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Life, Literature and Folk Deities in the Mangroves*

Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar**

To naturalists, the Sundarbans is fascinating in its mysterious variety and offers a rich field of interest and enquiry. The forests of the Sundarbans, located in the southernmost parts of West Bengal (in India) and south-western Bangladesh, remain synonymous with the Royal Bengal Tiger and, to some extent, the distinctive and dense mangrove cover characteristic of the region.[1] In these environs live a community of brave humans whose courage is manifest in their daily battle against nature as they seek to eke out a living, some by cultivating land and others by venturing deep into the forest to collect honey. The latter profession is dangerous as often the *moule* or honey collector ends up being a victim of the lord of the jungle.[2] Even the rivers fail to provide comfort. Apart from storms, which occur throughout the year, the fishermen are always wary of crocodiles.

In short, the Sundarbans have been and shall always remain synonymous with fear and anxiety. This thought is darkened even further by the fact that daylight scarcely penetrates the thick vegetation where walking is impossible owing to the dense jungle and prong-like pneumatophores (breathing roots) of trees that pierce upwards out of the ground. The Sundarbans with its unique physical features offered a tough proposition to human habitation throughout the ages. In fact, battling with hostilities of nature was so overwhelming an aspect of the settlers' lives in the Sundarbans that it led to evolution of deities to whom they could seek refuge psychologically during difficult times.

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These deities were not the regular godheads of the Indian pantheon.[3] On the other hand, they were fashioned from day-to-day experiences and realities that revolved around conflict and strife. The deities thus became essentially patron saints whose benevolence could effectively ward off the dangers of the jungle and its dreaded fauna. What therefore evolved here was a way of living and a culture emerging from responses to the challenges of nature in various forms.

The focus of this essay is on forms of religious practices in the Sundarbans and their representation in traditional literature. An implicit assumption is that religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothes. These conceptions have such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. Religion is thus a framework of general ideas articulated through symbols to help accommodate a range of experiences to give them a meaningful form.[4] Thus to study religion one would have to analyse the system of meanings embodied in the symbols and to relate these systems to social structure and psychological processes. It is in this general theoretical context that this essay proposes to look at the symbolic representations of godhead and worship in the Sundarbans. The region as an archetypal frontier domain threw up not only narratives that were different but underwent complex processes of material conflict and accommodation.

The Region

The Sundarbans stretches from the Hooghly on the west to the Meghna, the estuary of the Ganga and Brahmaputra, on the east. It covers the southern portions of the districts of South, 24 Parganas in West Bengal, Khulna, and Bakarganj in Bangladesh. It is the lowest part of the delta formed by three great rivers – the Ganga, the Jamuna-Brahmaputra, and the Meghna – which is fed by many smaller rivers. The landscape consists of islands and islets entrapped in an extensive network of estuaries, criss-cross channels and rivers.[5]

How did the region get its name? Opinion, as is usual in such cases, is divided. In Bengali, the word ‘sundar’ means beautiful and ‘ban’ is

forest. Some say that the natural beauty of the region led people to call it 'Sundarbans' or 'the beautiful forest'.[6] Then there are those who feel that the word 'sundar' refers to the Sundari tree (*Heritiera fomes*) that abounds in the forests. The third opinion is that 'sundar' is derived from 'samudra' or the sea, an inference that seems a little far-fetched. One thing, however, is clear. The name is relatively modern as even in the eighteenth century the entire region was referred to as just *bhati* or lowlands subject to the influx of tides.[7] There is however unanimity over the fact that the Sundarbans is no ordinary forest.

Literature and Folk Deities

Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries there thrived in lower deltaic Bengal *punthi* literature in Bengali verse devoted to the gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans. This literature reflected elements of the surroundings in which it emerged.[8] Its theme was the struggle between humanity and nature. *Punthi* literature arose to cater to the most marginal sections of the population. Their beliefs stood apart from mainstream Hinduism and Islam.[9] Folk religion here, as represented by local syncretic cults, had a distinctive aura of its own. The deities worshipped in the Sundarbans had a standing below that of the Bengali pantheon. They were the gods and goddesses of woodcutters, honey gatherers, beeswax gatherers, boat builders, and the most desperate cultivators.[10] They were deities with whom the man in the forest could identify himself. This literature came into existence much before the British became fully hegemonic in Bengal, and was therefore, free from colonial influence. In fact, *punthi*, in particular, is a literature of transition prevalent during late pre-colonial and early-colonial Bengal. The life and condition of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans are explained here as they were before the advent of British rule in Bengal.

The various sources of danger in this area formed the underlying theme of the *punthi* literature of the Sundarbans. The people there had not been equipped with firearms to any appreciable extent till as late as the end of the nineteenth century. They were always at the mercy of wild animals who ventured into the inhabited villages in search of prey. The Royal Bengal Tiger of the Sundarbans was said to be a

