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Hindu-Islamic Folk Goddess in Bengal: Bonbibi

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In a discourse concerning religions, syncretic traditions serve as a reminder of the popular desire to live in harmony irrespective of their religious affiliations. A culture which has its basis in plurality, will certainly celebrate that plurality within its rituals and practices. As part of this query into the syncretic nature of religions that have coexisted over a period of time, this paper will attempt to look at the story of Bonbibi—a deity worshipped in the deltas of Sunderbans—and try to trace and locate it within its socio-historical context. In an organised structural set-up where religious identities are constructed on the basis of the rituals that they practice, my concern is to look at how a deity whose origins are very much located in Islam became a ‘mother goddess’ for the Hindu community.

Keywords: syncretic traditions, Bonbibi,

In a multiethnic and multicultural set up like India where practitioners of different cults, faiths and beliefs have co-existed for centuries, various syncretic religious sects have originated as a result of interactions between these groups, and flourished. A nineteenth century scholar, Akshoy Kumar Dutta had listed some fifty syncretic sects that were flourishing in India during his lifetime, out of which at least forty were found in Bengal (Dutta 230). The Vaishnavite movement post Chaitanya Mahaprabhu and the proliferation of Sufism in Bengal were considered to be the primary influences behind the inception of syncretic sects such as Karta-Bhajas, Ram-Ballabhis, Lalanshahis, Darbeshis, Bauls, etc, some of which are popular till date in many parts of rural West Bengal. The reason behind the popularity of these sects was their inclusive nature which was fostered by the egalitarian values that they preached, something which the ortho-

dox religious structures denied to many sections of the society. One of the primary features that was common to most of these groups is their desire to transform the idea of the Supreme Being into a more approachable and accessible entity by humanising them as figures more intimate like a Beloved or infantilising them, as is seen in the representation of Krishna as Bal Gopal. While this phenomenon can be traced to the widespread Sufi and Bhakti movements in India during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the indigenous Bengali *Mangal Kavya* tradition also had already portrayed and popularised the domesticated versions of many popular deities (Banerjee 11-12). This practice also signified a major shift in the way discourses around religion was being framed. The hierarchisation attached to organised structured religion was being challenged. This is precisely why the study of lesser known syncretic deities in the popular imagination provides us an important insight into the socio-historical moments of their emergence. It is from this perspective that this paper attempts to study Bonbibi of the Sunderban deltas, a local goddess who comes to be acceptable in both Hindu and Islamic theology, while in structure and praxis, both are ordinarily seen as antithesis of each other.

In Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* (2004), one finds a mention of Bonbibi or Maa Bonbibi—the Queen of the forests—who commands much popularity in the deltas of Sunderbans. The backdrop to the origin of Bonbibi as witnessed by young Kanai in the book, makes an extremely interesting departure from the origin myths of most gods and goddesses that we are familiar with:

For Kanai the greatest surprise came right at the start of the show. This was because the story of the tiger-goddess did not begin either in the heavens or on the banks of the Ganges, like the mythological tales with which he was familiar. Instead, the opening scene was set in the city of Arabia and the backdrop was painted with mosques and minarets. The setting was Medina, one of the holiest places in Islam; here lived a man called Ibrahim, a childless but pious Muslim who led the austere life of a Sufi *faqir*. Through the intervention of the archangel Gabriel, Ibrahim became the father of blessed twins, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli. When the twins came of age, the archangel brought them word that they had been chosen for a divine mission: they were to travel from Arabia to 'the country of eighteen tides'—*athhero bhatir desh*—in order to make it fit for human habitation. Thus charged, Bon Bibi and Shah Jongoli set off for the man-grove forests of Bengal dressed in the simple robes of Sufi mendicants. (Ghosh Kindle ed.)

The 'country of eighteen tides' referred to in the story, is the present day Sunderbans, which was under the rule of a demon-king known as Dokkhin Rai. Every

human, bird, beast or spirit inhabiting that landscape, was under the command of Rai, who often would assume the form of a tiger and feast on human flesh. Dokkhin Rai was defeated in a battle by Bonbibi, who took pity on him and banished him to the wilderness that made for one half of the tide country. The rest of the territory was under her protection where she restored order and made it habitable. The balance between the two realms was disturbed once again many years later. A merchant named Dhona had set voyage with his crew to gather honey and other items from the forest. In his ship, was Dukhi—a small boy who had joined Dhona's team to support his widowed mother. Upon reaching the forest, Dukhi was instantly spotted by Dokkhin Rai, who managed to coax Dhona into leaving the boy for him to feed on. Tempted by the promise of all the wealth that Rai offered, the greedy merchant left Dukhi in the forest and set sail back with the rest of his crew. When Dukhi realised this, he desperately pleaded to Bonbibi, who immediately came to his rescue and vanquished Dokkhin Rai. Thus, the fame of Bonbibi spread far and wide and she became a popular deity worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims who inhabited the delta.

