



Nature-Man-Spirit Complex : An Anthropological Study in Indian Part of Sundarban Delta Region

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Abstract

Man and his society cannot survive without nature, rather they are interrelated to each other reciprocally. This nature has a direct impact on shaping the culture, economy, belief system of a community. Likewise, the people of Sundarban with different caste and religious affiliations are forced to depend on their surrounding forest and rivers. For their subsistence, people of Sundarban often experience conflict between man and animal and man and authority. This paper encompasses the nature of Sundarban as an economic resource base. Human interaction with nature and how the people are related to spirit that creates an impact on their life and culture are the main focus. According to the myth and local faith, *Bonbibi* is considered as the “Guardian and Saviour spirit of the Forest”. The most interesting feature that binds nature, man and *Bonbibi* is man, who in order to survive in this inimical nature, has to depend on the supernatural and superhuman power of *Bonbibi* for their safety of life. It appears that she (*Bonbibi*) gives them mental support, courage, and protection from all kinds of misfortunes and mishaps.

Keywords: *Nature, Subsistence pattern, Man-animal conflict, Coexistence of nature and Bonbibi, Existence of Supernaturalism in the form of Bonbibi, Nature-Man-Bonbibi Cult Complex*

Introduction

Man, his society and culture cannot survive without nature; rather they are reciprocally related to each other. The nature or environment or surroundings of a human population include both physical and social aspects. In its physical aspect, the environment includes its climate, soil quality, existing flora and fauna and the presence of vital resources such as water, vitamins, proteins, etc. Nature has a direct impact on shaping the culture, economy, belief system and practices of a community (Misra 2000). Man utilizes his surrounding nature and natural resources for their interest of survival and subsistence.

According to Ratzel (1899), the environment determines a culture whereas on the other hand it acts as a factor that limits man’s culture (Toynbee 1947). Steward (1955) also developed the concept of cultural adaptation, which is the main theme of his work on

‘cultural ecology’. Vayda and Rappaport (1968) suggested that we should give attention on the relationship of a specific human population to a specific ecosystem in studying cultural ecology.

The theoretical concept of the present work is derived from L. P. Vidyarthi’s seminal work “The Maler: Nature-Man-Spirit Complex in a Hill Tribe of Bihar” (1963), based on a three-tier concept of the ‘nature-man-spirit complex’ as their life was revolving around the phenomenon of such complex. Vidyarthi also suggested that all aspects of culture with an emphasis on the subsistence activities, social arrangements, and supernaturalism are involved in the struggle for survival.

The society of the Sundarban islanders was selected for the present study to examine the inter-relationship between man-nature and the *Bonbibi* cult that together are forming a complex. Since this area demonstrates an ecology-based economy as well as a myth-based social harmony of people who belonged to different strata of the society, it was felt that the concept of the nature-man-spirit complex can be re-examined in a different ecological context. For this the term used here is *Nature-Man-Bonbibi Cult Complex*. The ubiquitous presence of *Bonbibi* is in the minds of the inhabitants of Sunderbans may be taken as a synonym for the term ‘spirit’ used by Prof. Vidyarthi (1963). Vidyarthi’s original work and those of other later researches, were made basically on tribal people having a uniform type of magico-religious pantheon. The population under the present study belongs to multi-ethnic and multi-religious groups living in one ecological setting and having faith in the most undisputed, sylvan Goddess –the *Bonbibi*.

This paper is an attempt to understand the ecology of the Sundarban delta region and the economy that has evolved in managing nature and its sustainability. It also identifies the socio-cultural and economic factors related to the *Bonbibi* cult worship that creates an impact on the social life of the people of Sundarban.

For the present study, two areas have been selected. These are: *Pakhiralay*, meaning abode of birds, a village in *Gosaba* Island; and *Adivasipara* in *Dayapur-Satjalia* Island. The latter was first inhabited by seven *jeles* or fishermen. For convenience of understanding, the discussion is made under several heads as follows (after Vidyarthi 1963):

Man:

The history of reclamation of land in Sundarban as stated by Bera *et al.* (2006, 2010) dates back to 1770 when the Collector General Claude Russell planned to make use of the forest land for agriculture. In 1785, the Commissioner of Jessore, Tillman Henckell with the permission of Warren Hastings, distributed land among the cultivators. It took 40 years for the *Ijaradars*, to reclaim land in areas such as Sagar islands in south and Canning in the east. In 1814, the East India Company decided to distribute the land directly to the cultivators

and for this, in 1816 the post of Commissioner was created in Sundarban. Scott, the first Commissioner, observed that the company had not received revenues from the *ijaradars*¹ and *zamindars*² for a long time. In consequence, the land of Sundarban was declared as Government property in 1817. During the period from 1878 to 1879 about 4856 sq. km of the total area was accepted and declared as a protected forested area of Sundarban.

