

*Life, Literature and
Folk Deities in the
Sundarban Mangrove Forest*



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To naturalists, the Sundarbans – an intricate littoral web of islands and waterways bordering on the Bay of Bengal – 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. The Sundarbans figures in Bengal folklore as an unknown dark corner, attracting the more adventurous in search of livelihoods. 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. 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. These deities were not the regular godheads of the Indian pantheon. 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 way of living and a culture emerging from responses to the challenges of nature in various forms.



Royal Bengal Tiger (Man eater) of Sundarban

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 are fed by many smaller rivers. The landscape consists of islands and islets entrapped in an extensive network of estuaries, criss-cross channels and rivers.



Mangrove Forest of Sundarban



*Pneumatophores of mangrove trees of Sundarban
piercing under the feet of visitors*



*Crocodile, one of the threats
of Sundarban*

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 ‘Sundarban’ or ‘the beautiful forest’. 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. 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. 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. 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. They were deities with whom the man in the forest could identify himself.

The various sources of danger in this area formed the underlying theme of the punthi literature of the Sundarbans. The people here had not been equipped with firearms to any appreciable extent 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 monstrous foe or at times even a subordinate deity. The population of the Sundarbans consisted entirely of marginalized people.

The Hindus were mainly of the following lower-castes : napita, kaibarta, kapali, pod, candela. The hierarchy of the fourfold 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 candalas and other such categories into excluded groups. Candalas are thus not sudras, they are untouchables.) jalia, bagdi, tior, dhoba, jogi, suri, and kaora. Of these twelve castes, the pods and the candalas were the 'most numerous'.

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. 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.



A typical Banabibi shrine at Pakhiralay, Gosaba



Ma Banabibi, mother to humans and tigers

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 in 1686 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 verse. It is well known that the people chanted some verses before they entered the forest so that no danger would befall them. Our focus here is on three deities : Barakhan Ghazi, Banabibi, and Dakshin Ray.



Banabibi is worshipped at any place of the forest

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.

Dakshin Ray : Dakshin Ray was the relative and Commander-in-Chief of Mukunda Ray³⁰, 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 Bhatishvara 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 dakhin) 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.

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. 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. In fact, the worship of Banachandi is an affair of the whole community. 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. 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.



People thronging in front of a Banabibi shrine, Jaynagar



People going to the forest for work, will generally make such shacks of Banabibi, worship her and then enters

The Banabibi Jahuranama narrates 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. 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 thenceforth 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. Having rowed past various places, Dhonai and his party arrived at a place called Narakhali. 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 beehive. 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 Rājy to fulfill 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 punthis narrate the same story and the additional evidence in the second punthi makes it possible to identify the personifications of the Sundarban spirits firmly. In this text Dukhe once says 'When (Dakhin) Ray came as a tiger to eat me, Banabibi, the kind mother, came to the forest to save me.'

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.

Barakhan Gazi : 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, which are found in the Bengali literature of the seventeenth century the presence of a composite



Banabibi, Shah Jangli, Gaji Khan Baba at a local shrine in Nogenabad, Kultoli



Banabibi holding Dukhe on her lap and Shah Jangli on her side at Bonnie Camp, Kultoli

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 Sundarban 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.



Banabibi riding on a tiger which signifies Dakshin Ray

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. As a sequel, they came to an amicable division of the spheres of rule. The people, nay the gods, learnt through experience the principle of accommodation. A struggling population, with whom the question of survival was of the 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. 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 which can never be similar to the more settled lands of the north. In spite of constant fear, people here – Hindus, Muslims and tribals – enjoy the small things of life, dance to the first flower and fruit. This is the story of a people struggling to find a living in a harsh climate, and yet enjoying the joys of nature with the blessings of their homespun Gods.



Gaji Baba at a mosque in Mathurapur



Map of Sundarban

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