Although Ghosh in his novel, does not mention it in his narration of the tale, the popular legend on Bonbibi's story states that it was Dokkhin Rai's mother Narayani who fought with and was defeated by Bonbibi. There is also mention of another popular figure—Ghazi Khan—at whose behest Rai had surrendered to Bonbibi and sought her mercy (Jalais 71, Chanda, Sarkar 30-34). However, none of these versions contest the Islamic origins of the myth. The authorship of the texts that detail Bonbibi's exploits is also somewhat disputed. Ipsita Chanda in her analysis, traces two extant published texts—*Bonobibir Johuranama* and *Bonobibi Johura Nama Kanyar Punthi*—the authorship of which she attributes to Abdul Khater and Muhammad Munshi respectively. Chanda, however, has not provided any timeline for Khater's composition. About Muhammad Munshi's work, she attributes 1393 B.S. i.e, the year 1986 as the date. She points out that the source material for these two texts have been gathered from a number of hand-written manuscripts, commonly known as *punthi* literature (Chanda 53). However, another treatise by Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar claims Banayuddin as the composer of *Banabibi Jahuranama* and Marhum Munshi Muhammad Khater as the author of another version bearing the same title. Sarkar attributes 1877 as the date for Banayuddin's composition and 1287 B.S., Kartik i.e., the year 1880, for Khater's composition (Sarkar 32-33). Due to the ambiguity in spelling, henceforth, I am going to refer to the text as *Jahuranama* when I am commenting on it, as opposed to when I am referring to any other analysis of it by others.

The text of *Jahuranama* offers an interesting study of three seemingly different

strains fused together to form a localised narrative of a particular community. The nama tradition as a narrative genre has its roots in the Persian culture (Hodgson 293–94) where *nama* serves as a model for literary documentation of various historical and social conventions. The *Jahuranama* thus becomes a text through which the exploits of Bonbibī are made *jahir* or obvious. However, the text also adheres strictly to the indigenous narrative model popularly known as the *Mangal Kavya*, which sings the praises of various Hindu deities and their exploits. The *Mangal Kavyas* were already existent popular narrative genres that had flourished in Bengal from the fifteenth through the eighteenth century. Texts like *Chandi Mangal* (written between 1594 and 1606) and *Annada Mangal* (1752) apart from being didactic in nature, also serve as important texts of early Bengali literary landscape. While the *Mangal Kavya* is a longer version, *panchalis* or *bratakathas* are shorter forms therein, which make use of simple verse forms for narration, to be recited at households during the worship of a particular deity. Whoever the original composer of Bonbibī's story might be, has very cleverly fused the two genres—nama and panchali:

The middle section of the *Jahuranama* follows the same narrative structure as the *panchali*—the emergence of the deity, her initial exploits that led to her being singled out as divine and then the story of how she helped an individual and the results of her support, thereby establishing her as a deity to be worshipped by similar individuals with similar needs and desires. This function is here fulfilled by the story of Dukhe. (Chanda 57)

Another aspect that needs to be pointed out is the way the authors have tinkered with the linguistic format of Bengali in the composition of the text. As a rule, the Bengali script, like its parent Sanskrit, reads from left to right. Any book that has been composed in Bengali, is expected to follow that norm. In the composition of *Jahuranama*, the author however, has tampered with this normative order. While the text is written in Bengali, the format that has been followed is that of the Arabic script that reads from right to left. The fusion of these three strains together into the narrative also paves way for an ambiguous origin that strengthens the syncretic nature of the story. One is not really sure whether an already existent local myth in any other form composed in the format of the Bengali *Mangal Kavya* gets consciously Islamised into the Persian *nama* tradition; or, whether a myth that has its origins in Islam gets localised and syncretised through its incorporation of the local literary tradition of the Bengali *Mangal Kavya*. The existence of documentation seems to strengthen and legitimise the plural discourses that shape the cultural histories of any community. For the island community residing in the

deltas of Sunderbans, *Jahuranama* serves as the documentation of this plurality.