In 1903, Sir Daniel Mackinnan Hamilton came to Sundarban and established his *zamindari* with the purchase of 9000 acres of land in Gosaba island (lot no. 143) including the villages *Gosaba*, *Arampur*, *Dulki* and *Sonargaon*; and *Rangabelia* island (lot no. 149) comprising *Rangabelia*, *Pakhiralay*, *Bagbagan* and *Uttardanga* villages. Again in the year 1920, Sir Hamilton procured 1300 acres of land from the islands of *Satjalia* and *Lahiripur* (Bera et al 2006, 2010). In the year 1948-49 and later, for the first time seven fishermen (*sat jeles*) belonging to Rajbanshi caste group came to settle in the island, thus giving the name *Satjalia* (Bera et al 2006, 2010). In order to clear the virgin forest and for reclamation work, many tribals, such as, Bhumij and Munda, followed by Bengali Mahisya and Muslims were brought to this place as labourers from Ranchi district of Bihar, now in Jharkhand; and from Midnapur district. During the post-independent period, from 1948 to 1949 and 1952 to 1953, some fishermen community of East Pakistan, now Bangladesh, such as, *Malo* and *Rajbanshi*, came to the Indian part of Sundarban as refugees for settlement (Sarkar et al. 2003). They settled in barren plots of land near Bidya River in the two islands mentioned. Population of the early settlers of Sundarban gradually increased in later decades. By 1910, about one thousand acres of land were reclaimed by about 900 people including the tribals, Christians, Muslims and other Hindu caste people. After the independence of India in 1947, people migrated from East Bengal, erstwhile East Pakistan and settled in Sundarbans making it a place of the cultural mosaic.

The village *Pakhiralay* is inhabited by various caste groups, such as, *Poundra Kshatriya*, *Bagdi*, *Chamar*, *Jele Kaibarta*, *Malo*, *Namasudra*, *Rajbanshi*, *Brahmin*, *Kayastha*, *Mahisya*, and others. People belonging to the faiths of Islam and Christianity also live there. The *Adivasipara* is inhabited by the tribes like Bhumij, who are numerically dominant; and Munda and Bedia. The tribes are divided into different clan groups. There are three hamlets in *Pakhiralay* village. These are *Uttar-Purba para*, *Paschim para*, and *Dakshin para*. *Uttar-Purba* and *Dakshin paras* are more exposed to nature as these are situated near the forest and are dependent on the forest-based economy. *Paschim para* is located interiorly. Mainstay of their life here is mono-crop type of agriculture. Very often tigers swim across the river and attack the villagers. *Adivasipara* is also situated very close to the forest and has similar problems. Because of the hazardous situation the forest goes, including villagers of these *paras*, worship *Bonbibibi* for their survival, safety and welfare. For this reason these people are taken as target group and data are collected from them.

The inhabitants of the area selected have migrated from various parts of Bengal and nearby regions, but over the time adopted the local belief systems, culture, economy and practices for the sake of subsistence and survival. It has given rise to a new society with a heterogeneous culture. The uncertain, unpredictable, harsh environmental condition of this locality forces the islanders to maintain the cohesiveness and unity among all of them irrespective of their caste, creed and religious affiliation.

Among the Hindus, Muslims, Christians and tribals, Bengali speaking people are numerically dominant in the study area and *Bangla* is the main communicating medium. Many Hindu cultural traits are retained by the Christian and Muslim communities in their day-to-day life. The inhabitants of the region adopted a kind of occupation depending on the surrounding natural resources. However, tribals of this region retained a few of their cultural heritages, in the form of rituals, such as, *Karma*, *Sahrul* and *Tusu*, and *Murgi Ladai*, the Cock fight and such other.

Nature:

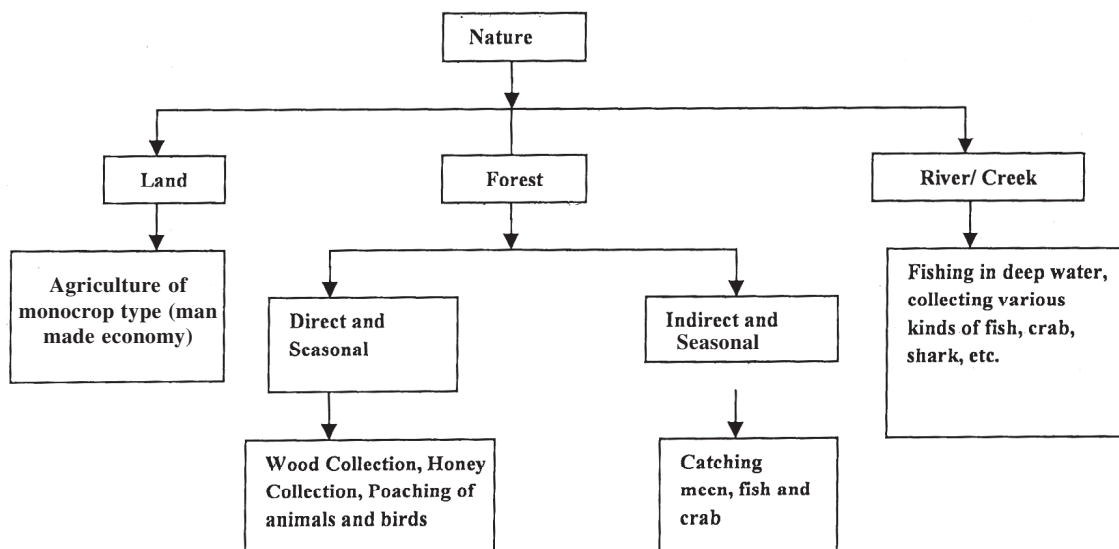
Economy in the area is based on natural resources. Nature plays a vital role in the subsistence pattern of the people. This area is surrounded by rivers, rivulets, creeks, and forests, with a unique ecological setup; and has a rich potential for resources. Sundarban is famous for having an extensive bio-diversity mangrove habitat. The unique nature of Sundarban is summarized below.

