

## Surviving Wrath of Nature: ‘Bonbibi’ and Local Communities in Sundarbans

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### Abstract

### Original Research Article

The natural resources remain crucial to survival of the economically marginalised population of the Sundarbans. Survival depends much on their affordability to negotiate with nature for access to natural resources, locally available. This paper aims to unfold the undying myth surrounding the divine role of ‘Bonbibi’, the local deity, in ensuring protection of the weak against the wrath of nature. The two dominant religious communities of the Sundarbans, the Hindu and the Muslim, worship ‘Bonbibi’ with the common belief that ‘Bonbibi’ would ensure living and livelihood vis-a-vis the hostile nature. Identical need of survival integrates the two religious communities.

**Keywords:** Sundarbans, Bonbibi, Survival needs.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Sundarbans is a world heritage site. The Sundarbans is known for the biggest mangrove forest in the world. Living and livelihood of the people of the Sundarbans however, continue to remain full of uncertainties. People remain engaged in unending struggle against the natural events like cyclone and inundation. Again, there is the man eater, the Royal Bengal Tiger. The honey collector or, the wood cutter goes deeper into the forest to collect forest produce knowingly the uncertainties associated with the journey.

Existential compulsions not only keep the people united in crises but also become decisive in generating in them a common belief, eventually a viable strategy, to win over the persisting adversities in everyday life situation. The people of the Sundarbans display strong faith in divine role of ‘Bonbibi’, the local deity, in ensuring living and livelihood of the disadvantaged. And of those, who venture into deep forest for collection of honey, crab and wood, in particular. It is interesting to note, while differences remain, the two dominant religious communities of the Sundarbans, the Hindu and the Muslim, worship ‘Bonbibi’, with equal spirit, driven by the common belief that it is only the divine wishes of ‘Bonbibi’ that will protect them against the adversities in everyday life.

## OBJECTIVES

The major objectives of the present paper are:

- To explore the impacts of climate change on the people of the Sundarbans;
- To analyze the role of ‘Bonbibi’ in diminishing the adversities of people of the Sundarbans;
- To explain the religious practices of the dominant religious communities as part of expression of faith towards ‘Bonbibi’.

## METHODOLOGY

The present paper, which forms part of a larger empirical study, relates to the climate change-induced challenges of the people of the Sundarbans and the common belief that keeps the two religious communities integrated for a secure livelihood. For a better understanding of these and such other related issues, the relevant secondary data have been drawn from the relevant literature. As well, a set of primary data have been used in this paper. An empirical study has been carried out with a smaller sample (fifty respondents). The respondents represent the Shibrampur Gram Panchayat and Frazerganj Gram Panchayat of Namkhana Block, Sundarbans. In selection of the respondents, the purposive sampling method has been followed. Data have been collected through interviews with the aid of a semi-structured interview schedule.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Sundarbans: A Brief Description