There is no doubt that the syncretism that the cult of Bonbibi's worship has at its core a prolonged co-existence of communities that may otherwise differ in their religious affiliations. While it is not possible to temporally identify the dissemination of Hinduism in the Sunderbans, one can easily trace the proliferation of Islam into this region by tracing the history of Muslim invasion of Bengal to the thirteenth century. Richard Eaton in his study stresses on the role of Muslim pioneers behind the transformation of this region into a revenue-generating agriculture-based economy. He draws on the oral narratives collected in the 1980s, almost all of which talk about holy men who visited this region, assisted the locals into clearing the forests, made possible the cultivation of wet-rice, and spread the teachings of Islam. Many of them later are elevated to the status of pirs and enjoyed a cult following (Eaton Kindle ed.). There has also been extensive documentations of the exploits of these holy men by gazetteers during the nineteenth century. One of these gazetteers, James Wise talked about Zindah Ghazi, a legendary protector of woodcutters and boatmen all over the eastern delta, who was "believed to reside deep in the jungle, to ride about on tigers, and to keep them so subservient to his will that they dare not touch a human being without his express commands" (Wise 40). References to Ghazi Khan have also been made in Bonbibi's story as Barakhan Ghazi or Zinda Pir. Krishnaram Das in his Raimangal (1686) talks about Barakhan Ghazi as a zamindar's son, who denounced his inheritance and lived the life of an ascetic preaching Islam in the Sundarbans. As Ghazi's popularity spread, Dokkhin Rai who had earlier been the reigning deity of the region, challenged him. The two fought fiercely until God himself intervened and put an end to their conflict. Since then they entered into a pact of friendship and amity, which also was extended to and practised by their respective devotees (Sarkar 39).

The evolution of Barakhan Ghazi's legend and his association with Dokkhin Rai may be traced to the eighteenth century model of provincial governance in the areas that were far removed from the mainstream. Eaton in his work mentions Bakarganj (located towards the south of present Bangladesh) as one such province, where a Hindu acquired zamindari rights from the Mughal governor, permitting him to extract as much wealth as he could from a given *talluq* so long as he remitted a stipulated amount to the government as land revenue (Eaton 1993: Kindle ed). In Bonbibi's story too, Dokkhin Rai is a Brahmin, whose incessant greed turned him into a demon. It was his increasing greed that led him to feed on humans which he legitimised as the 'tax' that they had to pay for what he considered as usurping the products from 'his forest' (Jalais 70). He declared himself

as the lord and master of this territory—the word ‘Dokkhin Rai’ literally means the ‘King of the South’. Thus, one can also interpret Dokkhin Rai as a Hindu upper caste Zamindar, who oppressed and tortured his subjects to no end for the purpose of generating revenue, to the point that he was considered as a demon and feared by all. Ghazi Pir or Barakhan Ghazi then becomes one who challenged this authority and power that Rai held over the masses.

Another way of looking into this interaction that Eaton cites from the ‘mauja’ records of the region is that, while assigned with the task of governing these provinces, the zamindars often contracted with some enterprising middleman, typically a member of the Muslim petty religious establishment, to undertake the arduous tasks of organising the clearing of jungles and preparing the land for rice cultivation. Since these zamindars mostly were upper caste Hindus, ‘social taboos prevented them from undertaking cultivation themselves’ (Eaton Kindle ed). In such cases, the reclamation process often bridged communal lines. The ‘mauja’ records from the district of Barisal that Eaton uses as his reference, document a certain Shaikh Ghazi in the eighteenth century, who befriended a zamindar Janaki Ballav Roy. According to these records, Shaikh Ghazi also provided assistance to Roy in the work of reclamation of lands from the Sunderbans. Eaton has not really specified whether Shaikh Ghazi and Barakhan Ghazi are the same person or whether there is any connection between Janaki Ballav Roy and Dokkhin Rai of the Bonbibi story. But attempts at tracing some parallels between the historical records and these characters are bound to be productive.

