



## Religion, Nature, and Life in the Sundarbans

The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove forest in the world, spanning across the borders of Bangladesh and India. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage site recognized for its ecological uniqueness and importance to all humanity. The Sundarbans is home to diverse species and some of the poorest twelve million people in the world. Hindu and Muslim fisherfolk and honey collectors who call this place home share a respect for the forest and venerate Bonbibi (Forest Lady), who they believe reigns over the forest and its inhabitants. For them, she offers protection. This article argues that in their ritual and ethical practices, these Muslims and Hindus treat the Sundarbans as sacred land. It is sacred because it provides all they need to live a sustainable life. This study combines textual analysis of the epic poem about Bonbibi entitled the *Jahuranama* with ethnographic studies and field visits.

KEYWORDS: Bengali—Bonbibi—fisherfolk—forest—Hindu—honey collector—Muslim—sacred groves

As the Bonbibi *puja* begins, in front of the forest gods stretches a thick carpet of flowers and food, a feast of scent and sound, a luxurious stage upon which the gods can play, seduced and intoxicated with comfort and delight. The priest, kneeling and bowing to the images, tweaks his own ears, then his nostrils. This is a way of purifying himself and apologizing for any errors he might commit in the puja . . . the priest mimics the tweaking a Bengali mother might use to gently reprimand a naughty son. Finally he folds his hands. A shimmering, shivering “Uluooooooooooooooooo” goes up from the assembled crowd; someone blows the sacred conch shell. . . . A reader wearing a white shirt and a pink lungi begins chanting from a hymnal. As the reader finishes a page, he folds it back from left to right. The book begins where an English or Bengali book would end—but where an Arabic text would begin. Yet the words are written not in the long scimitar strokes of Arabic script but in the shorter, ornamental tendrils of the Bengali alphabet. I recognize only a few words. One of them is “Allah.”

(Montgomery 1995, 110–11)

The above is an excerpt from the American naturalist Sy Montgomery’s first-hand account of a Bonbibi *pūjā* (worship service) in India. Her colorful description of this *pūjā* makes the reader wonder how the words “Arabic,” “Bengali,” “*pūjā*,” and “Allah” could be descriptors of the same event. For years scholars have described the Bonbibi *pūjā* and images of Bonbibi (*van bibi*), the “forest maiden” or “lady of the forest,” as syncretic Bengali folk religion, a religion of the uneducated that is a mixture of Islam and Hinduism (Bera and Mukhopadhyay 2010, 11). We find different iterations of this view in the works of Asim Roy (2014) and Rafiuddin Ahmed (2001). On closer examination, one finds a much more complex story revealing a religious life that is Islamic in orientation, just as it is Hindu in orientation. To understand this seemingly puzzling idea we must address the following relationships: those between Hindus and Muslims who venerate Bonbibi (Lady of the Forest); the venerated and their relation to the forest and its natural resources; and their relationship with Muslims and Hindus who do not venerate Bonbibi. It is the way the Hindu and Muslim Sundarbans residents relate to the forest that is the focus of this article. It is through their relationship to the forest that one can see how two different religious communities might find the same figure worthy of devotion.

For venerator of Bonbibi, the forest cannot simply be categorized as a forbidden zone, nor is it a space where one travels indiscriminately. The forest is tied to the people and the way they live. It is not only a geographic sphere that is associated with life and death with its devastating cyclones, fertile land, and abundant natural resources, but it shapes individual and communal identity as well. The forest, in an important sense, is sacred to Hindus and Muslims who recognize Bonbibi as their protector when they venture onto dangerous terrain. In the Sundarbans, many people rely on the forest but do so in ways that are more sustainable than those who do not venerate Bonbibi. Yet, other residents exploit it in ways that have changed the natural environment radically. This article addresses only ritualized actions and their generated meanings that Bonbibi venerator maintain in relation to the forest.

### THE SUNDARBANS

The Sundarbans is the largest mangrove forest in the world, stretching from the southeastern region of West Bengal, India to the Haringhata River located to the east in Bangladesh (see figure 1). The total size, including the Indian and Bangladeshi portions, is approximately ten thousand square miles, which is comparable to Haiti’s land mass.

Mangroves are located in the deltaic regions at the confluence of rivers and the Bay of Bengal. The trees of the mangrove, which thrive in the brackish water, protect the coastline by slowing the flow of water with the sediment that is collected from the rivers. The geography of the Sundarbans, in particular, changes drastically as a result of the impact of the ocean tides and river flow. Islands vanish into the waters in one area while they expand in another. It is a rich fertile land with many natural resources. There are approximately 4.5 million people living in the Sundarbans of West Bengal and another 7.5 million in Bangladesh. Fisher folk

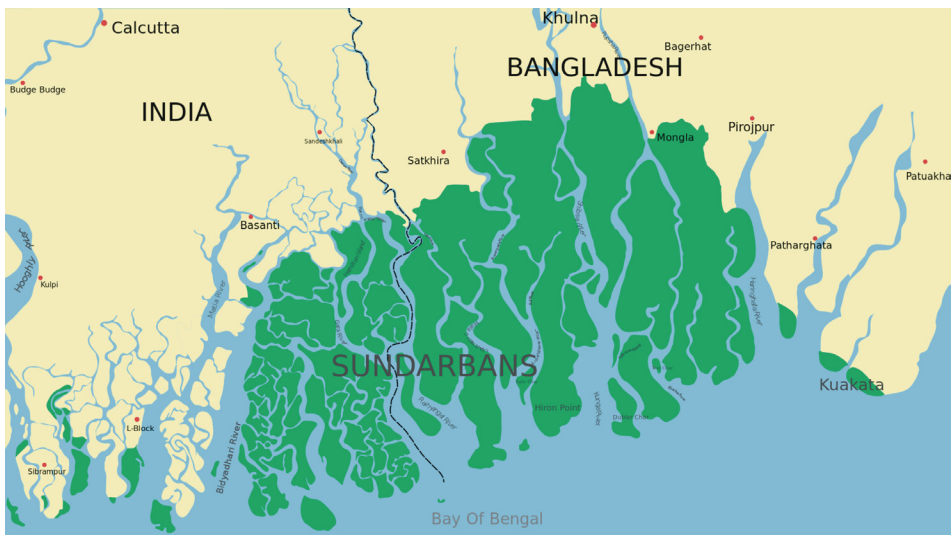


Figure 1: Map of the Sundarbans (courtesy of the author).

rely on the bounty of the Sundarbans waters for their livelihood. Others collect wood, honey, and wax from deep in the forest. And yet others, mostly women, collect tiger-prawn seed with mosquito nets on the banks of the rivers. Still others farm shrimp. While some of these income-generating activities such as tiger-prawn seed collection and shrimp farming have provided new means of supporting some of the poorest people inhabiting the region, they are not sustainable. Prawn seed collection and shrimp farming for export have become lucrative businesses. Yet, prawn seed numbers are decreasing, and shrimp farming is destroying the natural barriers that protect the land.

