



## Syncretism in Eco-Cultural Space of Bonbibi Cult in Sundarban Delta- An Ethnographic Context in Anthropology

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### Abstract

*Syncretism can be seen as a synthesis of religious and cultural ideas, where two or more belief patterns and practices combine to varying degrees to form a composite hybrid expression. India's diverse cultural and social context has an inherent tendency to popularize the concept of religious assimilation between Hinduism and Islam, their overlapping rituals and their hybrid performance traditions. However, in most cases, they reveal the results of conflicts and historical interactions of different local communities, flexible enough for human survival and coexistence. This paper attempts to express how harmony is being established between Hindu and Muslim communities within a specific eco-cultural system and forest-based economic system in a specific social structure in the Sundarbans of South Bengal through the existence of the Bonbibi cult. In this perspective an attempt has been made to identify the syncretic elements that emerged around the Bonbibi cult and to understand their modes of interaction. Again it is sought to perceive the ideas and practices revolving around the practice of the Bonbibi cult at the contemporary level reflecting the ancient trend of Hindu-Muslim polarization which often challenges and threatens the secular character of Sundarbans' pluralistic society.*

**Keywords:** Syncretism, Religion, Sundarban, Bonbibi, Myth and performing rituals, Icon, Contemporary challenges of syncretism

### I. Introduction

Syncretism can be seen as a synthesis of religious and cultural concepts, where two or more belief patterns and practices combine to varying degrees to become a composite hybrid expression. It has often been observed that in the diverse cultural and social context of South Asia there is an inherent tendency to popularize the concept of religious assimilation between Hinduism and Islam, their

overlapping rituals and their hybrid performance traditions. However, in most cases, they reveal conflicts and the results of the historical interactions of different local communities, flexible enough for human survival and coexistence. This paper attempts to register how harmony is being established between Hindu and Muslim communities within a particular social structure, in a specific eco-cultural system and forest-based economic system of the Sundarbans of South Bengal through the existence of Bonbibi cult. In this purview an attempt has been made to identify the syncretic elements that emerged around the Bonbibi cult and to understand their interacting modes. Again it has come to the realization that at the contemporary level the ideas and practices revolving around the Bonbibi cult also reflect the ancient tendency of Hindu-Muslim polarization which often challenges and threatens the secular character of our pluralistic society.

Among the numerous "little traditions" in Bengal's religious ecosystem, (Banerjee,2002) the Bonbibi cult of the Sundarbans has attracted the attention of researchers because of its seemingly unified beliefs and the breadth of its practices. Irrespective of livelihood and irrespective of their religion, deep respect for the sylvan deity Bonbibi is expressed. In the Badavan region of the Sundarbans, a belief persists, regardless of community, that Bonbibi is a Muslim pirani (religious woman preacher) sent by Allah to protect them from Dokkhin Ray. Dakshin Ray is the Brahman-Tiger God, an incarnation of the ferocious Royal Bengal Tiger, which threatens their lives. In Forest of Tigers, Annu Jalais(2010) analyzes the works of Richard Eaton<sup>4</sup> on the Islamization of Bengal and finds that the religion had its roots in "new agrarian communities [that] began to claim an Islamic identity" new converts to Islam who attributed the expansion of agricultural endeavors to Sufis, were associated with those who controlled the forest(Jalais,2010). Sujit Sur (2014) hypothesizes it



to be related to an ancient tribal deity, who later became very popular among immigrants of both religions, among the inhabitants who settled in the islands from pre-colonial times. Therefore, instead of assuming a spontaneous manifestation of cult ritual, Bonbibi analyzes the cultural manifestations of this cult as a shade of syncretism that appropriates the practice in a religious context arising from resistance to or safety from the terrible.

### Diverse population merged in Bonbibi

In recent times population diversity of the Sundarbans can be observed. In this delta, the tribal groups, lower caste people and the people who converted to Islam or who migrated and settled in the delta are the Pundra Kshatriyas, Namosudras (Chandals), Bagdis, Kapali, Malos, Barbers, Kaibartas, Jalia, Keont, Dhopa, Yugi Nath, Suri, and Rajvanshi—low caste Hindus (Danda, A.A., 2007) (Scheduled Castes); Sheikh, Mirshikari, Sapuria and Bedia—low caste Muslims; and Santal, Munda and Oraon (Scheduled Tribes). They are scattered poor who fled their native places to escape centuries of oppression by the mainstream society or who were brought by the British for reforestation and reclamation work to generate revenue for the state took up farming, fishing, crab gathering as their pursuits of sustenance. Their occupation is wood cutting, marine work and collecting honey/wax/wood to survive in dense mangroves. But natural calamities like frequent tornadoes, regular floods and the presence of wild and dangerous animals, especially the Royal Bengal Tiger, have instilled in the minds of the inhabitants the presence and protective power of a sylvan goddess, Bonbibi, fighting against the odds and natural challenge. This mighty goddess is their only resort who can ensure their safety irrespective of their religion, sex, caste, class and age, but only if one enters the territory out of necessity and does not covet. However, it is not unusual for lower caste Hindus to pray to deities of Islamic origin without trusting in the power of their existing divinity to escape the restrictions of Puranic religion. What is rare is that some Muslims who depend on the Sundarbans forests and rivers for their livelihood, practice idol worship, which is forbidden by Islamic principles. Bonbibi cult is therefore not a simple depiction of religious hybridity; instead, it is an example of a religious rationality that derives from the practice of a religious cult. Close analysis of this cult may decipher the underlying threads of syncretism inherent in this religious cult and its socio-cultural manifestations.