Whether or not one manages to locate Barakhan Ghazi and Dokkhin Rai as real historical figures, it seems obvious that their enmity or association was very much rooted in their association with the domain of forests and how one makes use of it. And herein one may locate Bonbibi’s relevance, not just as a popular deity but also as the personification of what she stands for—the forest. Drawing on the many popular versions of Bonbibi’s story, Annu Jalais in her treatise on Sunderbans traces how the goddess was chosen for delivering the people from the demon-god Dokkhin Rai. In order to put an end to the reign of terror, Allah had chosen Bonbibi, a young girl who lived in the forest. The story of Bonbibi’s association with the forest is explained in the following manner:

Her father, Ibrahim, following his second wife’s wishes, had abandoned his first wife Gulalbibi in the forest while she was pregnant. Gulalbibi gave birth to twins, a girl and a boy but she decided to keep only her son, Shah Jongoli, abandoning her daughter, Bonbibi, in the forest. A deer took pity on Bonbibi and became her surrogate mother. (Jalais 71).

After Dokkhin Rai is vanquished by her, the former is advised by Ghazi Khan to call her 'Mother' and surrender to her, and she accepts him as her 'son'. Having adopted Rai, Bonbibi becomes the protector and guardian of both the human and the natural realms of the region.

Entering the forest can be considered as some kind of 'liminal phenomenon' that brings people who are in its realm into an isolated space divorced from their immediate socio-cultural setting into 'a form of institutionalised or symbolic anti-structure' (Turner 182). The forest does not discriminate between humans in terms of their caste, creed or communal affiliations, nor between humans and animals in terms of the danger it poses. Thus the forest personified by Bonbibi is considered to have a 'levelling' effect in contrast to the relationships organised around land, which quintessentially stands for social hierarchies and differences (Jalais 86). For the community already geographically marginalised from what can be called as the 'mainstream' Bengali 'mainland', Bonbibi serves as the purveyor of these egalitarian values that are untarnished by man-made differences.

The deification of a certain phenomenon or figure by a community pertains to a 'collective mythologization of the adversities and observance of rituals in an attempt to overcome them' (Banerjee 77). This process also has at its core a combination of folklores and other narrative traditions which allow that community to adjust with emerging socio-cultural trends. One in fact needs to engage in a more expansive study of the socio-historical and cultural politics of any region in order to make a more comprehensive analysis of the syncretic cults that exist across different parts of India. However, these syncretic traditions serve as a reminder of the popular desire to live in harmony irrespective of religious affiliations. While organised religions have as their basis different 'markers', in a pluralistic set up, these markers often dissolve and there can be no water-tight compartments for fixating rigid doctrines. Sumanta Banerjee calls this intermixing to be more obvious in the 'popular' lesser known religious rituals and practices, than in the elite orthodox mainstream versions of the same, and attributes the reason for this to the fact that:

While the 'great' traditions of orthodox Hinduism, Islam or Christianity had become powerful mainly through sustenance by, and orientation towards, state power, the 'little' traditions of popular syncretic religions in India developed in nooks and corners of civil society primarily from the needs of the common people in their daily struggle for survival as well as salvation, rather than intervention in the polity. (Ibid 79)

Banerjee here makes a distinction between the great orthodox and the popular

little religions in terms of how they affect the political state. According to him, the sustenance of the elite orthodox modes of religious practices are inherently linked to their control over the state polity. Thus, as long as the popular syncretic cults are restrained within the margins and not effective as a political tool, very little attention do they manage to garner.

Whether one agrees with this point of view or not, one certainly needs to ponder over the fact that most religions have emerged at different moments in history, as 'a way of life' of a community to enable its members into following certain codes of conduct and behaviour for a harmonious co-existence. The existence of syncretic cults is an example of this harmony, and these practices repeatedly challenge the radical extremist and exclusivist versions of most of the mainstream faiths. At the same time they also challenge the notion of religious faith as a stringent unmalleable singular entity—be it Hinduism, Islam or Christianity. Their practitioners may profess different faiths, but at the same time they also highlight the fact that these faiths are, in fact malleable and adaptable to change. In a pluralistic set-up like India, they become all the more relevant due to the scope of plural practices that they offer within a particular religion or belief. A. K. Ramanujan in his essay on Indian thought had commented: "There is no single Indian way of thinking; there are Great and Little Traditions, ancient and modern, rural and urban, classical and folk. Each language, caste and region has its special world view" (Ramanujan 41). While these terms are highly problematic and have often resulted in prioritising one of these concepts over another at different points in history, one needs to carefully evaluate these seemingly opposing schools of thought and practices and the communities that follow them in order to initiate a more open discourse concerning religious identities—like no single Indian way of thinking, there also might be no single way of professing and practising a particular way of life.

1. Chanda in her essay has analysed the text of *Jahuranama* as a literary field formed as a result of contact between multiple literary traditions from Bengali, Persian, and Sanskrit.
2. The Bengali Era or Bangla Son

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