

Localising Global Faiths The Heterodox Pantheon of the Sundarbans

Shatarupa Bhattacharyya

Abstract

This essay foregrounds the Sundarbans, a littoral zone in India that moves between sea and land and is a site of global history. It studies the pantheon of divinities, especially Bonbibi (Lady of the Forest), a mythical figure of Muslim origin. Such deities are worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims exclusively in the Sundarbans (Beautiful Forest) that straddles the state of West Bengal (India) and the nation-state of Bangladesh. It demonstrates how the Sundarbans, during Islamisation in the medieval era actively adapted, as against passively adopting, the global faith of Islam to suit the local needs of the people there. The result was a religious worldview that was not quite Islamic, but not quite Hindu either, but rather a singular faith system unique to the region and suited to meet the needs of the people there. And because this faith system does not conform to the orthodox beliefs of either Hinduism or Islam, it can accurately be described as a heterodox pantheon.

Key words

Bengal, Sundarbans, tiger, Islam, Hinduism

I. INTRODUCTION

When one approaches the sea from Bengal, one comes across huge mangrove forests coupled with massive waterways like the *Ganga*, the *Meghna* and the *Brahmhaputra* dissecting these forested areas into innumerable deltaic islands teeming with wild tigers, boars, deer, crocodiles, and the like. This forest is called the *Sundarbans*, meaning ‘beautiful forest’ in Bengali. It is a huge archipelago situated between the vast Indian Ocean to the south and Bengal to the north, being the southernmost end of Bangladesh and West Bengal.¹ The total area of the *Sundarbans* is 40,000 sq. km., of which the total land area of the West Bengal *Sundarbans* is only 9,630 sq. kms.² These include waterways, forested islands, and inhabited cultivated lands. Scholars have denoted the southernmost islands of the state devoid of any civilization, merely calling the southern end of the *Sundarban* region, as “the forest.”³ These islands are marshy and swampy, housing one of the most ferocious mammals in the world, the Royal Bengal Tiger. This is South Asia’s famous littoral.

Pearson foregrounds such a littoral in world history:

‘Let me suggest that a history that takes full account of water as well as land is one that focuses on the beach, the littoral. Here is where we may find a society which by including both land and sea is distinctive from further inland or further out to sea...This points to the way forward. Rather than worry about extreme cases, binaries, with the land and sea being totally separate, we need to be amphibious, moving easily between land and sea...Only on the coast do we find a unique combination of fixed and yet fluid. Port cities, which I have more or less ignored on this occasion, clearly also demonstrate the

1 “Sundarbans” is the anglicized version of the Bengali words *shundor* (beautiful), *bon* (forest). The region might also get its name because of the abundance of *Sundari* trees in the region. Ronald Herring, “Rethinking the Commons,” *Agriculture and Human Values* 7 (1990): 88-104.

2 Annu Jalais, *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics Environment in the Sundarbans* (Delhi, Routledge, 2010), 2.

3 Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 18.

fluidity, the cosmopolitanism, that is characteristic of the coasts on which they are located. I am convinced that is the marge, the coast, where we can write the most distinctive maritime, water-based, history'.⁴

Because the littoral is world historical, 'studies of the littoral can contribute importantly as we try to write not only maritime, but also world, history'.⁵ In this essay we shall take a look at how a global faith was adapted to local needs and circumstances. Following Katy Gardner's work on Islam in Bangladesh, we 'discuss Islam not as an objective entity, but as a series of discourses that seek to define (and also to control) belief and practice.' As such, the concern will be 'not with the objective existence of the "core" or of a universal Islam, but instead upon how, and in what context local discourses about Islam are constructed.'⁶ This approach rejects the dichotomous view of the global and the local, and allows us instead to look at the complex interplay between them and to even move beyond a binary view.⁷

II.

Amidst such hostile surroundings the outsider (non-resident of the *Sundarbans*) will find a shrine with the image of a docile lady riding on a tiger, with a protective arm around a human seated on her lap and a bearded man standing beside her. This deity is *Bonbibbi*, holding *Dukhe* on her lap and accompanied by *Shah Jongoli*, her twin brother. The shrine is not the kind that is generally seen in cities and towns, i.e. it is not a properly constructed structure in a demarcated area of worship, but

4 M.N. Pearson, 'Water and History: Some Sceptical Notes' in Rila Mukherjee ed. *Living with Water: Peoples, Lives and Livelihoods in Asia and Beyond* (in press).

5 Michael N. Pearson, 'Littoral Society: The Concept and the Problems', *Journal of World History*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2006, 353-73: 373.

6 Katy Gardner, "Global Migrants and Local Shrines: The Shifting Geography of Islam in Sylhet, Bangladesh," in *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in Global Contexts*, ed. Leif Manger (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 38.

7 Knut S. Vikor, "Jihad in West Africa: A Global Theme in a Regional Setting," in *ibid.*, 96.

rather a small hut, with no definite shape or size, made of twigs, leaves and bushes. One will find both Hindus and Muslims who enter the mangrove forest for wood cutting, honey collecting, fishing, prawn seed collecting and the like worshipping her, with no defined ritual practices as such, but with fruits, flowers and incense sticks, sometimes even a chicken or a duck, to seek her veneration. This is the worship of *Bonbibi* widely practiced among the locals.