- a. Unique mangrove ecosystem, which is very much productive and protects the coastal area from various natural calamities like soil erosion, cyclonic storms, and strong tidal water influx.
- b. Brackish river water, rivulets and creeks are surrounding and crisscrossing the forest.

It is the only mangrove region in the World known to be inhabited by the great Royal Bengal Tiger and it seems they have uniquely adapted to the environment. Besides being expert swimmers, the big cats in the Sundarban are known to drink saline water of the river and eat fish, crabs, turtles, and even snakes. In the dearth of all such things, a tendency has been developed to invade human habitats in search of food and sweet water, causing danger to the lives of the people residing there.

Following diagram shows how Nature, as a natural resource base, provides for all the inhabitants of the Sundarban delta.

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From the above diagram, it can be seen that nature provides its resources to the islanders in three different ways, through the land, forest and rivers and /or creeks.

Land provides the islanders with livelihood by means of a mono-crop type of agriculture. They mainly cultivate *aman* paddy (*Khariff*) in wetland; a few *rabi* crops like pulses, oilseeds, etc. and vegetables in the kitchen garden. *Aman* paddy is cultivated in rainy season (June-September). During rainy season rainwater is channeled to the cultivable land and stored in ponds dug in the locality and in the homestead. The *aman* crop is sown in late June-July, Bengali month of *Ashar-Sraban*. It is harvested in October-November (*Kartik-Agrahayan*). The post-harvesting operation takes place during the month of *Agrahayan* (November-December) and *Poush* (December-January). The main steps are like *gada kara* (dumping), *dhan mara* (thrashing), *dhan jhara* (winnowing) etc. Agricultural works last for 5 months. But in reality, the agricultural operation includes tilling the land (15 days), sowing of seeds (about 1-month) and weeding (about 15 days). Harvesting and post-harvesting operations take another 1 month. During July, seedlings are transplanted in the field filled with logged rain water. The depth of standing water in the lands varies from one field to another. Sometimes over water logging and poor drainage system damage the crop. During *Khariff* season in the months of *Ashar-Sraban* (June-July), a large number of labourers are needed for transplantation. Women are mostly involved in sowing and weeding.

Reasons for dependence on forest and aquatic products are given below:

- a. Agriculture is of mono-crop type and not much profitable.
- b. Destruction of crops is a common phenomenon because of the salinity of brackish water.
- c. Natural calamities such as flood, cyclone and other events, inundate the land with saline water and. make the land unsuitable for cultivation for a few years together.
- d. The islanders depend on rainwater for cultivation of crops.
- e. Although groundwater level is high, the pumping of groundwater is discouraged because of the surrounding saline brackish water.
- f. Due to the mono-crop type of agriculture, in the field labourers are needed two times in a year that is during transplantation and harvesting. As a result, people would migrate to other places in search of job during lean time in the agricultural activities.
- g. With the abolition of *Zamindari* system in 1953, land was distributed in the form of small landholdings, mainly among the sharecroppers and landless people. Due to further sharing lands became smaller.
- h. Ultimately, all these resulted in insufficient yields to sustain a family.

Forest-based economy is pointed out below:

- a. Forest and aquatic resources are abundant because they are renewable.
- b. Anybody can access the forest and river product at any time.
- c. The islanders can earn hard cash within a short time period.
- d. In absence of modern amenities and other economic provisions, the islanders have been trying to adjust with the forest-river based said economic pattern for their livelihood.
- e. Finally, it may be said that the forest can fulfill one's basic needs for survival and subsistence.

Interaction between man and forest

Poor people are bound to enter the forest to earn their livelihood and sustenance. Attack of tiger and other wild and ferocious animals and the uncertainty of life became a part of their life.