Though life in the Sundarbans is simple, it is in no way easy for many who call this forest home. In her book *Forest of Tigers*, Annu Jalais clearly describes the economic backgrounds of the people who live here. She distinguishes between three main socio-economic groups: forest workers and poachers, prawn seed collectors, and landowners (Jalais 2010, 31–33). Here, I focus on those people Jalais identifies as coming from the lowest socio-economic group. These people live on the edge of the forest and exist on the margins of Bengali society economically, socially, and politically. Possessing land is the central factor in determining the extent of dependence on the forest. For those with land, there are many more options for income generation, while those who are landless depend more heavily on the forest and waterways. The landless are more reliant on day labor, forest-based fishing, legal and illegal honey collection, crabbing, and prawn seed collection to make ends meet.

There is little to no electricity in most villages in the Sundarbans of both India and Bangladesh. The number of roads is also limited, and even fresh water is becoming increasingly scarce, as soil is becoming salinized due to the shrimp farming industry's expansion (Rahman et al. 2013, 135). The fisher folk, like their counterparts in other parts of the world, regularly face dangerous storms and fierce, predatory animals. It is the fisher folk, honey collectors, and woodcutters in particular who seek the protection of Bonbibi.

Bonbibi is revered in this forest as the protector of these poorest occupational groups. In other words, people who fish, collect honey, or collect wood are the most vulnerable and face the most danger. I will argue that those who do venerate Bonbibi view their relationship to the forest as one based on respect and humility. As mentioned earlier, the forest is a sacred space for these groups of marginalized Muslim and Hindu fisher folk and honey and wood collectors. While I have argued elsewhere that neither Hindu nor Muslim devotees of Bonbibi are creating a new religion, in what follows I argue that their relationship to the forest is central to understanding how both Hindus and Muslims can share a space that both deem sacred for the same reason (Uddin 2012, 61–84). It is the relationship to the place that is central to the construction of belief and ritual. The behaviors and practices inculcated by the ritualized relationship between humans and their immediate environment demonstrates a profound respect for the forest, even sanctifying it. Furthermore, while religious identity is important in this context, occupation and economics also play significant roles in the way people view themselves in relation to the forest and their place in the world.

Because the inhospitable yet rich environment of the forest serves as a shared sacred site for both Hindus and Muslims, I explore the subject of the local population's relation to the natural world and how this rich yet hostile environment inspires and reinforces the veneration of Bonbibi in the contexts of both an Islamic and Hindu worldview. I will also demonstrate how the veneration of Bonbibi shapes the attitudes of the inhabitants of the Sundarbans to their natural environment. In addition, I explore how relational attitudes among residents shape the veneration and representation of Bonbibi.

#### MUSLIM SAINTS OF BENGAL

For virtually every Muslim shrine in Bangladesh and West Bengal, India there are stories about saints known by many honorific titles who arrived in the region from various parts of the Middle East. Such saints received their missions either from Allah directly or from Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. Broadly speaking, their purpose was to bring Islam and civilization to the wild frontier zone. For example, oral tradition tells us that Shah Jalal (d. 1346) of the district of Sylhet, in what is now Bangladesh, was from Mecca. He left Mecca to spread Islam with a band of 313 disciples. The number of disciples is significant as it is the same number of men the Prophet is purported to have had with him in the victorious Battle of Badr (Uddin 2006). Likewise, Khan Jahan Ali of Bagherhat (Bagherhat translates as “tiger market”) is said to have also come from the Middle East. Blessed and commissioned by Allah to bring Islam to this region filled with tigers, Khan Jahan Ali is said to have arrived in Khulna on the backs of two crocodiles (Uddin 2006).

The story of Bonbibi resembles narratives of other Muslim saints who came to the Bengal frontier heralding Islam. She, too, has been given a divine charge and her association with Muhammad, Fatima, Islam, and the Qur'an endow her with authority and legitimacy. Moreover, metaphoric language and “emboxed” stories containing motifs found in Islamic narratives further reinforce an Islamic framing narrative (Uddin 2006, 81–106). Bonbibi is charged by Allah to protect the people whose livelihoods depend on the forest.

#### THE POWER OF BONBIBI

Early accounts by Europeans document the dangers of the Sundarbans forest. Travelogues and books about the Sundarbans from as far back as the seventeenth century describe in detail the dangers of the region. Francois Bernier traveled through the Sundarbans in 1665–66. He described his experience on the boat as follows:

Among these islands, it is in many places dangerous to land and great care must be had that the boat, which during the night is fastened to a tree, be kept at some distance from the shore, for it constantly happens that some person or another falls prey to tigers. These ferocious animals are very apt, it is said, to enter into the boat itself while the people are asleep, and to carry away some

victim, who, if we are to believe the boatmen of the country, generally happens to be the stoutest and fattest of the party. (Bernier 1914, 443)

While accounts like his may be embellished for entertainment purposes by creating an alluring and exotic aura, such narratives attest to the fact that in the 1600s there was human activity in the Sundarbans.

Traveler accounts repeated the motif of the exotic, dangerous, and mysterious Bengal tiger that evoked an air of timelessness. According to such accounts, it became common knowledge in the Sundarbans that if you spot a tiger, it is likely too late to respond. In other parts of Asia where the Bengal tiger is found, they are not known to attack so aggressively. The Bengal tiger earned a certain reputation that increased its fame as fierce and beautiful. According to these accounts, humans are just as much prey as the chital deer and the rhesus monkey. Neither gun nor spear can provide adequate protection from the brute force, strength, appetite, and jaws of the tiger, according to early accounts. In 1867 Joseph Fayrer, from the Bengal Medical Service, described them as follows:

The purpose of these teeth is obvious. The small incisors are used to gnaw the soft ends of bones, and to scrape off fibrous and tendinous structures. The long fang-like canines seize, pierce, and hold the prey. The sectorial, or scissor-like teeth, working vertically against each other, serve to cut and divide the flesh or to crush the bones. These movements being effected by powerful muscles, which pass under the zygomatic arches from high crests of bone on the boldly-sculptured skull, and give the peculiar aspect so characteristic of the carnivore. (Fayrer 1875, 6–7)

Despite its massive four or five hundred pounds, the Bengal tiger is a stealthy hunter. It is known to stalk its prey in total silence for hours from land and sea.