### Syncretism in myth and other performing rituals

The Bonbibi cult influences the past and present of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans. The presence of Bonbibi is omnipresent in their collective and individual lives: their rituals and belief systems, their celebrations and festivals, their daily chants and proverbs. The mythology of their religious text, the Banbibi Johuranama (Islamic word joku meaning "jewel" and nama meaning "chronicles") actually depicts the ground reality of human settlements in the Sundarbans. Moreover, a close reading of Zahuranama by Muslim writers will reveal how the literary practices of Hindu Mangal Kavya and Islamic pir literary tradition influenced each other for composition of this exemplary religious text (Mandal, 2017).

Zahuranama's narrative is representative and exemplary of the islanders' lives in such a way that the forest-goers often identify themselves as Dukhe: the boy-hero of the story, who is very poor and unfortunate. Banbibi saves this small helpless Muslim boy from the tricky schemes of his greedy, rich merchant uncle Dhona. Dhona planned to sacrifice Dukhe to the fearsome tiger-god Dokkhin Ray in exchange for the forest's resource of honey and wax. Inhabitants of the forest-dependent poverty-stricken Sundarbans feel an intimate resonance with this narrative. Reciting it in part or in full is an essential ritual of the Banbibi Puja ceremony: Puja, which takes place during and around the full moon in the month of Magha (corresponding to January-February) and end of the month Boishakha (corresponding April). Its plot forms the basic story on which the Banabi Palas take place, unquestionably one of the most popular forms of ritual and an integral part of the community's annual festival. To adequately understand the ecology-driven cohesive texture of the fabric of social life in the Sundarbans.

The Zohuranama begins by narrating the story of the arrival of Banbibi and his brother Shah Jangoli, after gaining control of and cultivating the mangroves, defeating and then befriending the earlier man-eating shape-shifting Brahmin tiger-god-ruler Dokkhin Ray and his mother Narayani. This almost symbolizes the beginning of agriculture and Islamization in the mangroves. The Zahuranama, with its curious mixture of Arabic and Persian words intermixed with Bengali, is interestingly read from the last page first backward, like an Arabic or Urdu book, but written in Bengali in a certain meter poyar rhythm. Traditionally used in Hindu Panchali. Although this text is indeed "an idealistic creation of Hindu and Muslim minds,



which...were eager to meet each other on a common platform of amity and unity,"(Bannerjee, 2002).

In the first part of Jahuranama, Bonbibi defeats Narayani and Dokkhin Ray, but instead of completely removing them from their positions, Bonbibi enters into a sisterly relationship with Narayani and, in the process, adopts Dokkhin Ray as her adopted son. However, when we reach the second part of the book, Bonbibi seems to have completely forgotten this arrangement. On the verge of defeating Dokkhin Ray who was in position to attack Dukhe, Ghazi Pir reminded her of her previous settlement and the conflict ends in an amicable treaty. The forest's resources—honey and beewax—are in control of Dokkhin Ray, but if any of Bonbibi's human devotees enter the forest in search of basic sustenance, they would remain intact. The forest preserves the balance of the Sundarbans' soil, water, air, trees and its animal life. Such a strong sense of community loyalty and ecological cohesion is seen in most tribal societies. In fact, Sur (2014) locates the existence of his religion at a time that precedes or precludes the debate on Hindu-Muslim connections. The basis of his hypothesis is embedded in the story itself.

As Dukhe left his mother, she reminded him to remember Bonbibi in times of crisis and need. Does this mean that Dukhe's mother was from the worshipping clan of Banbibi? When Dukhe successfully returns to the village, he carries an axe ( probably representing the totem) around his neck. It might mean that he was protected by a community of woodcutters, who worshiped Bonbibi and hence there lie connection between Dukhe and Bonbibi.

Forest- goers often take pride in the fact that they are better in heart and health than those who work on agricultural field (settled land) because the forest is a sacred non-discriminatory place, no apparent discrimination is observed among forest goers. In fact, the soil of Bonbibi's abode (prayer place) is believed to have miraculous medicinal properties and can alleviate ailments of mind and body: a belief that runs deep in the mind of both Hindus and Muslims.

### Syncretism in rituals

Bonbibi is intrinsically linked to the forest-based professional cycle of the Sundarbans. She is worshiped whenever forest -goers enter or decide to enter the forests and rivers of the Sundarbans. Bonbibi Jahuranama is read through rhythmic recitation in Panchali tune occupies a central place in the ritual, performed by a non-Brahmin, or even better, by a Muslim. It is interesting to note how numerous Islamic terms such as hajot (devotional

austerities), shinni/shirni (an offering to the goddess originally made of rice and milk), manat (prayed blessings), and khoirat (charity) remain intact. Woven themselves into the ritual repertoire of religion, Khairat is an integral part of the ritual of worship; It symbolizes a community's philanthropy, a way of bridging the rich and poor, implying society's responsibility to care for those in need. However, non-Islamic practices such as idol worship, mud- mound worship and offering vog (cooked food) to the goddess are equally significant. A number of Islamic terms overlapped with worship-related terms. However, people of both Hindu-Muslim communities express the harmonious attitude through the observance of these mixed rituals.