Forest provides particular ecological set up to the islanders. The role of the forest as an economic resource base can be described from two different angles. One is the direct way of interaction where the people as they get direct exposure to the forest ground during

wood and honey collection and poaching of wild animals. The other is indirect exposure to the forest at the time of collection of fish, crab and other shellfish from the creeks. Expedition to the forest takes place mainly on seasonal basis. Usually the fishermen, woodcutters and honey collectors enter the forest. The important aspect of the forest-based economy is group effort. The unpredictable and inimical environment of the forest demands teamwork and a strong fellow feeling that persists among the teammates. A team effort plays a vital role in collection of any kind of forest products in this region.

There are seasonal forest goers, who directly depend on the forest for their subsistence. They collect wood, firewood, timbers, medicinal plants, etc. from the deep, dense forest. They are locally known as *Bauley*. The islanders set out for wood collection from the middle of August (*Bhadra*) to the end of November (*Kartik*). Agricultural work is negligible during this time. Before venturing into the forest they collect a BLC pass from the forest department. The forest department also demarcates some of the forested areas as restricted and people are not allowed to enter into those areas. Contrary to this, it has been observed and also reported that people have the tendency to enter into such restricted, undisturbed areas for greater potentiality of collection of forest products. As the forest goers enter into the core zone in search of a good yield of forest and river products, they are often arrested by the forest officers. For such trespasses, they have to pay cash as fine. In addition to paying fines, the forest authority would seize their nets and boats. People, who enter into the *jungle* legally with permit pass, get the benefit of insurance coverage of life. The family members of the permit holders get compensatory money from the authority in case of the permit holder's death within the forest. A large number of poor people of this area were engaged in collecting firewood from the forest almost on a daily basis because they were unable to buy fuel woods from the market. With the ban on wood cutting and strict measures that are imposed by the forest department, the act of wood cutting has been stopped leaving the woodcutters jobless. This resulted in rush for collection of aquatic resources in the forested areas.

Honey collection also plays a significant role in the livelihood of the people of Sundarban. Honey collection is seasonal. It starts from *Chaitra* (March-April) and continues up to *Baishakh* (April-May). Honey collection from the forest is locally known as "*mahal*". People who go to the jungle for honey collection is called "*Mauley*" and the act is locally known as "*jungol korte gechhe*" (Basu 2010). At present, people of Sundarban have taken the honey collection as one of the main professions in order to sustain their livelihood and to earn hard cash within a short period.

During the period of honey collection violent collision between the jungle goers and animals takes place. A number of cases of injury and missing of persons take place for this reason. According to the Government record, the incidences of death by tiger attack are

higher among the illegal forest encroachers. Illegal forest goers do not get proper security with arm guards, which the legal forest goers get.

The river provides the islanders with fishing as their secondary source of subsistence at present. The fishermen (*jele* or *jalia*) community sail through the river by boats in nearby forested areas in search of fish and crab. The fishermen use the traditional small and sleek boat (*jeleder nouka*) and nylon net. They explore the big rivers and small creeks within the territory of Sundarban Reserve Forest. They mostly avoid the Core area. The *jele* looks mainly for three items of river products, namely, fish, crab and prawn larvae. They catch plenty of various kinds of fish and also crabs which are lucrative items with high market demand. The types of fish generally caught by the people are *Bhetki*, *Bele*, *Boyal*, *Chanda*, *Chital*, *Punti*, *Gurjaoli*, *Ilish* (Hilsa), *Dantne*, *Parse*, *Tangra*, *Bhola*, *Bagda*, etc. They use various types of nets known as *Berajal*, *Kheplajal*, *Bintijal*, etc., which they fix into the river water or into the creeks with the help of big drums, floating balls, etc. The fishermen opine that the *khola* or the buffer zone does not yield sufficient river products due to over rush of the people. In this connection a proverb, much popular among the islanders is - '*Bagh jekhane mach sekthane*', means fish is there, where tiger is. This indicates the core area of tiger reserve. Even though it is a restricted place but the collectors in search of a good yield of fish and honey frequently enter into the core zone and often they are caught by the forest officers. Besides this, the female folk, aged person and children from different community backgrounds collect *bagda meen* (seeds of tiger prawn) from the nearby riverbanks. The supply of it rises up during the high tide. Women and children from every village and household are found in a large number collecting *bagda meen* from the river embankment by pulling drag-net (*chhakijal* or *tana jal*). Such an operation continues for about 6 hours through the duration of a high tide till its peak. They sell these prawn seeds to the owners of the *bheri* for aquaculture of prawns, which are of high demand in local market and abroad.

Man and their dependence on Nature

The people of Sundarban delta cautiously follow the seasonal variation. They depend on lunar position and variable wind directions. These aspects are interrelated and control availability of resources and subsequently affect subsistence pattern of the people. The dependence and inter-relationship between man and nature are reflected mainly in the economic life of those individuals who depend on immediate nature, i.e., forest and river, for their sustenance. Such people are fishermen (*jele*), woodcutters (*bauley*), honey collectors (*mauley*) and others. It has been observed that all the people of this area are knowledgeable with system of seasonal variation and lunar position for the procurement of the natural resources surrounding them.