habitual man-eater, unlike other tigers. One of the central motifs of the *punthis* was man's struggle against wild animals, especially the tiger, which was idealized as a monstrous foe or at times even a subordinate deity.[11] The population of the Sundarbans consisted entirely of marginalized people. 'Nearly all the inhabitants' of the Sundarbans were 'either Hindus or Muslims' according to Hunter. 'There were, of course, a few Magh Buddhists, and native Christians who came here with missionary penetration of the Portuguese and later with British power. The rest of the population was that of the Hindu and Muslim communities, mostly of low status.' The Hindus were mainly of the following lower-castes: *napita*, *kaibarta, kapali, pod, chandala.*[12] The hierarchy of the four-fold system was based on the distribution of power, authority and access to economic wealth and kinship networks. The fact of untouchability highlights an additional feature — the distinction being justified on the basis of ritual purity and pollution which converted the *chandalas* and other such categories into excluded groups. *Chandalas* are thus not sudras, they are untouchables: *jalia, bagdi, tior, dhoba, jogi, suri, and kaora.* Of these twelve castes, the *pods* and the *chandalas* were the 'most numerous'. Next came the *bagdis* whom Hunter described as 'rather numerous'. Thereafter, came the *kapalis* who were neither 'numerous nor few'. The others were either 'few or very few' in number. All of these castes pursued a mix of occupations, such as 'cultivation, wood-cutting and fishing' for their means of subsistence.

The largest group among the Muslims of the Sundarbans, according to Hunter, was the *Shaikhs* (cultivators and wood-cutters). The *Sayyids* and *Pathans* were higher in status than the *Shaikhs*. They were cultivators, and were said to be 'very few in number'. Besides these, Hunter noted, the *mirshikaris* (hunters and fisherman), the *sapurias* (snake-catchers and snake-charmers) and the *bediyas*, all outcastes or gypsy tribes, had 'professed Muhammadanism'. The native Christians, as recorded by Hunter, were all cultivators.[13] There were also other tribes like Santals, Mundas, and Oraons who had come and settled in this area to reclaim the forest. All these people depended entirely on the forest for their livelihood though they had to perpetually struggle against the hazards of nature. As their weapons were woefully inadequate, the people found recourse in divine intervention. A

superstitious fatalism pervaded the folk cults. The following is a discussion of a few texts originating from this conjecture which also reflects on the woes of the people.

The texts dealt with here are the following:

(i) The *Raimangal* eulogizing the tiger god Dakshin Ray was written in1686 by Krishna Ram Das. Later it was edited and published by Satyanarayan Bhattacharya on behalf of the Calcutta University. There is also an incomplete undated manuscript of the Raimangal by Rudradev. This was published in the, Sahitya Prakasika, Vol. V, Dwadash Mangal (ed.) Panchanan Mondal, Santiniketan,1966.

(ii) The *Banabibi Jahuranama* (poetical account of Banabibi) is about the mother goddess Banabibi. This was composed by Banayuddin in the year 1877. There is another version of the tale by Marhum Munshi Muhammad Khater entitled *Banabibi Jahuranama* written in BS 1287, *Kartik*, i.e. 1880.

These texts are all written in simple verses. It is well known that the people chanted some verses before they entered the forest so that no danger would befall them. What necessitated the appearance of these texts? Why did they disseminate among so many people over such a long span of time? If the construction of a text is understood as a social function, what kind of investment (aesthetic, moral, religious, or political) valorized these texts? What purpose did they serve that a body of people could use them in the course of their daily lives? At first glance, these texts would appear to be fantastic narratives about gods, goddesses and their interactions with humble men and women. Taken as documents of social reality, such texts would be poor in factual content. However, these texts were meant not to depict reality, but to transform it magically. After all, they were meant to be read as '*mantras*', to be chanted during the propitiatory rites.[14]

This function is not unique to these texts alone. There is a genre in Bengali literature, the origin of which is lost in obscurity, called the *Mangal Kavya* (verses in the nature of a prayer to be sung in the

panchali tradition for the wellbeing of the household).[15]*Panchali* is an easy flowing verse meant to be recited on auspicious occasion. It describes the acts of grace of a god or a goddess and is to be read out during or after the act of worship of the deity or idol. The worship and the recitation are meant to transform reality magically, rendering it favourable for the devotee. Thus there are: the *panchali* of *Lakshmi* (the goddess of wealth), of *Sitala* (small pox goddess), of *Manasa* (snake goddess). Worship of a particular god or goddess by recitation of his or her *panchali* is meant to ward off a particular kind of evil. Consequently, the texts at hand are replete with verses where promises are made by the god or goddess to confer a particular favour or ward off a particular danger. It is these that are desired by the devotee and attributed to the deity. Let us turn now to the narratives of the texts. Our focus here is on three deities: Barakhan Ghazi, Banabibi, and Dakshin Ray.

Dakshin Ray

Dakshin Ray, known as the lord of tigers, is widely worshipped throughout the whole of the Sundarbans even today. He is usually seated upon a tiger and is often accompanied by the brother or companion Kalu Ray. Dakshin Ray is worshipped not only as the god of tigers but also as a divine curer.[16] According to one of the stories, he was the son of Shiva. The head of Ganesa when severed from his body fell in the southern (or dakshin) direction to become a deity.[17] This is perhaps how the name Dakshin Ray came into being—as a subordinate alternative to the idea of Ganesa or Ganapati.The *Raimangal* of Krishna Ram Das relates the following story.

Puspa Datta, a merchant of Bardaha, intended to brave the dangers at sea in search of his lost father. He asked Ratai baulya (the woodcutter) to supply wood for his boats.