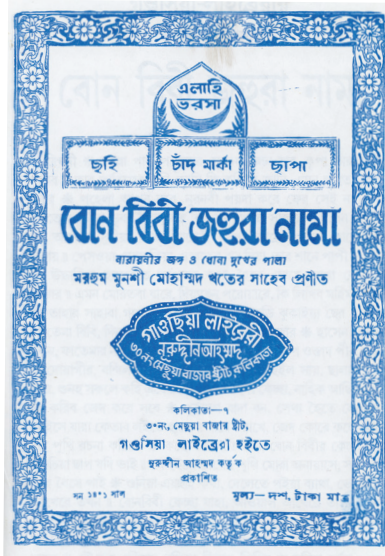


Figure 2: The cover of Muhammad Khater's *Jahuranama* (courtesy of the author).

The tiger typically takes hold of his prey from behind, at the neck. Those who survive to witness their friends turned into victims say that they grab their prey and flee into the forest. The tiger flees the scene as if carrying a small, weightless treat in its mouth, not wishing to share even a morsel with anyone. Even though such horrific stories abound about the dangers posed by the Sundarbans tigers, humans continue to venture into the forest, as they have done for centuries.

Muslims and Hindus both say that Bonbibi is an important source of protection from the tiger and other predators in the forest. A text known as the *Jahuranama* (*bonbibī jahurānāmā*, or Bonbibi sublime manifestation book) is recited annually at the Bonbibi festival (*melā*), as Montgomery wit-



nessed in the early 1990s (see figure 2). The festival takes place during the Bengali month of Poush. The *Jahuranama* is an epic poem that relates the story of Bonbibi's rise to prominence in the forest. It depicts her compassion for the poor landless people who are compelled to live there. Muhammad Khater, a nineteenth-century writer from Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), wrote one of the texts used in today's practice. In the preface to his *Jahuranama* (1880), Khater states that the people of the Sundarbans would come to the city to collect books, when they would often request that he write a *pun̄thi* (chapbook) about Bonbibi.<sup>1</sup> Though the *Jahuranama* was written in the late nineteenth century, accounts from the early British period also describe the veneration of Bonbibi, thus demonstrating that Bonbibi's veneration is far older than Khater's written version. This is similar to the case of the *maṅgalakābyas*. *Maṅgalakābyas* are epic poems written about local deities and why they should be worshipped (see Curley 2008). Like the *maṅgalakābyas*, these stories were presumably circulated orally, before being written down and documented in the colonial period.

#### THE STORY OF BONBIBI AS TOLD IN THE *JAHURANAMA*

The story begins much like the story of the Prophet Ibrahim. It starts with a man who lives in Mecca named Berahim.<sup>2</sup> After many years of trying, his wife Phulbibi (Flower Lady) is unable to conceive, so she advises him to seek the guidance of the Prophet Muhammad at his tomb. According to the *Jahuranama*, the Prophet responded by saying that he would ask Fatima, the Keeper of Paradise. Fatima then consulted the Qur'an and advised Berahim to take a second wife. Berahim was at once hopeful and sad. He returned home to his wife and conveyed the message to her. She was devastated by the news. Were her husband to take a second wife, Phulbibi would, in essence, have no role to play in the household. In order to protect herself and her status, she made Berahim pledge to fulfill a wish, should she have one in the future. Berahim agreed and soon after he found a second wife. Berahim brought his new wife, Golalbibi, to the home he shared with Phulbibi. He asked Phulbibi to take care of the new wife. Soon there was news of Golalbibi's pregnancy. Hearing the news, Phulbibi became jealous and now made her request. She asked her husband to banish his pregnant wife. After a painful discussion with his first wife, Berahim led his pregnant wife into the forest and deserted her while she was in labor. As Fatima predicted, two children were born. They were named Bonbibi and Shahjangali (Jungle King) by heavenly creatures that protected them after their birth.

After giving birth Golalbibi took Shahjangali and abandoned Bonbibi, because she believed she would not be able to care for both children in the forest. In the *Jahuranama*, Bonbibi informs her mother that she understands her mother's decision to abandon her as one any mother would make, given the circumstances. It would be nearly impossible for the mother to survive, let alone raise two children on her own. Up to this point, the story of desertion and self-sacrifice, along with the name Berahim, echoes the myth of Ibrahim, Hajara, and Ismail. Like Hajara, Golalbibi is abandoned and left to take care of her son alone. The Qur'an, Muham-

mad, and Fatima are central to the story, and it also draws upon Islamic stories of prophets. These elements bring Bonbibi's narrative and the characters' existence into an Islamic understanding of the world. Nevertheless, the names of Berahim's wives, Phul and Golal, are both Bengali. In addition, there are other characters we meet in the story who play major roles in Bengali literature. The important point in this story is that Islamic and Bengali motifs are intertwined, especially when Bonbibi moves to the Sundarbans.

By Allah's command, Bonbibi was left alone in the forest where she was cared for by deer for seven years, after which she was reunited with her brother, mother, and father. The fact that animals raised Bonbibi in the forest connects her directly to nature, a point to which I will return later. The family reunion was a happy occasion but short lived. Bonbibi informed her brother that their parents must return home while he should accompany her to the forest. Allah had commanded she go there, but before doing so, she must make a pilgrimage (*zīyārat*)<sup>3</sup> to the Prophet's grave. Bonbibi and her brother, Shahjangali, became *murīds*, or disciples, of one of Muhammad's grandsons.<sup>4</sup> From her grave, Fatima informed Bonbibi that she would protect those who sought her protection in the swamp forest. Bonbibi would be merciful and kind to all who sought her aid. Furthermore, she would receive grace (*baraka*) from Allah to carry out her duties.