The Sundarbans Delta, which is within the territorial jurisdiction of India, is part of the delta of the Ganga-Brahmaputra-Meghna basin in Asia. The Sundarbans, the largest mangrove forest in the world, is known for very high species diversity (25 true mangrove and 30 mangrove associates). This is the only mangrove wetland tiger habitat in the world [1]. The Sundarbans is shared between India and Bangladesh. The Indian Sundarbans Delta is spread over about 9630 km<sup>2</sup> between 21°40'04"N and 22°09'21"N latitude, and 88°01'56"E and 89°06'01"E longitude. It is the smaller and western part of the complete Sundarbans delta. This delta had been formed between 2500 and 5000 years ago by the silt carried by the river Ganges [2] as well as its tributaries like Mayurakshi, Damodar, Ajay, and Kansai rivers. In the east, the Indian Sundarbans Delta is bounded by the Ichamati-Raimangal River, in the west, by the Hugli River, in the south, by the Bay of Bengal, and in the north, by the Dampier-Hodges line drawn in 1829-1830 [3]. The Sundarbans delta comprises 102 low-lying islands, of which 48 are inhabited. In 2011, the total population was 4.4 million [4]. All habitation belongs to an area of 5,363 sq km [5]. The Sundarbans extends over two districts, the South 24 Parganas and the North 24 Parganas. The South 24 Parganas comprises 13 blocks and these are: Canning I, Canning II, Mathurapur I, Mathurapur II, Joynagar I, Joynagar II, Gosaba, Basanti, Kultali, Kakdwip, Namkhana, Patharpratima, Sagar. There are 6 blocks in the North 24 Parganas and these are: Hingalganj, Sandeshkhali I, Sandeshkhali II, Horoa, Minakhan, Hasnabad [5]. There was no human population or habitation prior to the 19th century in Indian Sundarbans. In 1771, Cloud Russell, the British Collector General chalked out a plan to divide the forest land into plots and to lease those out to the landlords. Poor farming communities, from various parts of Bengal as well as from neighbouring states (presently Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh), were encouraged by these lease-holding landowners to come and settle in the Sundarbans [6]. The population of the Indian Sundarbans increased from 11.59 lakh in 1951 to 37.57 lakh in 2001, almost an increase of 224 per cent over half a century. Indeed, it's a noticeable change. The decadal increase between 1991 and 2001, approximating 18 per cent, has been equal to the population growth in the entire district of the South 24 Parganas [7].

### Story of 'Bonbibi'

Ibrahim, who lived in Medina, was a pious Muslim. He was childless. With the blessings of Gabriel, Ibrahim became father of twins, 'Bonbibi' and 'Shahjongoli'. One day, Gabriel told the twins that they had been considered for a divine mission. In tune with the demand of the divine mission, they were to travel all the way from Arabia to 'the country of eighteen tides'

(*athhero bhatir desh*) to make the place suitable for human habitation. The forest of 'the country of eighteen tides' was the domain of a powerful demon king, to be specific, 'Dokkhin Rai'. Every animal, every ghost and every malevolent spirit of the forest was under the exclusive command of Dokkhin Rai. The demon king had lust for human flesh. As 'Bonbibi' and 'Shahjongoli' arrived, 'Dokkhin Rai', upon hearing their *azan* (Muslim call for prayer), invited them for a battle. 'Bonbibi', in lieu of joining the demon king in a battle, decided to divide the country into two halves--one half for the wilderness under the rule of 'Dokkhin Rai' and the other half--for human settlement, to be ruled by 'Bonbibi'.

In 'the country of eighteen tides' there lived a man called 'Dhona' who took seven ships in search of wealth in forests. Just before sailing, Dhona noticed shortage of one crew. One little boy, named 'Dukhey' (Sorrowful), was available on spot. He was offered to be part of the voyage. This little boy, who lost his father when he was a child, lived in abysmal poverty with his ailing mother. As the little boy was about to sail off with other crew members, his mother advised him to remember 'Bonbibi'; "the saviour of the weak" in the event of any danger he would encounter. The little boy, along with other crew members, reached an island named 'Kedokhalir Char'. This island was under the control of 'Dokkhin Rai'. While the sailors were unaware of the ownership of the island, they noticed some unusual things to happen in the forest of the island. This made the sailors worried of their safety. The same night, 'Dhona' saw 'Dokkhin Rai' in his dream. 'Dokkhin Rai' assured that he would mercy 'Dhona' if he would agree to act in compliance with the wishes of 'Dokkhin Rai'. 'Dokkhin Rai' wanted 'Dhona' to hand over 'Dukhey' to 'Dokkhin Rai' in exchange of wealth beyond imagination of 'Dhona'. 'Dhona' agreed to comply and in no time, the ships were found filled with huge amount of honey and wax. As the ships were full, 'Dhona' ordered 'Dukhey' to collect some firewood from the forest. 'Dukhey' had no choice but to carry out the order. When 'Dukhey' returned from the forest, he discovered himself alone in the jungle--trapped between the forest and the river. He found a tiger, with black and gold stripes, hidden behind the greenery. The tiger was none other than 'Dokkhin Rai' in disguise. 'Dukhey' recalled his mother's last message about 'Bonbibi' and prayed to 'Bonbibi' for saving him. 'Bonbibi' was far away but crossed waters as she heard the voice. She rescued her taking into her lap and her brother 'Shahjongoli' fought with the demon and punished him. 'Bonbibi' returned 'Dukhey' to his home with 'great treasure trove of honey and wax' as gift. The whole world became aware about the law of jungle: the rich and greedy would be punished while the poor and honest would be rewarded [8].