Chalila shiropa paiya baulya ratai
Loia pradhan putra ar chhoy bhai
.....
Katite lagila kasta monomoto jato

Kiropa pusuri sundari adi kato[18]

(Ratai along with his elder son and six brothers went to fetch the wood. They selected trees in the forest according to their liking – *Kiropa, Pusuri, Sundari* and began to fell them.)

There was a tree in the woods which was the abode of Dakshin Ray. Not knowing this they began to fell it as it was large. Calamity occurred at once as there appeared six angry tigers with bloodshot eyes: Mamuda, Kumuda, Suda, Tangabhanga, Bajradanta and Khan Daura. Bowing before Dakshin Ray they stood before him for his commands. The tigers killed all the brothers of Ratai. As Ratai was about to commit suicide, a heavenly voice asked him to sacrifice his son to Dakshin Ray in order to resurrect his brothers. Ratai obeyed the advice and his six brothers were revived. His son too regained his life. Ratai and his brothers returned and narrated the supernatural powers of Dakshin Ray to the local people.

Pushpa Datta, then offered a bag of gold coins to the craftsmen to make the boats for him. At the command of Mahadeva the master of heaven, two craftsmen, Hanuman and Biswakarma, descended to the earth in the form of human beings and made seven boats in the next seven days. The best boat was named Madhukar.

Pushpa Datta was ready to set out on his ardous journey. His mother, Sushila, offered prayers to Dakshin Ray and entreated him to save her son from any danger.

She advised Pushpa:

Jakhan bipak dekho samashay jivan
Bhabio dakshin ray dukhani charan

(Whenever you are in trouble or life is at stake seek shelter at the feet of Dakshin Ray.)

Pushpa Datta began his journey aboard the Madhukar. On the way he worshipped Shiva at Barasat and reached Khania where he offered prayers to Dakshin Ray. There he came across an altar of

Ghazi Saheb. On enquiry, the boatman explained that in the past, there had been a confrontation between Dakshin Ray and Ghazi Saheb. The duo fought so fiercely that neither of them won. Various tigers took part in the battle. The first disciple and the most favourite tiger of Ghazi Saheb was Dauda and that of Dakshin Ray was Hira.

Realizing that the prolonged fight meant destruction of the whole earth, God appeared in the garb of a saint and mediated between them. In accordance with the agreement, Dakshin Ray and Ghazi Saheb were given two different areas to rule. It was also agreed that every devotee would pay equal respect to Dakshin Ray and Ghazi Saheb. Moving down the lower reaches of the Ganga, Pushpa Datta arrived at its confluence with the sea at Ganga Sagar (Sagar Islands in the Sundarbans).There he heard the story of how Bhagirath had brought the Ganga down to earth.

He sailed along the coasts and at Rajdaha came across a wonderful sight — a beautiful place on the sea. His companions, however, could not see it. Finally, Pushpa Datta arrived at Turanga where he narrated his experience of the wonderful sight to the king. Not inclined to believe his fanciful story, the king asked Pushpa Datta for proof. Since Pushpa Datta could not show him the wonderful sight, he was imprisoned and the king ordered for him to be beheaded.

Pushpa Datta prayed to Dakshin Ray for help. The next day when he was about to be executed Dakshin Ray appeared with an army of tigers. The tigers attacked the city and the king lost his life. A heavenly voice at the battlefield promised the queen that her husband would be revived but on the condition that she would worship Dakshin Ray and give her daughter in marriage to Pushpa Datta. The queen consented and the king and his soldiers regained their lives. The merchant's father who had been imprisoned by the king was released. Pushpa Datta, along with his father and newly wed wife the princess Ratnabati, returned to his country. The fame of Dakshin Ray spread far and wide.[19] In addition to Krishnaram Das's *Raimangal* there is also an incomplete manuscript of *Raimangal* by Rudradev. This is notable on account of the depiction of the individualized traits of several tigers. In fact each tiger had a well-defined personality in Rudradev's version.[20]

Banabibi

She is the deity of the forest, the protector of all inmates. Banabibi was perhaps originally known as Banachandi before the advent of the Muslims.[21] Even today the images which are found are of two types: Muslims make the image in the form of a young girl of a well-to-do Muslim family. The Hindus on the other hand worship images of a mother goddess. But in both cases the image is decorated with wild flowers and creepers on her head and neck which is indicative of her roots being in the wild forest. The rituals practised by the people in worshipping Banachandi have no hard and fast rules or any similarity with those of the Puranic gods.[22] In fact, the worship of Banachandi is community affair. She can be worshipped at any time of the year and by any man of the community. There is no fixed date or season for the worship of this deity. Whenever the people enter into the forest with the apprehension of confronting tigers, they offer prayers or observe rituals by way of worshipping the goddess. The rituals are more suited to the convenience of the people and their estranged life pattern. This becomes evident from the fact that the poor Muslims who settled in the Sundarbans in Mughal times did not hesitate to accept Banachandi as their goddess. She was transformed into Banabibi in course of time and even today Hindus and Muslims worship her with equal zest.[23] In fact, the people of the Sundarbans do not think of Banabibi as an elite deity housed in a temple or a mosque. Instead she is a part of their hard and difficult life wherein the religious differences are obscure and the struggle of life more prominent.[24] The *fakirs* while entering the forests with the woodcutters often used to sing this song.[25] (This song is rhyming and this is sung repetitively to ward of any evil in the jungle. It also talks of the nature.)