After performing *zīyārat* to the grave of the Prophet, the twins proceeded to the low-lying swamp forest, where they would reign as lords. Bonbibi's role as a Sufi saint who aids those in need is thus established early in the narrative. Pilgrimage is a significant act as it establishes a lineage of authority. Her brother's role as her assistant is made clear when he is relegated to performing the call to prayer. When the two arrive in the deep forest they are confronted with the job of supplanting the current ruler, whose name is Dakshin Ray (Southern Lord), a regional Hindu deity in the form of a tiger.<sup>5</sup>

The *Jaburanama* paints a picture of Dakshin Ray as a superhuman figure who hungers for human sacrifice. This description differs radically from that found in the *Raymangal*, the epic poem celebrating Dakshin Ray, where he is depicted as the benevolent protector of the people. This is very much in keeping with the *mangal* literature mentioned earlier, in which deities are always competing with one another for worshippers. In the *Dharmamangal* corpus, for example, the local deity Dharmaraj competes with the Hindu goddess Durga for dominance, which is enacted through human agents on the battlefield. The hero, Lausen, and his brother Karpur are devotees of Dharmaraj, but the villainous maternal uncle who is their archrival is a follower of Durga (see, for example, Korom 2004). As the story continues in the *Jaburanama*, Bonbibi and Shahjangali meet a Sufi *pīr*, who offers advice on how to defeat Dakshin Ray. A battle ensues between Bonbibi and Dakshin Ray's mother, Narayani, who is accompanied by an army of witches.

Shahjangali does not play any significant role during this battle, so as Bonbibi nears death in battle, she calls out to Fatima for help. Bonbibi is granted the ability to defeat Narayani but does not destroy her. Instead, Bonbibi takes mercy on Narayani when the mother of Dakshin Ray agrees to obey the rules set forth in the forest by Bonbibi. Shahjangali gives the call to prayer and Bonbibi takes Narayani



into her lap, informing her and Dakshin Ray that they will still have power in the low-lying region. From that point onward, Narayani and Dakshin Ray too assist in governing the region and assuring the peaceful coexistence of people and the other creatures inhabiting the land.

Like other stories of Sufi saints in Bengal, the Bonbibi story is, as Richard Eaton suggests, a “personified version” of Muslim settlement in the region and how the different groups perceived each other (1996, 9). But it is also an allegory of the relationship to be nurtured and maintained between people and the forest. Clearly, residents did not always worship the same superhuman agents. The story of Bonbibi’s protection in the *Jaburanama* supplants Dakshin Ray as the most effective source of power.

Competition between *pīrs* and deities is not uncommon in South Asia; however, Nile Green (2013) suggests that to read into these narratives a competition between religions would be a gross over-reading of the text. The story demonstrates how two communities of largely distinct orientations to divine power recognized difference but also similarity.<sup>6</sup> In fact, in the *Jaburanama* the terms “Hindu” and “Muslim” are never mentioned, and although Khater’s version of Bonbibi’s story depicts Dakshin Ray in a somewhat negative light, it is a typical trope of competition narratives, in which two opponents are paired opposite each other for the purpose of debate. There are also, in fact, many stories of Muslim saints competing against each other, which suggests that this kind of narrative stressing opposition is necessarily about Hindu-Muslim confrontation.

The story relates that Bonbibi traveled to all of the villages in the region in order to establish her dominion, after which she directed Dakshin Ray to rule justly over Khedokhali. To Bonbibi’s dismay, soon after the agreement was made, Dakshin Ray demanded a human sacrifice. The second part of the story is about Bonbibi extending her mercy and kindness to the people who live on the edge of the forest and how she compelled Dakshin Ray to abide by her rules. It also conveys the delicate ecological balance that must be maintained in the Sundarbans. The fact that Dakshin Ray is a tiger-god is crucial here, as it is tigers that humans must fear and with whom they must share the resources of the forest.

The second part of the *Jaburanama* is the story of Dhona and Dukkhe. Dhona, as implied by his name, was a wealthy businessman who traded in honey and wax, some of the most valuable resources of the Sundarbans. A young man named Dukkhe who, as his name indicates, suffered a great deal and was very poor, lived in the same village as Dhona.<sup>7</sup> Dukkhe and his very old mother lived a hand-to-mouth existence. Despite the struggles of life, they were happy. Dukkhe had no skills, and even though he was an adult, the only work he knew was herding cows.<sup>8</sup> Dukkhe’s struggles in this story represent the struggles of the poor who feel disenfranchised and abused by the landed and educated elites of the Sundarbans. Dhona invited Dukkhe to join him on his next expedition. He promised Dukkhe that the trip would be safe and would bring him great wealth. He also said that upon their safe return he would find Dukkhe a wife. After great resistance from his mother, Dukkhe decided to join the expedition. Just before his departure, Dukkhe’s mother called out to her son and said,

Dukkhe, listen to me, in the forest, Bonbibi is the mother of kindness. If you find yourself in trouble, you call out to her as though she is your mother. If you call out to her as “mā,” being merciful, she will rescue you from danger. I entrust you to Mother Bonbibi. Bonbibi will look after you.

(Khater 1880, 18–19)

During that very expedition, Dhona met Dakshin Ray. Before disembarking from the boats with his men, he neglected to perform *pūjā* to Dakshin Ray. Later that night in a dream, Dakshin Ray came to Dhona and told him he wanted a human sacrifice. In exchange he would fill Dhona’s seven boats with honey and wax. Dakshin Ray demanded that Dhona offer Dukkhe as a human sacrifice. Under false pretenses Dhona led Dukkhe deep into the forest. Upon seeing the arrival of his blood sacrifice, Dakshin Ray took the form of a tiger and was about to devour Dukkhe when a fearful Dukkhe recalled his mother’s words and called out to Bonbibi. She arrived in an instant with her brother and saved Dukkhe from Dakshin Ray, who was chased southward by Shahjangali. Fleeing, Dakshin Ray met his friend Gazi Kalu and begged his aid as an intermediary between him and Shahjangali.

Gazi Kalu is an interesting figure whose name suggests that he is a Sufi Muslim. Also known as Barakhan, Gazi Kalu successfully resolved the conflict between Bonbibi, Shahjangali, and Dakshin Ray. Bonbibi was satisfied with Dakshin Ray’s offering of wealth for Dukkhe in compensation for his actions. Meanwhile, Dhona had already returned to the village with the wealth of the Sundarbans. Upon his return, he went to see Dukkhe’s mother and informed her that a tiger had eaten Dukkhe in the Sundarbans. His mother was devastated, and in her pain and suffering she became frail and blind. For some time Dukkhe had remained in the service of Bonbibi, until one day when she told him to return to his needy mother. Upon his return to the village, Gazi Kalu gave Dukkhe the wealth that was promised by Dhona. Dukkhe was now freed from his low station in life and elevated to the status of a landlord (*caudhuri*, a designation used both among Hindus and Muslims) with many tenant farmers (*rājyat*) happily residing within his domain. Dukkhe’s newly elevated status caused Dhona a great deal of concern. Dhona feared Dukkhe’s wrath for having offered him as a human sacrifice to Dakshin Ray. In fear, Dhona sought Bonbibi’s advice. She suggested that Dhona should give his daughter in marriage to Dukkhe. Dhona’s daughter, Champa, was married to Dukkhe in a grand style. The narrative ends with Bonbibi blessing the newlyweds.<sup>9</sup>

The ending of this story is one of hope. It also provides clues about a landless people by way of a description of Dukkhe’s poverty and how, ultimately, he is able to obtain land. To be able to farm land is not just a concern of Hindus but is a concern for all who live in the region.