Concept of the seasonal calendar

For the subsistence, survival and good yield from collection from forest and water bodies, the people of Sundarban delta depend heavily on the age-old traditional knowledge, which is handed down from one generation to another. Following the *Bengali* calendar, the people of this area divide the seasons mainly into three categories. They are *garam kal* (the hot season, summer) in the months of *Chaitra* to *Jaistha* (March-June); *barsha kal* (monsoon, the rainy season) in the months of *Ashar* to *Kartik* (July-October); and *sheet kal* (winter, cold season) in the months of *Agrahayan* to *Falgun* (November-February).

During summer season fishing is prohibited by the order of the forest department because this is the breeding time of the fishes. In the months of *Chaitra* and *Baisakh* (March-May), the forest authority issues passes and gives permission for honey collection only from the forest. The rainy season is not a suitable time for fishing because of heavy current and high water level in the rivers and creeks. During this time crab is available but in low quality. The month of *Bhadra* (August-September) offers Hilsa (*Ilish*) fish from the river. Its availability depends on the weather to some extent. As per the knowledge of the local people, during this time the river water becomes bluish in colour for a few days. . Along with different kinds of fish, Hilsa fish is also caught, but it is only for a couple of days, when the colour of water remains bluish mixed with saliva of Hilsa. In the months of *Falgun* (February-March) and *Kartik* (October-November) men and women enter the forest during high tide for crab collection and return back with low tide. According to local people, winter is the best season for fishing and collection of crab, prawn seeds and prawn from the river. However, prawn, crab and few kinds of fish, like *parse*, *tangra*, *dantne*, etc. are more or less available throughout the year.

Change in direction and flow of wind is an important variable, which is related to the availability of resources from the forest. Experience has taught the people about this phenomenon. They have divided the wind movement mainly into two types: *dakshiner hawa* (wind from south) and *uttire hawa* (wind from north). The *dakshiner hawa* prevails in the months from *Chaitra* to *Aswin* (middle of April to middle of October) and the local people consider this time as the best for honey and fish collection. The months from *Kartik* to *Falgun* (middle of October to middle of February) is the time of *uttire hawa*. During this period the villagers collect various types of fish, crab, etc. The water level at the rivers and creeks becomes low during this time. In between *uttire hawa* and *dakshiner hawa*, the two months, i.e., *Agrahayan* and *Poush* are considered unsuitable for any collection because of the wind blowing from west. This is locally known as *paschimer hawa* (west wind). During this time the rivers turn very rough and strong undercurrent prevails causing damage to

village roads and embankment of the rivers. During *Sraban* and *Bhadra* months, in the rainy season, the environment is not suitable for any type of collection as the wind blows from east and the rivers turn very rough with high water level, undercurrents, and whirlpools. Such wind is locally known as *puher hawa* (east wind). Table 1 shows the availability of resources depending on the season and wind variation. (Please find at the end of this article)

Concept of lunar position:

The position of the moon also plays an important role in the livelihood of the islanders. Depending on the lunar position, the water level in the river and creeks varies during the time of ebb and tide. This, coupled with the velocity of the water current, influences the quantity of fish and crab. The availability decreases or increases accordingly. This relation of time with the lunar position and its effect on ebb and tide is locally known as "*tithi*".

Each month is divided into two halves or fortnights, each of which is locally known as "*paksha*". One *paksha* is known as *Sukla paksha*. It is the period between dark and full moon, i.e., the time of waxing of moon. The other fifteen days is known as *Krishna paksha*, darkening of the moon. It is the time between full moon and dark moon. The day of new moon is called *Amabasya* and the full moon day as *Purnima* by the local inhabitants.

Each *paksha* can further be subdivided into three *tithi* categories. Firstly comes *Sukla paksha* with "*Gonmukh*" from 1st to 5th day of the same *paksha*; secondly "*Marani*" or "*Marakotal*" from 6th to 9th day of *Sukla paksha*; and lastly "*Barogo*" or "*Bharakotal*" from the 14th day of *Sukla paksha* to 2nd day of *Krishna paksha*. During *Gonmukh*, the water level of rivers and creeks becomes high and saturated with less water current and this time is considered as the best time for catching fish and crab. During *Marani* or *Marakotal*, the water level of the rivers and creeks remains calm. This is the best time to collect *bagda meen*. During *Barogon* or *Bharakotal*, water level reaches an optimum level with a strong undercurrent. It is the best time for catching various types of fish and crabs.

Krishna paksha or the period of darker moon is subdivided into three *tithi* categories. First *tithi* is *Gonmukh*, from 1st to 5th day of *Krishna paksha* with high water level and saturated surface water. This is considered the best time for collection of fish and crab. Second *tithi* is '*Marani*' or '*Marakotal*', from 6th to 9th day of *Krishna paksha* with calm water. This time is not suitable for catching fish and crab. The third one is "*Barogon*" or "*Bharakotal*" from the 10th-14th day of *Krishna paksha*, continuing into the 3rd day of *Sukla paksha*. This is the best time for fishing and crab hunting because of its strong undercurrent. According to Basu (2007), people follow the traditional way of the calendrical system, which is the part and parcel of collection of aquatic resources like fish and crabs from river and creek.