### Syncretism in iconic presentation

The iconic figure of Bonbibi is in the form of a woman, usually with Dukhe in her lap, but not always. She is always accompanied by Shah Jangoli and often by two other male human iconic figures: one Ghazi Pir and the other Dokkhin Ray. Dokkhin Raya is sometimes depicted as a tiger, sometimes as a Brahmin, and sometimes as half-tiger and half-man. Scholars have argued that "in response to their environment the natives developed a religion that is a peculiar mixture of animism, pir-ism and Shakti religion." The uniformity of a hybrid syncretic divinity. In Hindu-majority regions, her depiction is similar to that of Hindu deities: red in color. She is dressed in a sari, with a crown on her head, usually garlanded with wild flowers. However, "in Muslim-majority areas [he]...is dressed in a salwar kameez, wearing a necklace around his neck, plaited hair and sometimes a dopatta, or a decorated Muslim topi (cap) and feet covered with shoes and socks." He's either empty-handed or carrying an ashabadi(the symbol of peace and tranquility)."(Basu,1969).

## II. Discussion

Therefore, in the light of the foregoing analysis, Bonbibi cult appears to be clearly integrated and the tune of syncretism centered on Hindu-Muslim can be perceived; however, it is not without its internal contradictions that defy any homogenous categorization. Not only Hindus and Muslims have different types of idols to worship Bonbibi. They live almost in isolation in different villages, clearly identifying their religious affiliations. The depiction of Muslim deities and characters during the annual festival of the deity Bonbibi Pala performance is considered pious, however, these palagans today have very few Muslim performers. These indicate that the domain



of Bonbibi worship has a large number of flexible boundaries that can be easily crossed without even shedding the markers of distinctive fundamentalist religious practice (Vimal, Deka and Das, 2021).

#### *Recent state of syncretism*

The seeds of organized and diverse cultural beliefs and practices were organically rooted in Bonbibi devotees in past and did not face such dissent and irrationality as today in the context of fundamentalist forces, who find it problematic to accommodate a democratic set-up for exploiting the ecosystem of Sundarbans. The Hindu devotees are employing Brahmins to perform puja and rituals, thus reinforcing Brahminical hegemony. On the other hand, the maulvis (Muslim religious scholars) of prominent mosques in the Sundarbans are increasingly forbidding the worship of any god other than Allah. Fearing ostracism, Muslims are increasingly openly denying their relationship with God. However, it is understandable in the light of news reports about how Hindu fundamentalist forces are trying to polarize the deity by claiming Bonbibi is only for Hindus and denying its collective heritage. (Banerjee, 2019) 49. Although Muslims are being weaned from this tradition, in casual conversation they unanimously agree that they enjoy performing Bonbibi Pala in the village taking it into consideration as an entertainment. Recently there has been a shift between the folk goddess Bonbibi and the goddess Kali of the Hindu pantheon in Sundarban. The goddess Kali is gradually increasing in popularity among forest officials and women prawn collectors. In this context Jalais (2022) observed that the reason why Kali, a goddess not previously worshipped by this community, is rapidly replacing Bonbibi is also because she is seen as 'contemporary' or 'modern' (adhunik). Jalais also claimed that Kali is well inscribed within the Hindu pantheon (as opposed to Bonbibi, whose Islamic origins are increasingly seen as problematic) and therefore, in their eyes, more suited to their status of forest official-considered a few notches above that of a forest worker. In fact a Hindu-Muslim dichotomy has been established in the Sundaban. On the basis of which the communal opposition between Kali and Bonbibi is moving forward. This is becoming harmful in establishing syncretism centered around Bonbibi, as well as initiating the process of discord between Hindus and Muslims. This situation may seriously shake the traditional social system of Sundarbans in the future.

### **III. Conclusion**

With the expansion of education and alternative career options, with the penetration of developmental and tourism initiatives in the Sundarbans, some sections of the society in Sundarbans are slowly becoming economically uplifted. In their dependence on forest-rivers for their livelihood, they have not lost faith in the religion of Bonbibi. She has become a goddess who ensures good health and grants the wishes of her devotees – such as getting a desired job, birth of a son in the family, guarantee of restoring the peace, success and justice to the poor etc.. Those who carry the agency of religious polarization have certainly tried to adversely affect the all-pervading beliefs of the Bonbibi, but the flexibility of the Bonbibi cult, hereto, has kept communal solidarity intact. However, regressive election-based fundamentalist politics continue to attempt to undermine this flexibility so as to destroy the resilience of the Bonbibi cult by disunity and fragmentation of two major religious communities resulting into the chage of the overall social cultural system of Sundarban region.

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