## Climate Change and Sundarbans Depletion of Mangrove Forest

The forest and the sea are the major sources of livelihood of the people of the Sundarbans. Any adverse change in environment leads to adverse impacts on these people. The mangrove forest, from which the people collect honey and wood, has been depleting. As evident from some recent works, the mangrove forest has been decreasing since 1776. In 1776, while the area of the mangrove forest was 6588 km<sup>2</sup>, it decreased to 1852 km<sup>2</sup> in 2014 [9]. Because of depletion of mangrove forest, one major source of livelihood of the people is in danger.

### Increasing Cyclone

It is true that the Sundarbans is always prone to cyclone. But, cyclones in a row (1988, 1991, Asian tsunami in 2004, Sidr in 2007, Nardis in 2008, Aila in 2009) have made the situation worse for the inhabitants of the Island. Regeneration of mangroves is badly affected due to series of cyclones. Between 1881 and 2001, the occurrence of cyclones rose by 26% on the Bay of Bengal along the Sundarbans [10]. A tropical cyclone (Aila) hit the Sundarbans (India and Bangladesh) on 25 May 2009. The wind speed was 110 km/hr. It brought huge casualty. Over 8000 people were registered missing in India and Bangladesh. A million lost their home of these two countries. About 300 people were killed in the Sagar Island (India) alone [11]. Again, along with Aila, there were tidal bores and high tides. Because of a tidal bore (13–15 July 2014), over 50,000 people were displaced. About 10,000 dwelling units were completely ruined while another 5000 were partially damaged. Paddy fields across the villages were flooded. About 15 villages were completely destroyed. Intrusion of saline sea water destroyed the prospect of agriculture for the next one year [9].

## ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

### Economic Condition: People of Sundarbans

The people of the Sundarbans are economically marginalised. It is their economic status that makes them most vulnerable to changing climatic conditions. It is evident that the people living in the blocks of the Sundarbans encounter poverty more than those living in other parts of the districts of the North and the South 24 Parganas. Since any reliable data on per capita income of the people at the block level is unavailable, the present study relied upon the average poverty ratio or the number of households below poverty line as the index of state of poverty of the people of the 19 blocks of the North and the South 24 Parganas which make up the Sundarbans. It may be mentioned that living below the poverty line means living on less than Rs 26 a day. The average poverty ratio of the below poverty line households is 43.51 per cent. Some blocks have about 50 percent poverty ratio like Basanti (64.89), Sandeshkhali I (58.29),

Sandeshkhali II (59.7), Canning II (50.32), Patharpratima (49.13), Namkhana (48.17). While comparable data suggest that the poverty ratio in the remaining blocks of the North and the South 24 Parganas are much better, at an average of 22.41 per cent in the North 24 Parganas and 24.43 per cent in the South 24 Parganas [5].

The state of food security is another important indicator of state of poverty. Reports are available to indicate that in the 13 blocks of the Sundarbans (South 24 Parganas), it is only about 12.47 per cent of population do not encounter the problem of scarcity of food. The remaining 87 per cent do not enjoy security of food. About 21 percent of the population (more than one person in every five), do not manage to get food even once a day on regular basis. The vulnerable blocks are Basanti (36.93), Sagar (28.3), Patharpratima (27.37), Namkhana (22.55), Canning II (20.77) [5].