Table 2 is showing the nature of procurement and activities based on lunar position and *tithi*. (Please find at the end of this article)

Spirit:

Sundarban is also known as *Bhatir Desh*, which means, country of tide. The region is rich with its own history, cultures and belief system. From the very beginning, religion played a vital role in the daily life of the inhabitants. The oral tradition of Sundarban is rich with myths and folk tales. The interaction and relation with the forest are explained in the light of the myths. It is the crises of survival that brings the people together under a common canopy of belief system.

As their economy is mainly forest-based, the lives of the people are merged into uncertainty, danger, anxiety and fear. In order to reduce the anxiety and fear, people have devoted themselves to various Gods and Goddesses, *Pirs* and *Darvesh*. The cult of *Bonbibi* is based on both the faiths of Hinduism and Islam. *Bonbibi* may be considered as part of 'little tradition' of the Sunderban. It is a belief system which is conceived centering around the forest and Royal Bengal tiger.

Impact on Muslim community is reflected on the name of the local diety, the *Bonbibi*. *Bibi* is an Urdu word. It is used to address a dignified and aristocratic lady. In Bengali "*Bon*" means forest. It can be said that *Bonbibi* is the noble, dignified and respectable lady of the forest. The *Bonbibi* cult does not represent any religious affiliation of a particular group. It reflects an intimate bond that nature shares with the men in Sundarban. Everybody living in the forested area of Sundarban worships *Bonbibi*, and considers her as the 'Sylvan Goddess of the Forest'. She is the sole protector of all the inhabitants of Sunderban who depend on forest for their meager sustenance. People, irrespective of their caste and creed worship *Bonbibi* with faith and reverence and consider her as the only undisputed Goddess who can save them from the malevolent tiger god *Dakshin Rai*. *Dakshin Rai* in the form of a tiger is part of the tiger cult continuing from the remote past. The worshippers of *Bonbibi* are mostly those who enter into the forest, namely, *bauley* (woodcutters), *mauley* (honey and wax collectors) and *jele* (fisherman). Before starting the journey into the deep forest and in the creeks of Sundarban, all the *bauley*, *mauley*, and *jele* worship *Bonbibi* with offerings and propitiate the goddess for her blessings to overcome all sorts of danger. *Bonbibi* is represented by a stone slab or by clay made vessel in their voyage. The story of *Bonbibi* is described in folktales of *Bonbibi Johurnama*, *Dukhe Kahini* and in *Dhana Manar Pala*. These are very popular folk theatres in Sunderban.

The last stanza of *Bonbibir gan* (Basu 2006) is given below:

proti bachor boshekh maser shes mangalbare,

(Every year on the last Tuesday of the month of *Baisakh* (middle of April to middle of May)

dal bendhe sab nouko niye ase boner dhare,

(People in groups bring their boats next to the forest)

bonbibir name tara sara diya jae,

(They utter the name of *Bonbibi* and enter the forest)

morag kingba murgi diya manat metae.

(Vow to *Bonbibi* is fulfilled with the sacrifice of a cock or hen)

bonbibir jangalete esab pratha ache,

(All these customs are prevalent in the forest of *Bonbibi*)

sodarboner geyno manush esab niye banche.

(The rural people of Sundarban live depending on such things.)

People of Sundarban have strong faith on supernatural powers. Adverse conditions of the environment create lots of problems in the daily life of the people. *Bonbibi* protects the people from all sorts of adversities by her supernatural power. There is a very interesting and popular local saying, which implies that *Bonbibi* is the mother of everyone, regardless of their caste, creed and religious backgrounds in this land of eighteen tides, as is reflected in a folk song mentioned below:

atharo bhatir madhye ami sabar ma

(I am the mother of all in this land of eighteen tides)

ma bole je dake tar dukhya thake na

(Person who calls me as mother, does not face sorrow).