Bonebadare dake pakhi joare chote khal
aire ai bandir put katte hoglanal
amra age age jai maye smaran kore
tora ai khonta kurul benki hate kore

(Birds chirp in the forest and the tidal waters rush through the creek. Come along boys, come here to cut the reeds. Let us move forward in the name of the mother. Follow us with spades, shovels

and axes in hand.)

The *Banabibi Jahuranama* contains two stories. The first story narrates how Banabibi along with her brother Shah Jangli was sent by God from Mecca to the Sundarbans to acquire a place there. At that time the Sundarbans were ruled by the deity Dakshin Ray.[26] So Banabibi had to wage a battle against Dakshin Ray. But Dakshin Ray's mother Narayani declared that only a woman could fight another woman and so she armed herself to face her adversary. In the great battle that ensued just as Banabibi was about to win, Narayani proclaimed that she was her friend. Banabibi accepted the overture and agreed that a portion of the forest would henceforth remain under the rule of Dakshin Ray. Banabibi and Dakshin Ray shared the realm of the Sundarbans from that time onwards. The other story narrates how a boatman of Kalinga (Orissa coast) named Dhonai set out for the Sundarbans in a boat to collect honey and wax. His nephew, Dukhe, the only son of his widowed mother, accompanied him. As the boy left for the dreaded forests his mother prayed to Banabibi to protect her son.[27] (These lines are from the original text *Banabibi Jahuranama.* It gives a clear idea of the verses from which this narrative is taken.)

Kotha raile banabibi mai
abhagir putra dukhe mahalete jai
kangaler mata tumi bipadnasini
amar dukhere mago tarabe aponi
tomar kadame mata sapinu uhare
rane bane banabibi tarabe bachare

(She (Dukhe's mother) prayed to Banabibi, 'where art thou' Oh Mother! Banabibi. The son of this unfortunate mother is heading for the forest. You, the saviour of all the poor ones, shall surely save my son. I put my son into your hands; protect him from the perils of the forest.')

Having rowed past various places, Dhonai and his party arrived at a place called Natakhali. They spent the whole night singing and dancing and Dukhe played on the kettle drum. When day dawned, the party rowed deep into the forest. Dhonai the honey collector landed there with his associates after offering prayers to Dakshin Ray, god of

the tigers. Dukhe stayed back in the boat. The tiger godling played a trick on the honey-gatherer. Try as he might he could not locate any beehives. The despondent merchant returned to the boat and fell asleep. Dakshin Ray appeared in his dream. Dhonai prayed to Dakshin Ray for his blessings and asked him for seven-boat loads of honey and wax from the forest. He entreated Ray to fulfil his desires: 'Either you give me honey and wax or I shall lay down my life.' Dakshin Ray promised to give Dhonai enough honey and wax if his nephew Dukhe were sacrificed to him. After a slight hesitation the boatman agreed. His boat returned piled with honey and wax.

On the way back Dukhe was thrown overboard. With great difficulty he managed to reach the bank of the river. Dakshin Ray appeared in the shape of a tiger and was about to devour him when Dukhe started praying to Banabibi. She appeared immediately and took Dukhe in her arms, chanted hymns in the name of Allah and blew into the pores of his body. Dukhe got back his senses. Banabibi summoned her brother Jangli to come to her. Jangli resided within the eighteen lowlands over which she had jurisdiction. Hearing her summons, he armed himself with a club and arrived at the place where his sister was seated with Dukhe on her lap. At the command of Banabibi he drove Dakshin Ray away from the forests. Dakshin Ray became scared and approached Barakhan Ghazi to help and protect him. Ghazi Saheb agreed to mediate and requested Banabibi to pardon him. On the entreaty of Ghazi, Banabibi pardoned Dakshin Ray and reassured him by saying: 'I am the mother of all beings within these eighteen lowlands. Anybody who hails me as mother gets relief from all sufferings. You must not cause injury to anybody who appeals to me in danger.' Hearing these words Dakshin Ray made a solemn promise. Listen to my vow: 'I shall never cause harm to any person who appeals to you for protection.'

In addition to Munshi Banayaddin's *punthi* there is also another *punthi* of Banabibi called *Banabibi Jahuranama* written by Marhum Munshi Khater. Both the *punthi*s narrate the same story and the additional evidence in the second *punthi* makes it possible to identify the personifications of the Sundarbans spirits firmly. In this text Dukhe once says 'When Dakshin Ray came as a tiger to eat me, Banabibi,

the kind mother, came to the forest to save me.'[28]

Here the personification is virtually transparent: the reader knows at once that Dakshin Ray is none other than the man-eating tiger of the Sundarbans, whereas Banabibi is the spirit of the forest in its benign aspect. Banabibi saves Dukhe from the clutches of the tiger and sends him home on the back of a crocodile. Dakshin Ray, it is clear, is the fierce spirit of the tiger who must be propitiated; Banabibi, on the contrary, is the embodiment of the forest itself, cast in a feminine form. The personification of the forest as a kind mother who protects all woodcutters and honey-gatherers is evident in the text.

There is nowhere in the text any lengthy description of nature as we find in later novels of the Sundarbans. But incidental references deftly bring out the fearsome, impenetrable character of the Sundarbans. In one instance it is seen that Monai, the boatman, says to his brother Dhonai: 'I have heard that the low-lying forest is fearsome because of tigers. I am afraid that you may be killed if you go there.'

