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SPECIAL SECTION: New Epistemologies of Water in India

Hydrocultural Histories and Narratives: Insights from the Sundarbans

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> To put water at the heart of the narrative is to demand that we adopt a more flexible conception of space
>
> *Unruly Waters: How Mountain Rivers and Monsoons Have Shaped South Asia's History* (Sunil Amrith 2018, 9)

Abstract: This article focuses on water-centric quotidian-actualities by bringing to the fore collected oral histories from the field and their relation to the local religious literature—*Bonbibi'r Johuranama, Raimangal, Manasa Mangal.* When asked about the water history of the region, the narratives of the locals reflect the desire to shift the attention from terrestrial–aquatic tyranny to climatic despotism. To put this into perspective, the islanders, at present, are conscious about how climate change holistically affects their deltaic ecosystem. The realization does not stop the community from engaging in age-old religious practices that have acquired habitual existence in the lower Bengal delta. This provides an entry point to a new cultural system re-centred on historical imaginations and novel spatialities, which in every aspect is exemplary for contemporary policy-makers.

Keywords: Hydroculture, Water, Culture, Bonbibi, Sunderbans

1. INTRODUCTION

From cultural and political transitions, modern history has shifted its focus to water, owing to the escalation of the irrecoverable existential threats induced by climate change (Amrith 2018). The literature on agrarian history

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from the 1970s and 1980s is strewn with studies on irrigation, as harnessing water was the main concern for Indian society then (Chaudhuri 1970; Stokes 1978; Stone 1979; Bose 1986; Kaiwar 1992). The age-old presence of step-wells in Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Delhi, followed by the modern construction of dams in South India, bear testimony to the historic preoccupation in agriculturally motivated India with finding methods to battle water depletion and disappearance. The pursuit and belief in the security of water for agricultural purposes in delta regions, supported by the idea of India as a repository of the monsoon, propelled people to migrate to deltas from the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly in the face of accelerating poverty and inequality. However, the growing potential of water to shape national history and rural communities was largely neglected after the 1990s till the first half of the twenty-first century, as most historians shifted their focus to water's effect on urban culture. It should have been otherwise, as India is primarily agriculture-dependent.

The landscapes of South Asia and the development of its urban centres are influenced by water. This is best illustrated in the religious values of the bay dwellers. In the Sundarbans, water acts as a social leveller that benefits and impairs all its inhabitants equally. Religious practices centred on water in different communities, through the divine personification of the same as gods (Poseidon, Greek mythology) and goddesses (Ganga, Indian mythology), have not only assigned undying importance to the element but have also facilitated recent legal developments that have enshrined the importance of water. Some recent examples include the National Water Framework Bill (2016), which calls for the rejuvenation of river systems through local community participation and the inclusion of rainwater harvesting in new urban constructions under the Kerala Municipality Building Rules, 1999 (amended 2004).

Evidently, religious practices are influential enough to propel the crafting of policies that not only protect these community practices but also draw from them to institute water security measures at scale. This paper, drawing on empirical insights from the Sundarbans, examines the importance of water in sustaining a community and how the local inhabitants religiously revere it.

2. WATER IN MANGROVE RELIGIONS AND RITUALS: ENMESHED HUMAN–NON-HUMAN REALITIES

The study focuses on the region's history after Partition (1947), which resulted in the geopolitical remapping of India. New borders dissecting rivers, created based on bureaucratic ratiocination of the environment, have

resulted in mismanagement of disasters caused by cyclonic storms, flooding, heat stress, and sea-level rise. These incidents have led to a shift in the focus of modern history to the evaluation of natural uncertainties in the coastal region (Amrith 2018). Subsequently, it becomes imperative that policymaking is informed by the reimagining of the philosophy behind the cultural, religious, and eco-centric imaginations of water-dependent forest inhabitants. Thus, this paper aims to bring to the fore the quotidian realities of the Sundarban islanders in relation to the life lived in and around water. A study of religious dictates and folklores associated with the people of the *Bhatir Desh* (land of ebb and tides) will facilitate the endeavour.

For the specific case that this paper makes, it is imperative to mention that the gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans are believed to preside over the forests, its resources, and the animals of the region. Religious narratives include norms associated with divine appeasement through austerity and death rituals. The islanders also practise certain religious rituals they believe will protect their livelihood. Given the geographical location of the Sundarbans, the islanders depend on the forests and rivers for survival. The salinity of the water renders the land unfit for cultivation. Thus, they have to penetrate the forest to secure wood, wax, and fruits, bearing in mind the risk of attacks by wild animals—mostly the tiger. In the river, they may encounter crocodiles and snakes. The evolution of a syncretic religion in this reserve forest is driven by an all-encompassing fear of life loss related to specific animals, which naturally induces the prominence of the worship of inferior Bengal goddesses who exclusively have control over the actions of these animals. This explains the psychological dependence of the islanders on lesser deities—Bonbibi, Dakhin Rai, Kalu Ray, Manasa, and Makal Thakur. This paper examines their divine alliance with forest animals—tigers, crocodiles, snakes, and fish. Despite belonging to the pantheon of inferior gods, the actions people take to seek their blessings follow *bhodrolok*[1] Hindu procedures.