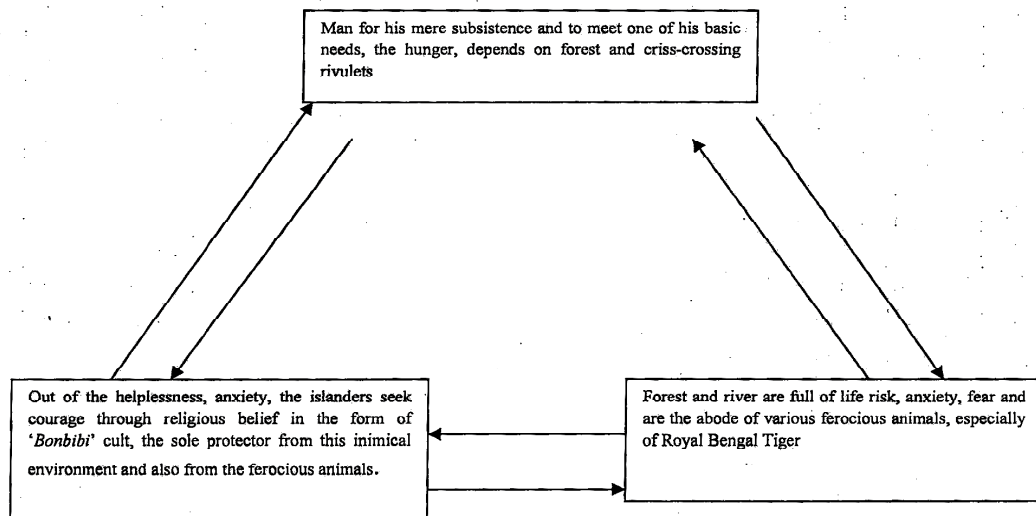
Along with *Bonbibi*, the name of *Shahjangali*, *Gazi Saheb*, *Dakshin Rai*, and *Dukhe* are reported to be very popular. They are worshipped and appeased together with *Bonbibi*. In addition to annual worship, daily offerings are also made to these deities at the respective places of worship. The places are locally known as *Than*. Offering is done by the head of the family members or by his wife with blowing of conch shell. Along with the icons of *Bonbibi* and his associates, the icon of *Bonbibi* in miniature form is placed by the local inhabitants in fulfillment of the vow, at the *Than*. This is known as *chhalan* locally. In front of the idols, five earthen mounds are prepared in the name of *Bonbibi* and her associates, who preside over the *Than*. In case of any sickness, accident, or any problem, the inhabitants smear themselves with this soil of *than* in full faith and reverence that this will act like magic and relieve them of the maladies.

Traditionally, all the inhabitants of Sundarban area worship *Bonbibi*. However, it is found that there are three different dates in a year for the different groups among the

inhabitants. People of *Jele para* of *Dakshin para* and *Pakhiralay* worship *Bonbibi* on *Poush Sankranti* (middle of January). Other people of Hindu and the Muslim faith worship her on the very next day of *Poush Sankranti*, i.e., on the first day of *Magh*. The tribals of *Adivasipara* worship *Bonbibi* on *Basanta Panchami* (in February on the day of *Saraswati Puja*). In this area, caste does not play any role to become a priest or, in other words, any person from any caste or community background can act as a priest. *Bonbibi Johurnama* is recited from back to the front, as is done in Urdu literature. *Bonbibi Johurnama* depicts victory over tiger who is the Lord of the forest. In other words, it indicates victory of good over evil. *Bonbibi* is the owner of *Atharobhatir desh*, i. e., the land of eighteen low tides. She is the saviour and protector of the people from the attack of wild animals, especially tiger, crocodile, snake, etc. She also is a healer, who cures sufferers from serious diseases, fulfills desires, gives child to issueless and solves many more problems of the people. *Bonbibi* as the cult image of Sundarban is established.

Nature-Man-Bonbibi Cult Complex

While discussing the trichotomic relationship between Nature-Man-*Bonbibi* cult that forms a complex whole in this area, it is essential to know the interdependence and interaction among these three. The trichotomic concept centering around Nature-Man-*Bonbibi* cult can be shown in the following way:



(Source: Basu, B. 2012. 'Nature-Man-Bonbibi Cult Complex: An Anthropological Study in Sundarban Delta Region' Unpublished Ph.D. Report)

In this diagram, man is compelled in this particular environment to depend mainly on the forest and riverine products for their livelihood. From this point of view, 'Nature' of Sundarban as a donor at the macro level remains static for its inhabitants, both in case of collecting forest products and agriculture, which is full of uncertainty, unpredictability, and with high risk. Only the change can be seen at the micro-level.

In the ecological setup of Sundarban, 'man' depends on natural resources mainly for his mere sustenance. He catches fishes, crabs, tiger prawn from the rivers, whereas from the forest he collects honey and wax, fuel wood, medicinal plants, etc. While doing so, he often confronts ferocious Royal Bengal Tiger, crocodile, etc. Because of having high life risk and anxiety, many of the islanders are gradually changing their economy from forest-based resources to land resources in the form of agriculture. A kind of shift and transformation in their subsistence pattern can be seen with much more production, certainty of production and safety. Sundarban is a mono-crop type of zone where saline river water gradually engulfs the land and makes it unsuitable for producing crops for round the year. This is a threat to the economic life of the inhabitants. Having no other alternative, people are forced to depend on nearby forest and river for resources. This, in turn, brings the inhabitants to harness the same environment. For the subsistence, people enter into a conflict situation with animals like tiger, crocodile, snake, shark, etc. and also with the forest authority. Hence, the economy of man in this area is vulnerable in nature.