Deities in the Mangroves

In the foregoing legend, we find mention of these Muslim saints and Hindu godlings: Muslim female saint Banabibi, Muslim saints Barakhan Ghazi and Kalu Ghazi and the Hindu tiger deity Dakshin Ray or Rayamoni. It may be stated that in many other parts of northern India, sylvan goddesses similar to the Muslim female saint Banabibi are believed to preside over the forests and jungles. Among these may be mentioned the Hindu goddesses 'Champavati' and the 'Banaspati Ma'.[29] It is believed that these goddesses protect the herdsmen and the huntsmen who carried on their respective avocations within the gloomy recesses of the forest. From other sources it is known that Dakshin Ray was the relative and Commander-in-Chief of Mukuta Ray[30], Raja of Brahmanagara in the district of Jessore, and was entrusted by the latter with the administration of the southern portion of his kingdom. For this reason, the former was otherwise called *Bhatisvara* or 'the Lord of the Eighteen Lowlands'. Dakshin Ray is believed to have been a very powerful man and is reported to have slain many tigers and crocodiles with his bows and arrows, and other weapons. It is further stated that, on some occasions he fought tigers

with bare hands and killed them. It is for this reason that he is worshipped till today as a godling who can grant his votaries immunity from the attacks of the tigers of the Sundarbans. Dakshin Ray is widely worshipped throughout the whole of the Sundarbans in both parts of Bengal (after the Partition of India in 1947, the bulk of the islands, islets, estuaries, channels and rivers became part of East Pakistan which later became Bangladesh in 1971) even today. He is usually seated upon a tiger and is often accompanied by his brother or companion Kalu Ray. Dakshin Ray is worshipped not only as the god of tigers but also as a divine curer. According to one of the stories he was the son of Siva. The head of Ganesa when severed from his body fell in the southern (or *Dakshin*) direction to become a deity. This is perhaps how the name Dakshin Ray came into being, as a subordinate alternative to the idea of Ganesa or Ganapati. It is stated that Banabibi was the daughter of one Ibrahim, a resident of Mecca, and that she with her brother Shah Jangli came to live in Bhatidesa for the purpose of protecting the peasantry from the oppression of *Bhatisvara*. Dakshin Ray was ultimately defeated by Banabibi and became her vassal.

In the account of Ghazi, as given in the foregoing legend, he is stated to be the son of Shah Sikandar Badshah and it appears that Kalu Ghazi was Zinda Ghazi's brother. From the legend we come to know that he had 14,000 tigers as his guard. In Edward Gait's report on the Bengal Census 1901, the following information is given about Zinda Ghazi. He was from Zindik-i-Ghazi, 'conqueror of infidels', who rode on a tiger in the Sundarbans, and was the patron saint of woodcutters, whom he was supposed to protect from tigers and crocodiles.[31] He was sometimes identified as Ghazi Mian, and at other times as Ghazi Madar. Songs were sung in his honour and offerings made after safe return from a journey. Then again it is said that Ghazi Saheb and his brother Kalu were Muslim *pirs* or saints who exercised absolute power over all living things, and possessed the ability to encompass whatever they desired, and that they too could command tigers. The also rode on tigers to roam the jungles and hence the tigers were called 'Ghazi's horses'. These two *pirs* were so revered by all the Muslims and Hindus living in that part of the country that whenever anyone wished to go into the jungle, he first bowed down to the earth and uttered the words, 'In the name of the Ghazi Saheb'. After performing the little act of reverence, he entered the forest fully believing

that this saint would protect him thoroughly.[32]

The preceding legend of Dhonai is also interesting because it discloses to us a curious admixture of the Muslim and Hindu cults. It shows us how a Muslim (the boatman Dhonai) worshipped the Hindu godling Dakshin Ray with Hindu rites and ceremonies; how the Hindu godling, having been punished by a Muslim female saint (Banabibi), sought protection from a Muslim saint (Ghazi), and ultimately acknowledged his own subordination to the female saint Banabibi. The folk gods of the Sundarbans are depicted in the narrative as arbitrary deities, exercising a fearful command over the settlers. The reasons are presumably two-fold. First, the deities emerged out of the hard material struggle for existence in an inhospitable terrain. The people had to invent the heavenly deities in order to come to terms with the overwhelming forces of nature. The gods and goddesses were personifications of the malignant forces that had to be propitiated. It was believed that if the ritual propitiation was done properly, then a living could be made out of the forest. And therefore no moral virtue was attached to the gods and goddesses. Secondly, the settlers were all of lowly origin, and the deities were destined to dominate a lesser breed. Therefore, the narrators invest in them all the attributes of the arbitrary master. The striking common feature of these tales remains the reward-punishment syndrome. Not infrequently, the deities were shown by their narrators to be engaged in fierce battles, and the deity who eventually won the duel, drew the largest number of followers. Sometimes, when a potential devotee was adversely disposed to the deity, and declined to deify the latter as an image of veneration at his homestead, the deity descended upon him, inflicted a crushing punishment, and compelled him to be a faithful follower instead of a recalcitrant opponent. For instance, there is an episode in the *Ghazi Kalu O Campabati Kanya-r Punthi* in which Ghazi and Kalu brought a recalcitrant king to heel. The two brothers reached a place called Chapai.