#### NATURE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE

The veneration of the same superhuman agent by both Hindus and Muslims in the Sundarbans has to do with practical necessities of life. In multiple waves, people of diverse backgrounds migrated deeper and deeper into the dense forest that at

the same time grew smaller and smaller through settlement, land cultivation, and exploitation of the hardwoods the forest offered. The common purpose of the people who migrated was to eke out a livelihood. Though they venerated the same figure, we cannot claim that they were misinformed Muslims and Hindus, since such a claim does little in the way of offering an explanation.

Frederique Apffel-Marglin and Pramod Parajuli demonstrate that Hindus, Muslims, Adivasis (indigenous people), and Buddhists along the coastal area of Puri in Orissa share practices in terms of work associated with the environment around them. Their cooperation in labor is also expressed in the annual festival celebrating the Hindu goddess Bali Haracandi, in which both Hindus and Muslims participate (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000, 292). The Goddess Bali Haracandi's annual festival of Raja Parba occurs at the onset of the monsoon. The festival of Raja Parba lasts four days. The goddess is said to menstruate for the first three days. On the last day, she has a purificatory bath. During this period, there is no work to be done—no fishing, no farming. Instead, men congregate in a grove and sleep there. Women pass the time in public spaces of the villages and men present gifts to wives and sisters. Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli suggest that villagers regard both the land (as Mother Earth) and the sea as forms of Bali Haracandi. She is in menses and the menses is interpreted as a fallow time during which humans should leave her “bodies” (whether earth or sea) untroubled by their activity. Even Muslims participate in the celebrations, with girls and women observing the rituals associated with the event (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000, 292–93).

Though participating Muslims do not hold to the belief that the goddess is in menses, they do affirm the notion that the earth is symbolically maternal. Therefore, observing several days when land is not cultivated makes perfect sense to them. Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli suggest that,

in these statements [of the Muslim and Hindu villagers] is expressed not only solidarity with Hindu neighbors but the view that the earth is Mother and that she should be given rest. Thus, the practices of not ploughing and of stopping work (among others) are not only engaged in to keep harmonious relationships with their Hindu neighbors but also because of their way of viewing the earth as Mother. (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000, 296)

Ultimately what Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, and Adivasis share in this region is “a place and a way of acting in that place and of relating to the nonhuman collectivity of that place” (Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli 2000, 292). This sharing is articulated on days marking seasonal changes that impact the natural environment upon which they rely for their livelihood. In a sense, for the Hindus of the area, the goddess and nature are one and the same; Muslims, too, rely on the natural environment that they deem worthy of their gratitude. Muslims' appreciation for the natural environment does not violate, in their view, their Islamic understanding of the world and their relation to it.

Apffel-Marglin and Parajuli offer us a way of understanding shared or common elements in the religious lives of Muslims and Hindus. They offer us a way to look beyond simplistic notions of mixed and seemingly uninformed practices. They also offer us a way of understanding the connection between people and their natural

environment. Similar to the Hindus, Buddhists, Adivasis, and Muslims who celebrate Raja Parba in Orissa, the communities of the Sundarbans acknowledge and celebrate an important relation to the mangrove forest and the nonhuman inhabitants that reside there. This relation between communities of people and the forest is a relation of respect for the forest, its inhabitants, and the value of the resources it continually provides to those dependent on them. It is only through the Sundarbans people's own acknowledgment that their livelihood is dependent on the forest that a viable and sustainable existence is maintained.<sup>10</sup>

The villagers of the Sundarbans maintain a sustainable existence by taking only what they need to survive, and they do so only with ritual demonstration of their gratitude. What we also see in the case of Bonbibi-associated rituals and ethical practices is that Muslims and Hindus have common needs and common interests, so each religious community, in their interwoven ritualistic way, appeases the same source of power. The *Jaburanama*, like the *Raymangal*, informs us of the presence of superhuman agents, such as heavenly creatures, Sufi saints, deities, and witches who reside in this forest. There are many forces, some of which are malevolent. Bonbibi, however, is there for the protection of all, so long as homage is paid. Hindus of the region, of course, appease other entities too who are there to protect those who pay them homage. It is at the simple shrines throughout the Sundarbans that people ask for protection. And they turn to ritual specialists known variously as *fakīr*, *gunīn*, and *bāule* to lead work parties into the deep forest.

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF SHRINES

The Sundarbans is a region that contains villages on the outer edges of the forest. There is another zone of the forest that is considered to be protected lands and waterways. On both the Indian side and Bangladeshi side of the border forest guards patrol these areas. Local villagers may enter the area for fishing and honey collection with permits. However, no one is permitted access to the core zone that has been designated a World Heritage Site and the exclusive domain of tigers.

In the many Hindu villages that exist on the numerous islands of the Sundarbans, there are shrines dedicated to Bonbibi and other superhuman agents associated with the region. At Bonbibi shrines are images of Bonbibi, Shahjangali, Dakshin Ray, Dukkhe, Gazi Kalu, and others. These shrines are made from simple materials easily available in the Sundarbans. The images are made of clay, then painted. The structures that house them are constructed from mud and thatch. One interesting aspect of these shrines, locally referred to as *thāns*, is the fact that there are no rules about whose image must be included. Sometimes figures such as Shahjangali and Dakshin Ray are omitted. Aniconic images of Bonbibi are also common. Typically at the *thān* a mound of clay representing Bonbibi is placed on the shrine. Many families have their own shrines located adjacent to their homes. There are also village shrines throughout the region. In addition to the *thāns* of the villages, I have seen even simpler *thāns* at the edge of the forest. Hindus perform *pūjās* at these shrines before the departure of their men into the depths of the forest. Women, men, and children take part in the *pūjās*, and their purpose

is to request protection from Bonbibi, or perhaps also to ask Dakshin Ray for his permission to enter the forest.<sup>11</sup>

Muslims of the region do not typically construct *ṭhāns* as Hindus do. Instead, they simply tie a red cloth on a flagstaff in the forest or on the edge of the forest. Muslims perform a simple prayer of supplication, known as *du'ā*, requesting Bonbibi's protection. Both Hindus and Muslims hire a ritual specialist to lead the work party into the forest.