The islanders visit the forest for collecting forest products having full knowledge of every danger and uncertainty of their life in the forest since they do not have any other alternative. The river system in this area is also unique. The rivers are divided into several tributaries giving rise to criss-cross creeks that are further surrounded by the forest. Therefore, for collecting aquatic products, people have to interact with the forest indirectly. In these situations, out of their helplessness or anxiety, they seek courage through the religion in the form of *Bonbibi* cult. The ubiquitous presence of *Bonbibi* manifests that she remains at the cognitive level in the mind and belief system of the islanders.

Previously, *Bonbibi* used to be worshipped mainly by the forest goers, like *jele*, *mauley*, and *bauley*, as the forest deity for their safety, survival and good yield. But, at present, across the boundary of the forest, she has achieved a distinct place in the household of more or less every islander. Now she is worshipped not only for safety and survival but also for family welfare, childlessness, serious diseases, etc. This fact suggests that from the very beginning of the formation of this society, the faith on *Bonbibi* and her ubiquitous presence was in the mind of the people and it has been continuing in their day-to-day activities. Many sustainable changes have come up over time but the Goddess *Bonbibi* has been accepted and assimilated as an integral part of the traditional Hindu worship.

Conclusion

At the very beginning, Sundarban was just a geographical area with its unique natural resources for survival. The area was full of uncertainty and high life-risk. The people from various ethnic backgrounds were brought to Sundarban to make the virgin forest habitable. Nature, in this deltaic part of Sundarban, provides the base of economic resources to all the inhabitants irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds. The typical ecology and economic resources gave rise to new social norms, traditions and belief systems. All these factors are closely related and form the superstructure, where forest plays a vital role. The ecology of this particular region forces the inhabitants to harness the surrounding natural resources for their survival. They mainly depend on the forest and surrounding brackish water for their livelihood. While doing so, a kind of direct relation or interaction is seen between man and forest or nature giving rise to a man-animal conflict situation both in the forest and habitats. The moment man has been defeated or killed repeatedly by animals of the forest, mainly by the tigers; they started seeking for a third power in the form of a supernatural or superhuman kind, to save them from these kinds of situations.

The cult of *Bonbibi* has been understood in this deltaic region as an integral part of the inhabitants' life and culture. According to the myth and local faith, she is considered as the 'Guardian and Saviour Goddess of the Forest'. Being the 'Guardian of the forest', *Bonbibi* is the owner of the forest products and the sole protector of the forest goers and the inhabitants from all mishaps, accidents, etc. The most interesting feature that binds all these three points is the man, who in order to survive in this inimical nature, have to depend on the supernatural and superhuman power of *Bonbibi* for their safety of life as if she (*Bonbibi*) gives them mental support, courage, and protection from all kinds of misfortunes and mishaps.

Endnotes

1. The system of landholding called *ijara* given on lease by a bigger landlord or *zamindars*.
2. They are the feudal chieftains of colonial India.

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Fig 1: Idol of Bonbibi along with a Child Dukhe, Shahjangali and Dakshin Rai in the form of a Tiger



Fig. 2: Collection of honey



Fig. 3: Collection of honey

Table 1: Availability of resources depending on the season and wind variation

Seasons	Months according to Bengali Calendar	Equivalent English Months	Availability of Resources	Wind Variation
Summer	Chaitra	March-April	Fishing restricted	Dakshiner Hawa (southward wind)
	Baisakh	April- May	Collect bagda meen (tiger shrimp) from the river bank	
	Jaistha	May- June	- Best time of honey collection - Crab hunting	
Rainy	Ashar	June-July	Hilsa Fish especially in Bhadra month	
	Sraban	July-August	Fishes like Gurjaoli, Topse, Pamphret, prawn	Puber Hawa (eastward wind)
	Bhadra	August-September		
	Aswin	September-October		Dakshiner Hawa (southward wind)
Winter	Kartik	October-November	Best time to collect crab, bagda meen (tiger shrimp), prawn, etc.	Utture Hawa (northward wind)
	Agrahayan	November-December	Fishes like Chakul, Rupamati, Parse, Chanda, Mochan(maximum), Hilsa (for few days) are available	Poschimer Hawa (westward wind)
	Poush	December-January		
	Magh	January-February		
	Falgun	February-March		Utture Hawa (northward wind)

Table - 2 : Lunar position and nature of procurement

Lunar Position (in local term)	English Equivalent	Tithi	Activities & Nature of Procurement
Sukla paksha	Full Moon	<i>Gonmukh</i>	A little collection of fish and crab hunting
		<i>Marani/ Marakotal</i>	Best time to collect of bagda meen (tiger shrimp), Fishing
		<i>Barogon/ Bharakotal</i>	Catch various types of fishes and crabs
Krishna paksha	New Moon	<i>Gonmukh</i>	A little collection of fish and crab
		<i>Marani/ Marakotal</i>	Not suitable for any collection, phase of return from economic activities
		<i>Barogon/ Bharakotal</i>	Best time for fishing and crab hunting

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