The king chased them out of his palace. In his anger Kalu uttered an imprecation and immediately the palace of the king caught fire. King Sriram understood his mistake and begged to be forgiven. Ghazi and Kalu relented and he was converted to Islam.[33] Again, when a devout soul readily accepted the deity's omnipotence and worshipped

him or her in the most mundane manner, the deity showered benefits on him. He or she rewarded the follower with wealth, or social prerogatives, and sometimes with progeny. In the *punthi Banabibi Jahuranama* we see that Dukhe's mother prayed earnestly to Banabibi for her son's life. Banabibi protected Dukhe from the clutches of Dakshin Ray. Dukhe went back home with enormous wealth and a prosperous kingdom to rule over throughout his life.[34]

Thus reward and punishment became the twin instruments of domination in the divine order of the deities. Internecine bickering gripped the people and even their godlings. In each and every local tale one invariably notices close encounters between the two communities — the Hindus and the Muslims, and in the process of confrontation communal harmony gets established in the end. This is the natural inference to be drawn from the tales of the deities. The gods and goddesses waged war with one another over the supremacy of the jungle. In the sequel, they either came to an amicable division of rule and understanding among themselves, or a god of a higher order descended from the heavenly abode and mediated the quarrel. The inference from both cases is however the same. It was, one can argue, a question of survival. The adage 'survival of the fittest' was, however, not accepted as a norm here. The people, nay the gods, learnt through experience the wise principle of adjustment and accommodation. The people adjusted to the existence of religious divisions, sometimes voluntarily, but more often under duress. This accommodative principle permeated their religious practices too. The figure of Banabibi, for instance, evolved in order to accommodate both Hindus and Muslims.[35] This implied not merely co-existence but a common set of beliefs and practices. The natural context of the Sundarbans dictated the evolution of a common cult standing apart from orthodox Hinduism and Islam. Banabibi in other words was the reigning spirit of the forest.[36] Religion here is nothing but a way of life as much as culture is and the two mingle at some point — one cannot be separated from the other completely.[37] There is an evolution of a composite culture in Bengal between the sixteenth and nineteenth century. The legends of pioneering *pirs* (who were mainly responsible for clearing the jungles and making the land useful for cultivation) found in the Bengali literature of the seventeenth century reveal the presence

of a composite culture at the time. Krishnaram Das's *punthi Raimangal* is an account on this context. One of the stories over here narrates the conflict between the tiger god Dakshin Ray (sovereign deity of the Sundarbans forests) and a Muslim called Barakhan Gazi who represented the personified memory of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers. The encounter between the two, though initially hostile, was ultimately resolved in a compromise, while the tiger god would continue to possess authority over the whole of lower Bengal, people everywhere would show respect to the holy *pir* Ghazi by worshipping his burial spot, where there was a symbol of a godhead.[38] Another *pir* who is very popular in this delta and his worship is widely prevalent is Satya *pir*. The early literature in praise of Satya *pir* depicts a folk society that freely assimilated a variety of beliefs and practices that were prevelant in the pre-modern socio-religious environment of Bengal.

In general, scholars interpret Satya *pir* cult in terms of a synthesis of Islam and Hinduism. The modern folklorist D. C. Sen wrote 'when two communities mixed so closely, and were so greatly influenced by one another, the result was that a common God was called into existence, worshipped by the Hindus and Muslims alike.'[39] The worship of Satya *pir* by both Hindus and Muslims became a common feature and an integral part of rural deltaic Bengal. The poet Bharat Chandra's *Satyapirer Katha* bears ample testimony to this phenomenon.[40]

The discussion remains incomplete unless we talk of the tribals who migrated to this place, apart from the Hindus and Muslims already residing in this area. They worship Banabibi and Ghazi Saheb with great enthusiasm. They, along with the Muslims and Hindus, also worship Badar Saheb, the *pir* or saint of the river. The turbulent rivers pose many dangers to the people. In their water bound travels people seek the help of Badar Saheb. They believe that by continually uttering his name, their journey will be safe. The two songs which became popular as folksong actually refers to the tides and the riverine estuary (*Ke Jare Bhati Gang Baiya-O* — who goes down the lowland tide — an S. D. Burman song and *Bhatir Ganger Naiya* — Boatmen of the lowland tide – by Abbasuddin Ahmed).[41] These two songs sung along with the utterance of *Badar Badar* represents a lifestyle that has

been sustained by these simple God-fearing people over the aeons in these troubled wetlands. Apart from these the tribals have their own deities, which they worship in the traditional manner. The Oraons have their household deity known as Daogri, the spirit responsible for watching over the threshing ground. Karam, a deity represented by the branch of the Karam tree (*Nauchea parvifolia*), is worshipped by the Oraons during the months of October and November. Singing and dancing form a part and parcel of the occasion. The Oraons of this area also observe the festivals of *Nawakhani, Sohrai,* and *Sarhul*.[42]

Nawakhani is the ceremony of eating the freshly harvested rice and thanking the Gods for the harvest. Fresh crops are offered to the supreme God (Dharma) and to the ancestral spirits (Buda Budi). *Sohrai* is also called *Goreya* Puja. *Goreya* is the spirit residing in the cattle shed. During this puja the cattle are taken special care of and allowed to rest, while the cowsheds are cleaned. *Sarhul* festival is celebrated in the months of March and April. This is essentially a festival of offering the mangoes, which is considered the first fruit, and the neem, which is considered the first flower of the season, to Dharma and Buda Budi. They consume liquor produced by fermenting rice (*Handia*) and singing and dancing follow.