#### TIGER CHARMERS

The *fakīrs* are easily distinguished in the Sundarbans; they are invariably quick, intelligent men with sharp eyes and a wild look about the face. They have great influence: not a man will step out of his boat and enter the jungle, unless preceded by a *fakīr*; not a follower or beater will attend a sportsman in the forest, unless he engages the services of one of these men to secure the tigers away or to shut their mouths. These men do not even pretend to have the least influence over rhinoceros or buffaloes but only over tigers. (De 1990, 53)

An integral part of the life of the Sundarbans is the *fakīr*. The *fakīr* is known by several names, such as *guṇīn* or *bāule*, all of which identify him as a ritual specialist.<sup>12</sup> No one who acknowledges Bonbibi will attempt to enter the forest without one. These ritual specialists protect the working party from tigers. It is believed that they have the power to make tigers be still, lie down, or stay away from the area where the men are working through the recitation of Arabic *mantras*, magical formulas for the acquisition of spiritual power or strength. In the Sundarbans, I spoke with some of these ritual specialists and asked how they learned these *mantras*. I was told that they either received their *mantras* from another ritual specialist or the *mantras* came to them in a dream.<sup>13</sup>

Ritual specialists can be either Hindu or Muslim, so the parties they accompany may be a mix of both faiths. Muslims and Hindus all feel that it is absolutely necessary for their survival to be accompanied into the forest by these men. The *mantras* are taken very seriously by all concerned. The *fakīrs* and *guṇīns* I met would not reveal their *mantras*. They describe the *mantras* as having great power, so that they should not be pronounced without need. The *fakīrs*, *guṇīns*, and *bāules* do not suggest that they have control over the tiger, but they have the special ability to communicate with the source of their power. The words they utter to themselves are powerful, so the *fakīrs*, *guṇīns*, and *bāules* are merely the means by which this potent verbal tool may be used. In addition to the *mantra* the ritual specialist will also provide an offering of sweets, *khicurī*,<sup>14</sup> or a live chicken left in the forest. William Wilson Hunter recorded these practices in his *Statistical Account of Bengal* in 1876:

Before commencing work in any allotment, the *fakīr* assembles all the woodcutters of his party, clears a space at the edge of the forest, and erects a number of small tent-like huts, in which he places images of various forest deities, to which offerings and sacrifices are made. When this has been done, the allotment is con-

sidered free of tigers; and each woodcutter, before commencing work, makes an offering to the jungle deities, by which act he is supposed to have gained a right to their protection. (Hunter 1876, 31)

The *fakīr* is compensated with a portion of the profits or resources retrieved from the forest for the service of protection. Sometimes, despite their best efforts, tigers attack the working party and snatch some unsuspecting victim. “In the event of any of the party being carried off by a tiger, the *fakīr* decamps, and the woodcutters place flags at the most prominent corners of the allotment to warn off all others” (Hunter 1876, 31). In this case, the party understands that permission was not granted to the party to enter and retrieve resources from that particular area. This can happen for a number of reasons, such as mistakes made by the *fakīr* or his violation of the rules of conduct proscribed to their order (Uddin 2012, 77). It is also possible that one of the men in the work party is believed to have violated one of the rules laid out by the *fakīr*.

Although Bonbibi serves the same protective purpose among Hindus and Muslims, the means for achieving that protection differ. For Hindus the hope is that when they perform their *pūjā* the deity will hear their humble request when they place the ball of mud or the clay image on the shrine. If the deity accepts the invitation, there is still no guarantee that the request will be granted but only that it will be heard. For Muslims, Allah is everywhere and as a disciple of Muhammad, Bonbibi will hear one’s request. Again, this does not guarantee that she will help an individual. Muslims have their own way of explaining such rejections. Most often the rejection may be that the individual supplicant does not deserve assistance, or that it is not in the person’s fate, as it was not in Phulbibi’s fate to bear children. In any event, an effort is often made by the party to recover any human remains and bring them back to the family of the victim. In addition to the rituals performed at each venture into the forest, there are annual celebrations of Bonbibi’s kindness as well.

#### BONBIBI MELĀ

The many ways in which residents of the Sundarbans protect themselves include rituals performed by the *fakīr*, acts performed by the work party as instructed by the *fakīr*, and the *pūjās* and *du‘ās* performed by individual men and their families before or after return from the forest. The grandest way in which Bonbibi is shown gratitude is at the annual celebration on Makar Sankranti during the Bengali month of Poush. It is on this occasion that Bonbibi is celebrated and gratitude to her is demonstrated through remembrance and commemoration. It is a time when the *Jaburanama* is recited, and a play entitled *Dukkhe’s Journey* (*dukkher jātrā*) is performed in villages for large gatherings. The recitation of the *Jaburanama* is conducted aloud and several people will participate in the recitation. Those with the best skills will be asked to read major portions of the text, which are recited in a melodic manner that corresponds to the traditional meter used in the Bengali language for this type of text. The play is very important in that it is a ritual enactment of the power and mercy of Bonbibi. It is a means of teaching



the younger generation the story while entertaining, keeping the community connected to Bonbibi, and reaffirming the community's relationship to Bonbibi and the forest.

During the festival, when one and all give thanks to Bonbibi, some people also make a vow or *mānat*, which in this context is also called *hājat* by Muslims. For Hindu devotees many of these vows are promises to perform elaborate *pūjās* after the safe return of the men, while Muslims promise the distribution of a distinct ritualistic sweet termed *shīrnī*. These vows are made to ensure safety and security. One of the biggest celebrations for Bonbibi is held by the Forest Department of West Bengal. People from all over the Sundarbans flock to the Forest Department celebration. At the time of the annual festival new images of Bonbibi and other figures from the *Jahuranama* are installed in *ṭhāns* big and small. Hindus offer a mirror to Bonbibi, a toy to Dukkhe, and a *lāṭhi* (staff) to Shajangali as well as food such as rice, sweets, and fruit. Muslims also participate with offerings of *shīrnī*, a practice found at most *māzārs*. Every year Bonbibi is remembered and the people's relationship with her and the forest is renewed. The ritual practice and ethical view of the forest as demonstrated through the veneration of Bonbibi suggests the forest is sacred to these people.