### Sundarbans: Wrath of Nature

The climate of the Sundarbans has been changing rapidly. This has resulted in land erosion, depletion of mangroves, rise in sea level and increase in extreme weather events like cyclone and flood. The sea-facing islands of the southern Sundarbans viz.; Sagar, Ghoramara, Jambudwip, Namkhana, Mousuni, Dakhsin Surendranagar, Dhanchi, Dalhousi, Bulchery, and Bhangaduani are most vulnerable. For these islands, 69 per cent of land has already been lost to the sea. Between 2001 and 2009, Bhangaduani in the east and Jambudwip in the west have lost 16 to 20 per cent of land area [5]. In the Sundarbans, as a study reveals, around 7000 people have been displaced from their original habitat, becoming environmental refugees/migrants during the last thirty years [12]. This is mainly because of sea level rise, coastal erosion, cyclone and coastal flooding. The cyclone Aila hit Sundarbans on 21 May 2009. The North 24 Parganas and the South 24 Parganas were the worst hit districts. While more than 6.77 million people were affected, 137 people were killed. The cyclone Aila ruined more than 500 kilometres of embankments and 926,000 semi-permanent houses. According to the official damage report of the Government of West Bengal, 2.89 million hectares of agricultural land had been submerged with 100 per cent loss of standing crops and stored grains in the South 24 Parganas and the North 24 Parganas, in particular [13]. People of the Sundarbans remain helpless witness to the devastating impacts of extreme weather events on life, assets and livelihood.

### Fear of Tiger

Together with changing climate and poverty, there is the fear of possible attack of Royal Bengal Tigers. All these have made living and livelihood in the Sundarbans most uncertain. Historically, the tigers of the Sundarbans are ill-famed as man eaters. The first written documents, with a description of the man-eating tigers of the Sundarbans, are the letters of Portuguese

Jesuit missionaries, Francis Fernandez and Melchoir Fronseca who travelled to Bengal in 1598/1599. Through their writings, we come to know that the tigers of the Gangetic delta are fond of human flesh [14]. The confrontation between tiger and human is on the rise and such confrontation results in shedding of blood. The honey collectors, the crab collectors, the fishermen, the wood cutters and those others, who go deeper into the forest to earn a living are the potential victims of tiger attack. They suffer most from uncertainties in life, naturally.

### ‘Bonbibi’: The Saviour

The people of the Sundarbans are engaged in continuous struggle against the perilous environment as well as the ferocious animals towards fulfilment of basic needs. They are driven by a common resolution that they must survive against all odds. This very disposition towards life among the inhabitants of the Sundarbans provides the basis of their unity in exigencies. It is their common concern for survival that persuades them to worship a common deity ignoring the differences between communities with faith in different religion. The inhabitants across religions believe that ‘Bonbibi’, ‘the saviour of the weak’ will rescue them from all evil powers—be it the cyclone or, the tiger. As it has already been stated, the major occupations of the people of the Sundarbans are fishing, crab collection, honey collection and farming. Hence, for most of them, dependence on nature is only unavoidable. The dependence of the local communities on nature reinforced by their strong will to survive motivate them to pray to ‘Bonbibi’, hoping that she will also respond to their prayer to rescue them in moments of crisis as she did to ‘Dukhey’.

### Fact of Faith

Close interactions with the sample, in course of fieldwork, prompted us to ascertain whether or not, the people of the Sundarbans perceive ‘Bonbibi’ as their saviour? It was also thought that it would be interesting to know the direction of relationship between people’s perception of ‘Bonbibi’ and their religious faith given the social composition of the sample. The present study reveals that 88 per cent of the respondents perceive ‘Bonbibi’ as their saviour in crises. A smaller proportion of the respondents (12 percent) only disagreed (Table-1).