They live in perpetual danger, in constant fear of the forests. And yet they know how to celebrate the smaller joys of life – their meager harvests. Leaving aside the texts (*punthi*s) and the regular struggle between man and the monster, the life of the tribals revolve round the temporary cultivation and the songs and dance of the worship of the first fruit and flower.

Conclusion

What emerges from the tales of the deities is a world where gods and goddesses waged war with one another over the supremacy of the jungle.The people, nay the gods, learnt through experience the principle of accommodation. A struggling population, with whom the question of survival was of utmost importance, sought to accommodate one another and to propitiate every god or goddess who held sway

in the jungle. Thus admission to a particular religious cult was thrown open to other immigrants. This implied not merely co-existence but a common set of beliefs and practices. Given the conditions that men encountered in the forest, it was not possible to divide the community into Hindus and Muslims, or into tribals, as was characteristic of the more settled villages to the north. What is worth emphasizing is that the physical marginality of the frontier had a human, social correspondence; those who lived here belonged to the periphery and the cultural and religious life that evolved was distinct from that which prevailed under more mainstream conditions. The sacred and the sacrosanct in the frontier order of things differed widely, in terms of hierarchy and lineage, from more formal but nonetheless lived varieties of Hinduism and Islam. This was a religion of men and women who knew no certainty and had little stake in investing in classical norms and whose religious beliefs and practices evolved out of, but distinct from, the main strands of Hinduism or Islam practiced elsewhere in the subcontinent. It was different and difficult. Given that social stratification and structures of ritual privilege were relatively nascent in the region, the religious life that characterized it was in a sense of a more equal and literally 'plebian' variety than elsewhere.

The swamp and the jungle brought about a human intermingling symbolized by the common goddess whose authority every other god recognized. Banabibi was the reigning spirit of the forest. The marshy, swampy, and inhospitable terrain thus has a unique life of its own where the people struggle to find a living in the harshest climate and yet seem to enjoy the nature with the blessings of their homespun Gods.

Notes:

[1] Kumudranjan Naskar, Dwijendra Narayan and Guha Bakshi, *Mangrove Swamps of the Sundarbans: An Ecological Perspective*, Naya Prakash, Calcutta, 1987, 1–3.

[2] Shyamali Gupta, 'Aranyer Thaba' in *Eksathe* (cultural monthly for women, Paschim Banga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti) (ed.) Shyamali Gupta, 1 August 2007, Kolkata, 40, Deborah Pasmantier, Maneating tigers wreaks havoc on India's island of widows, *Daily Times – Leading News Resource of Pakistan*, Wednesday, December 22, 2004.

[3] Here it is called Indian because Hinduism as we understand it today to describe a particular religion is modern, as also is the concept which it presupposes. Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1025-26, Sunil Kumar Basu, "Socio-Cultural Profile", in Amal Kumar Das et al. (eds.) *A Focus on Sundarban*, Indian Edition, Calcutta 1981, 65.

[4] Dulal Chaudhuri, 'Folk Religion', Amal Kumar Das et al. (eds.) *op. cit.*, 74.

Directly influenced by Durkheim, some contemporary anthropologists have focussed on the study of symbolism in ritual context. In their view, ritual provides a symbolic connection between the complex of meanings embedded in a given cultural thought and the level on which social action takes place. Nur Yalman (1967) and Geertz (1973) have subscribed to this view. Symbols evolve or are invented to serve purposes of socio-religious and political communication. It would appear that they acquire an especial significance in pre-modern social formations as catalysts of a sense of collectivity. Representation of gods in the morphic and anthromorphic forms is being traditionally carried in Bengal in three recognized media, namely, (1) in the form of vessels, (2) in the form of paintings, (3) in the form of images. The village god and godlings are the symbolical representation of the thoughts and aspirations of the village folk of India. The trees, the forests, the beasts and birds, the flora and fauna, the rivers, the streams and the supernatural spirits constitute the composite folklore of Bengal in general. In this essay we see that the gods and goddess are represented by various symbols, like Banabibi is sometimes represented by a stone slab or by a pot vessel or by an image seated on the back of a tiger. Dakshin Ray is worshipped widely in the form of a beheaded image and this image is known as Bada Thakur.

[5] W. W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Bengal* I, *Districts of the 24 Parganas and the Sundarbans*, 1st edn., Smith Elder and Company, London, 1875, 286-7; L. S. S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer, 24 Parganas*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1914, 2.

[6] Shib Shankar Mitra, *Sundarban Samagra*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 1988, 7.

[7] L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer, Khulna*, Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1908, 198.

[8] Gopendra Krishna Basu, *Banglar Loukik Devdevi*, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1966, 10–11.

[9] Ibid., 43.

[10] Abdul Jalil, *Sundarbaner Itihas*, 2nd edn., Ahmed Publishing House, Dacca, 1986, 418–20.

[11] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *The Sundarbans*, Orient Black Swan and Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2010, 31–3.

[12] W. W. Hunter, *op. cit.*, 317–18. Romila Thapar, *Cultural Pasts*, New Delhi, OUP.

[13] Ibid., 317–18.

[14] Sarat Ch. Mitra, *On Some Curious Cults of Southern and Western Bengal*, Calcutta, 1918, 440–4.