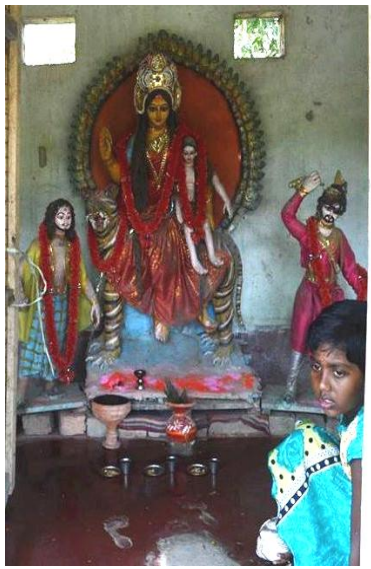
2.1. The mythologies of Bonbibi and water

Bonbibi, or the tiger goddess, is worshipped by all those who use the forest resources of the Sundarbans (Figure 1). Her worship is most widespread in the *atharo bhatir desh* (land of the 18 ebb tides). However, there has been a systematic shift towards worshipping Kali (the Hindu female goddess of

[1] Pertaining to the Hindu upper/middle class identity, *bhodrolok* translates to "gentleman." The idea came into existence between 1757 and 1947, along with the rise of British Raj in India. It was used to refer to any person who has wealth and polished (mostly English-like) manners. This segment of colonized society zealously exhibited their religious practices and ultimately normalized it within the public sphere.

prowess; the destroyer of evil forces) by prawn seed collectors, as the community believes the occupation to be deadly because of its symbolic association with the rage of Kali (Jalais 2010). The risks of working in water are immense as compared to that of working on land in this region; camouflaged and submerged crocodiles can attack without warning. The worship of Kali can also be attributed to urban encroachment in the delta. Unlike the *mohule* (those who work in the forest), prawn seed collectors are all women, who perceive the water as not only their source of livelihood but also metaphorically as a temple. The islanders believe that the attacks on land and sea are punishments from the resident goddess, Bonbibi, who mandates the loss of life of anyone who consumes forest resources out of greed. Therefore, while wading through the river, these women immerse their hands in the water and, with devotion, evoke the mercy of their benevolent mother. They sing no specific chants. Their devotion stems from the spontaneous desire for a good catch and security of life.

Figure 1: Bonbibi



Source: Author, 25 January 2018

Gender equations become important here. Although women are allowed to be the occupational partners of their husbands, these same women are denied access to fishing boats once they are widowed. The same thing happens with the prawn seed collectors; once widowed, they are restricted from entering their occupational temple, in an

Figure 2: Glimpse of the preparatory stages of fishing in Bakkhali, West Bengal

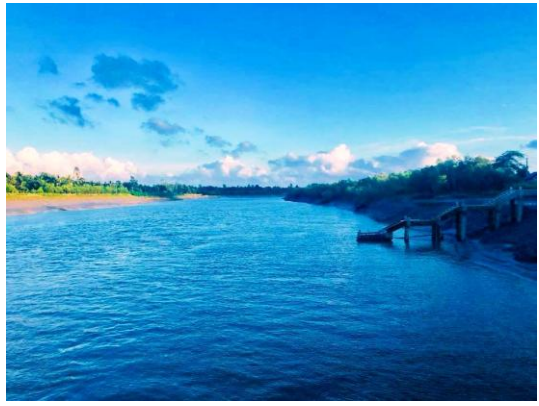
Source: Author, 26 May 2017

androcentric ostracization based on Hindu laws. The water, though not a part of the rituals except for being housed in the *mangalghat* (a ritual urn) to assure the wellness of worshippers, assumes layers of meanings in the daily lives of islanders (Figure 2).