#### ARE THE SUNDARBANS A SACRED GROVE?

The concept of “sacred grove” has been employed in many disciplines, including religious studies, anthropology, and environmental studies. Implied in the concept is that the ordinary use of forests or trees is limited or completely prohibited. Freeman suggests that environmentalists have perpetuated this view. “Sacred groves have been typically presented as stands of primeval forest, left undisturbed for reasons of deep religious sentiment at their climax stage of floristic succession, preserved in the midst of surroundings otherwise transfigured by human agricultural activity and resource exploitation. While not denying that some *kavus* [sacred groves] may take this form, the majority of others in my experience do not” (Freeman 1999, 261).

At the same time, as more and more middle-class citizens and urban residents in South Asia become environmentally concerned citizens, they create essentialist and romanticized depictions of indigenous concepts of sacred groves being protected forests. The subaltern environmentalist-historian Madhav Gadgil refers to sacred groves as a “religion-based conservation ethos” (Chandran and Gadgil 1998, 60). The assumption in this view is that the forest or trees must be protected; therefore, we must conclude that modern environmentalists, scholar-activists, and indigenous people share a view of nature, that sacred groves may be a way to preserve biodiversity and rare plants and species (Sivaramakrishnan and Cederlöf 2003, 32). As Goutam Gajula rightly suggests, there is a problem in these generalizations about religious views of nature. They dehistoricize and essentialize religious behavior (Gajula 2007, 21). With reference to the Sundarbans, I would like to suggest a more dynamic notion of sacred groves; namely, that the binary divisions of sacred and profane do not accurately depict the relation of people to forest. Sacred

groves might better be defined by local cultural rules that govern a social and individual relation to the forest. The sacrality of the forest is determined temporally and by action, with rituals that invoke the divine conducted at particular junctures.

The village or human habitation is defined not just by what it is not but also in relation to the space that is beyond human habitation. It is not a space that is in juxtaposition to the village but another zone of human activity that is culturally determined and reinforced through ritual. The inhabitants' relation to the mangrove forest shapes their interaction with it. Honey collectors and fisherfolk sacralize the forest at different moments in their lives. They do so annually at the *melā*, before entering, and when they return safely from work in the forest. Entry and the retrieval of forest resources are permitted but only when done in accordance with certain ritualized behaviors that connect all the people to a guardian agent. The act of making the forest sacred is an ongoing part of the cycle of life in this region, with consequences for behavior that does not comply with prescribed rituals. Thus, attacks by tigers are often understood as a result of rituals performed incorrectly or not at all.

The guardian agents Bonbibi (and Dakshin Ray among Hindus) can be understood through the lens of kingship. The situation in the Sundarbans is not so different from sacred groves in South India that local residents say are protected by guardian deities of the forests belonging to those deities (see Hildebeitel 1989; and Masilamani-Meyer 2004). The *Jahuranama* indicates that Bonbibi is the sovereign ruler of the Sundarbans. As the ruler, she designates a leadership role for Dakshin Ray. Similar to the sacred groves of other parts of India, Bonbibi in effect is also a guardian deity / superhuman agent. As the “lady” of this forest she always resides there, and when people enter the forest, they are, in essence, asking permission to retrieve produce from a dangerous zone and then requesting safe passage out when the job is done.

The sense of a sacred presence in the forest is further demonstrated in recent explanations of tiger deaths. When the Indian subcontinent was divided into two nations in 1947, thousands of refugees were displaced. Those who came from East Bengal were promised by the then West Bengal Communist opposition political party that, should they come to power, they would provide a place for these Bengali refugees to settle in West Bengal. The place of likely resettlement would be in the Sundarbans. In the meantime, in 1947 the refugees were settled in Central India; it was only in 1977 when the Left Front (Communist Party) came to power that some thirty thousand Bengali refugees migrated to the island of Morichjhanpi in the Sundarbans. Jalais explains that the island was not forested but had been reclaimed by the West Bengal government for a coconut and tamarind plantation (Jalais 2005, 1758). Nevertheless, the West Bengal government, which had decades earlier (i.e., when they were the opposition party) promised to resettle these refugees in the Sundarbans, attempted to move the new residents out, citing the Forest Act. Ross Mallick, who has done an extensive study of the massacre at Morichjhanpi, suggests that it is unclear if the Left Front's unwillingness to resettle the refugees had to do with fear of an uncontrollable and unmanageable influx of refugees or if it had to do with a concern for land and animal preservation (Mallick

1999, 107). Those that stayed faced an economic blockade and were deprived of access to their fishing boats, fresh water, and other basic necessities. Police razed homes, used tear gas, and raped women. In the process, thousands of people were shot and killed by government troops or died from disease and starvation (Jalais 2007, 4). According to Mallick, some 4,128 families perished as a result (1999, III).

As villagers on other islands near Morichjhanpi recall the massacre, many believe that the increased tiger killings in the years after the massacre were a result of the defilement of the Sundarbans. Likewise, Jalais finds that residents also believe that because the upper-caste *bhadralok* (gentlemen) viewed the refugees as worthless, the tigers began to believe they were superior. The anthropomorphizing that is evident in the comments of Sundarbans residents is intriguing. Jalais picks up on this thread as she explains that the residents of the Sundarbans see the tiger as man-eaters, while the *bhadralok*'s view is much more romanticized. "The essence of one's *bhadra* identity is often revealed through one's romanticized vision of nature, in this case of the Sundarbans—which literally means 'beautiful forest'—and of wild-life—here of the Royal Bengal tiger" (Jalais 2007, 5). For the villagers of the Sundarbans, the forest is not romanticized. Instead, the increased tiger deaths suggest to the villagers that the forest's sacred nature was violated and so violence ensued.

If the urban elites and the residents of the Sundarbans have anything in common it is a sense of awe of this place, but the relation to the forest is drastically different. It is precisely the relation to the forest that determines how the forest is defined. The upper-caste urban elites may view the Sundarbans as exotic, beautiful, untamed, and majestic, but for landless Sundarbans residents it is a challenging place to live. In fact, it is the only place to live. Recalling the second part of the *Jahuranama*, Dukkhe finds himself venturing into the forest for the wealthy trader, Dhona. Dukkhe does not seek riches, just a means of making ends meet. Dhona, on the other hand, is ambitious and greedy. It seems that the class struggle we find in the contemporary period is also reflected in the *Jahuranama*. The *Jahuranama* tells the story of not just why Bonbibi is venerated but also reveals the identity of a marginalized, disenfranchised people who, though they may be from two different religious orientations, have much in common.