[15] Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *op. cit.*, 33.

[16] Gopendra Krishna Basu, op. cit., 154.

[17] Ibid., 146.

[18] Satyanarayan Bhattacharya ed., *Raimangal,* Sahitya Sabha, Bardhaman,1966, 5.

[19] Ibid., 89.

[20] Rudradev, *Raimangal* (incomplete manuscript), in Panchanan Mandal ed., Sahitya Prakasika vol. 5, Dwadash Mangal, Santineketan, 1966, 128.

[21] Gopendra Krishna Basu, *op. cit.*, 9.

[22] Sarat Ch. Mitra, *On an Accumulation Droll from Eastern Bengal—and On a Musulmani Legend about the Sylvan Saint Banabibi and Tiger-deity Dakshina Raya*, Calcutta, 1923, 154–5.

[23] Abdul Jalil, *op. cit.*, 232.

[24] Manindranath Jana, *Sundarbaner Samaj*, Dipali Book House, Kolkata, 1984, 94.

[25] Sarat Ch. Mitra, *On Some Curious Cults of Southern and Western Bengal*, Calcutta, 1918, 440.

[26] Samir Ray, *Banabibi-O-Narayanir Pala*, Kasinagar, 24 Parganas, 1990, 23.

[27] Sarat Ch. Mitra, *On An Accumulation Droll from Eastern Bengal*, *op. cit.*, 157. Both the texts *Raimangal* and *Banabibi Jahuranama* are replete with verses which has a distinct structure. The constructions of these texts were understood as a social function. They would appear to be fantastic narratives about gods, goddesses and their interactions with humble men and women. After all, they were meant to be read as '*mantras*', to be chanted during the propitiatory rites. The formal rhetorical character of these texts (the rhythm, the metre) is worth mentioning. Written in easy flowing verse meant to facilitate the act of reciting.

A few lines are selected here to give an idea how it was. Each line divided in units, they are rhythmic. They are read out again and again during the worship. The recitation is melodious, swinging. It consists of a special rhythm. Such as:

Bibi bole ore dukhe
kumbhire na khabe toke
ei bate nahi daro tumi
kumbhirer pith pare
jaite jadi bhoy kare
kole nia basibo je ami
sune tabe dukhe kai
se hoile kiser bhoy
thaki jadi jananir kole
kahe hin kabikar
aman nachhib kar
banabibi beta jare bole

([Ban] Bibi said, 'My poor Dukhe, the crocodile will not eat you; don't have any fear on that score. If you are afraid to ride on the crocodile, I shall take you on my lap.' Hearing this Dukhe said, 'If I am on my mother's lap then I have nothing to fear.' The poor poet says, 'Who ever had such good fortune as to be called a son by Banabibi herself!')

On the entreaty of Ghazi, Banabibi pardoned Dakshin Ray.

Atharo bhatir madhye ami sabar ma
ma bole je dake tar dukh thake na
samkate pariya jeba ma bole dakibe
kadacit himsa tai kabhu na karibe

(I am the mother of all beings within these eighteen lowlands. Anybody who hails me as mother gets relief from all sufferings. You must not cause injury to anybody who appeals to me in danger.) Translation done by author.

[28] Marhum Munshi Khater, *Banabibi Jahuranama*, Gaudia Library, Calcutta (rpt.), 1987, 35.

[29] Sarat Ch. Mitra, *On an Accumulation Droll*, *op. cit.*, 167.

[30] Girin Das, *op. cit.*, 240.

[31] L.S.S. O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteer, Khulna*, Calcutta, 1908, 64.

[32] Sarat Ch. Mitra , *Indian Folk-Beliefs about the Tiger* I & II, Bombay, 1908, 22–3.

[33] Abdur Rahim, *Ghazi Kalu O Champabati Kanyar Punthi*, Gaudia Library, Calcutta (rpt.) 1987, 1 -14.

[34] Marhum Munshi Khater, *op. cit.*, 39–40.

[35] Sarat Ch. Mitra, *On Some Curious Cults of Southern and Western Bengal*, *op. cit.*, 441.

[36] Dulal Chaudhuri, 'Folk Religion', Amal Kumar Das et al. (eds.) *op. cit.*, 74–8.

[37] Sushil Chaudhury, *Evolution of a Composite Culture – The Bengal Case*, paper read out in the Indian History Congress, Santiniketan, 66th session, January 2006.

[38] Ashutosh Bhattacharya, 'The tiger cult and its literature in Lower Bengal', *Man in India* 1: 49–50, March 1947. Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, *op. cit.*, 32–9, Annu Jalais, 'Bonbibi: Bridging Worlds', *Indian Folk Life*, Serial No. 28 January.

[39] Dinesh , Chandra, Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, University of Calcutta, Calcutta, 1954, 677.

[40] Bharat Chandra, 'Satyapirer Katha', *Bharat Chandra Rachanabali*, Dey's Publishing, Calcutta, 1963.

[41] Shri Sachin Dev Burman (1 October 1906-31 October 1975) was a famous music composer and singer. Abbas Uddin Ahmad (27 October 1901-30 December 1959), popularly known by his first name, was a Bengali folk singer.

[42] Sunil Kumar Basu, 'Socio-Cultural Profile', Amal Kumar Das et al. (eds.), *op. cit.*, 67–9.

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