2.2. Representing the realms of forests and water through empirical information

At the Ashrom ferry ghat (Gosaba), from where the boats leave for Bali Island, there stands a temple of Mother Ganga. Locals[2] recounted the need to rebuild the temple just after Cyclone Aila (2009), when the land was engulfed by the sea, embankments were broken, and habitats were ruined by the rising sea level. No amount of blowing of conch shells could calm the anarchic sea. The main *purohit* (priest) of the temple mentioned the need to provide alms to the water goddess occasionally, to keep her calm. The women of Gosaba are often seen setting lamps and fruit afloat on banana leaves at the ferry ghats (Figure 3). Here, we often find the families of fishers engrossed in prayers, pleading to the mother to be compassionate to their breadwinners in the open delta. Thus, the inherent fright of the animal-fearing community of the river compels scrutiny of the mythical tri-party relationship between Ganga, Parvati, and Manasa (Hindu female goddesses), as described in the *Manasa Mangal Kavya*.[3]

Figure 3: Bidyadhari, the performative sphere of Ganga worship adjoining the Ganga temple in Ashrom Ferry ghat



Source: Author, 28 August 2018

Manasa, the snake goddess, was not allowed to enter heaven; the *Manasa Mangal* recounts her promotion to a greater goddess from being a folk deity. On achieving greatness, she performed a myriad of miracles in several places, including the Sundarbans. Parvati always hated Manasa, as she believed that her husband was sexually interested in Manasa. On

[2] Based on interview in Dulki Sunderbans on 25 January 2018.

[3] The oldest of all, *Mangal Kavyas* recounts the initiation and spread of the snake goddess' worship in Bengal by the conversion of a devotee of Lord Shiva into a devotee of Manasa, the snake goddess.

the contrary, Manasa was like a daughter to Parvati's husband. Ganga tried her best to make Parvati understand the father–daughter relation that Mahadev and Manasa shared, but to her dismay, nothing helped. This familial discontentment compelled Ganga to take pity on Manasa and support her through the struggle. Therefore, the islanders worship the snake goddess to avoid snakebites, and, in the process, they also please Mother Ganga.

Specific death rituals were performed for those who died from snakebites in the region, to maintain the social order of the Sundarbans (obscure). The dead body of the snakebite victim was supposed to be set afloat on a bamboo raft, and the widow was to accompany her dead husband. During the journey, the widow was expected to chant the glory of the snake goddess and Ganga so that the river remains calm and the widow successfully reaches her destination. Mythologically, the destination was heaven and the journey was undertaken by *behula*—a woman determined to please Mahadev in order to restore her husband's life. Here, the water is personified as the goddess; when angry, she can devastate all that is around her but, when satisfied, is the best ally.

According to the scriptures, Bhagiratha brought River Ganga to earth from the heavens. On ascending to the throne of the Sagara Dynasty, he became aware of the miseries of his forefathers, who burned in the fires of hell. To repent for the mistakes of his ancestors, Bhagiratha left his kingly responsibilities to embrace a life of austerity in the mountains. On the advice of his guru, Trithala, he aimed to satisfy Ganga through his penance. Ganga, as the myth proceeds, is capable of washing away the mortal sins of humans, and only she could offer salvation to Bhagiratha's forefathers from the curse of saint Kapila. It required the purgation of the soul by an offering of water by the son to his forefathers—ritualistically, this is called *tarpana*—and *niravapanjali* or the ceremonious immersion of the ashes in the holy water after cremation. The tradition still continues in Hindu death rites (*sraddha*), where water plays an important role; it cleanses the soul of impurities and prepares it for birth after the successful completion of *pind daan* (offering of food and water to dead forefathers). The Sundarbans, as a part of the larger Bengali culture, adheres to these age-old death rituals. Concurrently, the pilgrimage to Sagar Island during Makar Sankranti[4] is important. The island is situated on the continental shelf of the Bay of Bengal; it is a place for Hindu pilgrimage. Every year, on the day of Makar

[4] Makar Sankranti celebrates the transition of the sun (Hindu god, Surya) into Capricorn (*Makara*). Hindus rejoice on this day to mark the beginning of longer days and the end of the month of the winter solstice.

Sankranti (in the middle of January), thousands of pilgrims gather to enjoy a holy dip in the confluence of the Ganga, Brahmaputra, and Meghna, followed by a trip to the adjoining Kapil Muni Temple. Although this is a festival for the sun god, Surya Dev (sun god) accepts no offerings and prayers until the people take a dip in the *sangam* (where the river meets the sea) to cleanse themselves of mortal evils.

Figure 4: Bonbibi with Dukhey in her lap

Source: Author (25 January 2018)

Figure 5: Dakhin Rai

Source: Author (25 January 2018)

Local scriptures, such as *Bonbibi'r Johuranama* (The Miracles of Bonbibi) and the *Raimangal*, shed light on the distribution of forest resources. After saving Dukhey from the monstrous Dakhin Rai, Bonbibi commanded that forest resources should be distributed equally among the animals and humans in the presence of Barkhan Gazi[5] (Figures 4 and 5). The shape-shifting tiger Dakhin Rai protects forest produce like honey and wood from human consumption, but there is no reference to the riverine commons, which testifies to how the scripture refers to forest resources as land resources. This leaves the readers wondering how water resources are to be shared and whose refuge is to be sought when dealing with resources from the water. Nevertheless, the islanders pray to Kalu Ray and Makal Thakur