**Table-1: Perception of ‘Bonbibi’**

‘Bonbibi’ as Saviour	
Agree	Disagree
44 (88%)	6 (12%)
<b>Total 50</b>	

**Source: Field Data** N= 50, N- Sample Size

As evident from Table 2, the sample includes 62 per cent Hindus and 38 per cent Muslims. The Hindus, barring a few (6 per cent), have indicated that

‘Bonbibi’ helps people to survive the livelihood-related problems. Among their Muslim counterparts, a significant majority (32 per cent) perceive ‘Bonbibi’ as the saviour of the people in distress. Among the Muslims, who differ with the dominant view, is only 6 per cent. The study therefore, suggests that both religious communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, have faith on ‘Bonbibi’ as their saviour in distress. Religious faith is not a serious hindrance to one’s perception of ‘Bonbibi’ as the saviour of the disadvantaged.

**Table-2: Relationship between Perception of ‘Bonbibi’ and Religion**

X Religion	Agree	Disagree	Total
Hinduism	28 (56%)	3 (6%)	31 (62%)
Islam	16 (32%)	3 (6%)	19 (38%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>44 (88%)</b>	<b>6 (12%)</b>	<b>50</b>

**Source: Field Data** N= 50, N- Sample Size

Footnote: X denotes ‘Bonbibi’ helps people to survive problems associated with livelihood

### ‘Bonbibi’: Religious Practices

Travelling deep into the Sundarbans, one comes across a shrine with the image of a beautiful woman, riding a tiger, with a protective arm around a much smaller human male. She is ‘Bonbibi’, the deity. One notices that both religious communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, who inhabit the mangrove forests, offer prayer to her. Bonbibi provides protection to honey collectors, wood cutters and such others who depend on this forest for livelihood. The devotees offer sweets and/or chicken in a bid to secure her blessings that would protect them from tigers and other dangers of forests. In Muslim shrine, one finds a tomb of saints where offerings are made. ‘Bonbibi’ appears as a Hindu goddess who is worshiped by both the Muslims and the Hindu. Both these religious communities sincerely conceive her as a source of power who will aid them in their problems [15].

While both the Muslims and the Hindus worship Bonbibi, differences remain in rituals. For the Muslims, she is a Sufi saint — a woman endowed by God with specific powers. The Muslims offer her red flags and garlands of flower. The Hindus worship her as a goddess, leaving offerings before the clay likenesses. This shared worship is not a simple equation but reflects something else: a shared dependence on the forest and a very practical need for protection [15].

The Sundarbans is known for its tradition that unifies the people of various faiths. Both the dominant religious communities, the Hindus and the Muslims, live side by side, pursue one’s livelihood and lend support to the neighbours as and when required. ‘Bonbibi’ emerges as the protector for both of them in distress [16].



## CONCLUSION

'Bonbibi', the 'lady of the forest', integrates two religious communities—the Hindus and the Muslims. In the Sundarbans, the two religious communities, despite cultural differences, worship a common deity: 'Bonbibi'. The presence of 'Bonbibi' is felt even beyond international borders, unifying two neighbouring countries, India and Bangladesh. The horrifying environment reinforced by economic miseries compels the people of the Sundarbans, cutting across religions, to look to 'Bonbibi' as a source of security. It is their very faith on 'Bonbibi' that give them strength to survive the adversities in everyday-life situations. It is their belief that the 'lady of the forest' will protect the inhabitants of the Sundarbans against all forms of disasters. The devastating Aila, resulting in loss of human lives, inundation and increasing salinity of water, with adverse impact on the prospect of agriculture in the delta have not weakened the faith of the victims on 'Bonbibi'. It is no wonder to come across a survivor of wrath of nature who feels that the Aila could have been even more disastrous had 'Bonbibi' not been with us. It is their helplessness in the face of wrath of nature that makes them more 'dependent' on 'Bonbibi', the saviour of the disadvantaged.

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