#### SUSTAINABLE LIFE, NOT GREED

The life of the people in the Sundarbans is filled with constant connection to Bonbibi. It is through this relationship with her that the forest continues to be the source of livelihood for so many people of the region. There is a direct correlation between the level of dependency on the forest and the relationship maintained with Bonbibi. It is a very pragmatic and logical practice of reciprocity. If one is no longer dependent on the forest for one's livelihood, then there is no need or obligation to venerate Bonbibi.

Bonbibi has no purpose other than providing protection in the Sundarbans. She has no role to play in Muslims salvation or Hindu rebirth. In that sense, when discussing the veneration of Bonbibi, the observer must be careful to remember that it is a practice that does not conflict with the larger worldviews of the region's

inhabitants. Throughout the Islamic world there are saints, living and dead, whose favor Muslims and others seek for specific purposes. The interactions with Bonbibī are based solely on a this-worldly need. Though the need pertains to the material world and this life, it can be bettered by divine power, and that divine power can be communicated with in terms that fit within both Hindu and Muslim worldviews.

There is a prevalent attitude of respect toward the forest and its most dangerous inhabitants in the Sundarbans. Residents understand that they share this space with nonhuman entities that have rights to the region as well. Workers do not enter the forest recklessly; they enter with a sense of the awesome power of their environment and formidable creatures such as tigers, crocodiles, and snakes. The *Jahuranama* reminds us of what happens when proper respect is not given and homage is not paid to the rulers of the Sundarbans. Dhona entered the forest without paying respect to the superhuman rulers of the forest and as a result was forced to provide Dakshin Ray with a human sacrifice. Certainly, according to the narrative tradition, things changed for the better in the Sundarbans when Bonbibī arrived. Though Bonbibī stopped Dakshin Ray from obtaining his human sacrifice, Bonbibī did not expel Narayani and Dakshin Ray from the forest. In fact, she allowed them and others to rule, but only on the condition that they recognize her as their superior.

The economically challenged residents of the Sundarbans understand that the tiger has an important role to play in the environment. Without the tiger, there would be no forest. The Sundarbans would become a barren wasteland. The forest would long ago have disappeared for the sake of profits to be gained from its rich natural resources. Indeed, Muslim rulers such as Khan Jahan Ali successfully reclaimed some of the land of the Sundarbans for rice cultivation. The British also tried very hard to reclaim land from the forest. To a great extent they succeeded, and the Sundarbans has shrunk as a result. However, the British often had to abandon reclamation efforts:

And there is no small danger from wild beasts while all this is going on. Crocodiles are seldom met with, except on the immediate banks of rivers; but tigers are not unfrequent, and occasionally break out upon the defenceless forest clearers, if the latter approach their lair too closely. Sometimes a tiger takes possession of a tract of land, and commits such fearful havoc, that he is left at peace in his domain. The depredations of some unusually fierce tiger, or of more than one such tiger, have often caused the retirement of some advanced colony of clearers, who have, through their fear, been compelled to abandon land which only the labour of years has reclaimed from jungle. (Hunter 1876, 51)

I have attempted to demonstrate that both Muslims and Hindus feel that the tiger is worthy of their respect because of its significant power and its divine charge in this sacred forest that has sustained millions of people.

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the colonial to contemporary periods, which has yielded *Constructing Bangladesh: Religion, Ethnicity, and Language in an Islamic Nation*, published by UNC Press in 2006. The topic of her latest work is marginalized communities of Muslims and Hindus who share recognition and veneration of Bonbibi in the Sundarbans. A translation of the epic poem that conveys the story of how Bonbibi became a source of protection in this forest to honey collectors and fisher folk is forthcoming.

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NOTES

1. *Pun̄̄hi* is a genre of popular literature written in *dobhāṣī* Bengali that thrived in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth. Originally handwritten manuscripts, they were mass produced and widely available to the masses, functioning very much like chapbooks did in the English-speaking world. For a different interpretation relying too heavily on their “syncretic” character, see Ghosh (2006). See also Schöwerling (1980) on chapbooks in the Anglophone world.
2. Berahim is a Bengali translation of the name Ibrahim. There are many commonalities between Berahim’s life and some of the struggles that Ibrahim and Hajara undergo according to Islamic tradition.
3. *Ziyārat* is an Arabic term that means visitation. It refers to the visits or pilgrimages people make to saints’ tombs. It should not be mistaken for *hajj*, the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca.
4. The text does not indicate the reason why Bonbibi and her brother become disciples of the Prophet’s grandson, nor does it indicate which one.
5. Dakshin Ray is the tiger deity written about in the seventeenth-century *Raymangal*, of which there are several extant versions. Mention of him can also be found in a *pun̄̄hi* known as *Gazi Kalu—Champavati*, named after a figure discussed later in this article.
6. As I refer to orientations of power here, I mean that Muslims have their own array of superhuman agents with associated hierarchies, such as one omnipotent God who sometimes chooses to endow others with powers that enable them to guide or aid human beings in need of help. I certainly do not intend to suggest that all Muslims accept this notion of figures who intercede on behalf of Allah, but it is common in Bengali Muslim culture.
7. The names Dhona and Dukkhe are telling. Dhona is derived from the root meaning “wealth” and Dukkhe is derived from the root for “sorrow.” The character of Dukkhe represents the anguish and difficult life of the impoverished peasants forced to make their living in the forest of the tiger.
8. Typically in Bengali culture, the herding of cows is a simple task that is carried out by young boys, not adults.
9. See Uddin (2012); the translation included there is by the author.
10. My assessment of the more sustainable way in which fisherfolk and non-professional honey collectors live is based on my own conversations with villagers in the Sundarbans in Bangladesh. However, this way of life is disappearing as a result of economic pressures. The shrimp farming industry and prawn seed collection have grown, drawing more people into these job sectors.
11. For discussion of the *thāns* see Niyogi (1987).
12. In her book *Forest of Tigers*, Annu Jalais finds some Sundarbans villagers who refer to tigers with the term *fakīr*.
13. For further information on the Arabic mantras, see Uddin (2012) and Montgomery (1995). I spoke with some of the same informants as Montgomery in visits to the Sundarbans in 2006.
14. It is a rice and lentil dish often made from leftovers.

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