[5] *Bonbibi'r Johuranama* (The Miracles of Bonbibi) tells the tale of the birth of Bonbibi and her brother Shah Jongoli and their winning over of the Sundarbans. They were sent to the Sundarbans by Allah to save its people from the villainous tiger, Dakshin Rai, who could take human form. He would take the lives of the people who came searching for wood, food, wax, or honey in the Sundarbans. Dukhey was given as sacrifice to Dakhin Rai in lieu of the resources garnered by his uncle from Rai's forests. Dukhey, scared by his fate, sought the security of the forest goddess. Bonbibi waged a war against Rai and ultimately won. Barkhan Gazi, a resident of the forest (now remembered as a pious saint), requested Bonbibi to spare Rai's life and establish order in the forest. She did as she was requested by equally dividing the forest resources among the animals and forest dwellers.

to resolve issues relating to crocodiles and varieties of fish—the most significant non-human inhabitants of the sea. *Raimangal* aptly underscores that forest resources are mainly considered inland resources. Dakhin Rai hankers to protect his resources and demands human sacrifices in exchange for wax and honey taken from his forest:

> *Yabat na daya more narabali puja* (So long as human sacrifice is not offered to me)
>
> *Nahi diba mon-modhu- dekhaiba moja* (I will not give you wax or honey; I will have fun)
>
> *Jodi tumi narabali puja para dita* (If you are successful in offering me a human sacrifice)
>
> *Sat dinga mom diba tomar dalite* (I will give you seven boatloads of wax)[6](Das *et al.* 1980, 86).

Water and sand are integral to the belief system relating to animal exorcism in the area. Animal exorcism is facilitated by *fakirs* (tiger-charmers). Woodcutters, honey gatherers, and wax collectors are advised not to enter the forest without their *fakirs*. The *fakir* is believed to have the power to disperse tigers and to prevent life-threatening attacks. Faith in the *fakir* is so strong that he is believed to have command over crocodiles, control over the level of seawater, and the power to prevent animal attacks even when the attackers are close to the mouth of the river. No work commences in the forest until the *fakir* has recited his charms and incantations and performed the ceremonial act of drawing lines with mud (a mixture of water and sand) for the dispersal of all dangerous animals. When the woodcutters start their work, the *fakirs* sit on anchored boats and chant; there is the imminent possibility of the occurrence of a fluvial catastrophe if the chant fails:

> In the name of my brothers Hingli, Bingli and Mangala, and the horses of Ghazi Saheb, also in the name of Barkat (God). O mother Kameswari, thou art uppermost in my mind. I have put Azrael, the rider, on the backs of the tigers and tigresses of this jungle. Go eastward, thou of colour of fire; go eastward or westward, go to the right-about, I command thee, and feed thyself by killing deer and pig. If this my charm fails, may the top-knot of Mahadeva fall at the feet of Kali. (O'Malley 1908, 62–63)

In the Sundarbans, there are two types of boat rituals that use water. These rituals can be broadly classified as business-centric and women-centric (Naskar 2017). To secure the expansion of the family business and the health of their husbands at sea, the women of the islands perform the rites of *bhora bhashan*. For this, 17 types of leaves tied together by a red thread and 17 types of fruits are offered to the river goddess. The day after the

[6] English translation by the author.

worship, all these items are submerged in the river as a token of thanks for the blessings of the goddess. The same ritual is repeated every Tuesday, which is evident from its name, *joy mongolbar* (*mongol* is the Bengali word for Tuesday).

The women-centric boat rituals are elaborate. The river water becomes the foundation of the boat-temple. As the idol of Sashti is enshrined within the boat, the vessel itself becomes a temple. This simply means that the women of the household turn the boats of their husbands into temples by placing the idol of Goddess Sashti in them. They perform rites to invoke her benevolence and seek divine empowerment in an attempt to safeguard the lives of their husbands at sea. It is necessary to understand that a riverine community includes water in every survival strategy—these are occupational and god-fearing observances.

3. HYDROCULTURAL REALITIES DEFINING EVERYDAY LIVES: CONCLUSIONS

Given the dangers surrounding the inhabitants of the Sundarbans, their psychological serenity is ensured by their faith in dedicated ritualistic practices. Hence, water is not only salient because of its importance for their occupational identity, but it is also crucial to their geographic and personal identities. The people not only share a fear-based relationship with the environment but also nurture a friendly attitude towards it. Their ideas of submission to nature and of seeking its benevolence are rooted in their fear of dying. The sources of danger constitute a recurrent theme in religious texts and quotidian practices. Water has the same ritualistic importance in all religions practised in the region, as it is the absolver of sin. Owing to this preconceived idea of how water can dissolve one's sins, the islanders equate it to a means of forgiveness, in addition to depending on it for survival. Water assumes the omnipotent position of the gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans, manifesting the strong syncretism prevalent in the region.

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