At times, a text is also read out, which is entitled *Bonbibi Johuranama* (Tale of the Sublime Manifestation of Grace),⁸ this is a text of contested authorship and provenance that sets out the story of *Bonbibi* (the Lady of the Forest) and *Dukhe*. The reading of the text is part of the ritual of worship, but it is not always done for no definite preparation or rules are followed by *Bonbibi's* worshippers. However, as this essay demonstrates, *Bonbibi* is simply one example, albeit a prominent one to whom we cannot easily ascribe the labels of Hindu or Muslim, of a whole pantheon of such deities worshipped in the *Sundarbans*. Although they represent the Islamisation of Bengal, they also represent the localization, or Bengalisation of Islam, forming a heterodox pantheon. By detailing these myriad divinities the essay will show how a global religion like Islam is transformed by, and not merely transmitted to, the active participation of the locals of a littoral region like the *Sundarbans*.

III.

Bengal's earliest contact with Islam happened with Turkic speaking groups from Central Asia coming to the region. Along with them came mystical fraternities called Sufi leaders, who were eventually transformed by the people of the region into charismatic holy men, believed to possess magical powers and have contact with the unseen world.⁹ With the beginning of the Turkish encounter, a section of Muslims appeared who were

⁸ Muhammad Khater Saheb, *Bonbibi Johuranama, Narayani Janga aar Dhona Dhukhe r Pala* (Kolkata: G. K. Publisher, 2002).

⁹ Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1993), 71.

integrated into local religious lives and the esoteric practices of local yogis and, from the existing religious scenario, gave rise to an amalgamated cultural understanding that was distinct from any religious faith. Something of this sort appears in *Ray-Mangala*, a poem composed in 1686 that narrates the tale of *Dakhin Ray*, the tiger god, and a Muslim pioneer called *Badi Gazi Khan*.¹⁰ It is from this time on that Islamic superhuman agencies are seen being associated with indigenous agencies, although they were yet to be fully identified with them. In fact, there are instances of innumerable Muslims saints, still venerated by Hindus, clearly demonstrating that strict religious boundaries established at the macro level are far more porous at the micro level. Even in the nineteenth century, James Wise's instruction to a certain *Zindah Gazi*, a legendary protector of woodcutters and boatmen who was believed to be residing deep inside the forest of the *Sundarbans* to keep the tigers away from the humans and make them subservient, is an example of the rise of superhuman souls who protected mortals from coming dangers.¹¹ The earliest European notice of the symbiotic relationship between the delta's tigers and Muslim holy men is found in 1690.¹²

Thus, what emerged are extreme flexible and indigenous understanding of these religions, formulated to answer the needs of the people rather than following a global notion of the same. Since these practices are seen to be overlapping, the boundaries may be regarded as syncretic. This kind of change is more visible in economically and socially backward regions, which are poor, deprived from the basic amenities of life, and are the least developed of all the areas compared, for people in these areas seek refuge in such religious quarters.

A kind of similar case may be made for *Bonbibī* where, especially when one moves out of "the forest," she is repeatedly referred to as *Bondevi* or a reincarnation of *Durga*, with extravagant religious practices participated in by both

¹⁰ Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 270

¹¹ James Wise, "The Hindu Eastern Bengal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 62 (1893): 278-81.

¹² Eaton, *The Rise of Islam*, 270.

Hindus and Muslims. Thus, what is noticeable are two parallel worlds existing in the Sundarbans: one where *Bonbibi*—far from being produced from a universal religion like Islam—is actually the result of a localized form of that universal religion, worshiped by people seeking protection from ever-present danger. On the other hand, the same deity is merged with Hindu worship as mainstream deities like *Durga* and *Kali* and dominated largely by that faith's religious practice, thereby moving away from her principal roots.

The term syncretic is generally applied by scholars to those practices and rituals that cannot be ascribed to particular religious groups.¹³ Asim Roy was among the first to propose the model, arguing that Islam, as it evolved in Bengal, was not a corruption of the “authentic” Islam of Arabia, but simply a different faith that was responsive to the region where it flourished.¹⁴

Similarly, Rafiuddin Ahmed argued that the literature of the region, with both Hindu and Muslim elements, was a localized version of popular Islam.¹⁵ Thus, when in a backward region like the *Sundarbans* the local, both Hindus and Muslims, pay homage to superhuman figures like *Bonbibi*, they are immediately outside the boundaries of any religious belief since it does not conform to the strict religious boundaries that civil society has determined.

However, Ralph Nicholas argues somewhat differently. He notes that the scholar's job is to explain the meaning of the rites and rituals in a shared practice, for just because these practices are shared, it does not necessarily mean the same thing to two different religious groups.¹⁶ This understanding

13 Sufia Uddin, “Beyond National Borders and Religious Boundaries: Muslim and Hindu Veneration of Bonbibi,” in *Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations, and Resistances*, ed. Matthew M. Schmalz (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2012), 62.

14 Asim Roy, *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983).

15 Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims, 1871-1906* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1981).

16 Ralph Nicholas, “The village mother in Bengal,” in *Mother Worship: Theme and Variations*, ed. James J. Preston (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 192-209.

might not hold true at present, for in different parts of the Sundarbans, we see that *Bonbibi* worship has taken a different turn altogether, especially in regions near Kolkata, where her affiliation is closer to Hindu deities and rituals associated with Hinduism. Here *Bonbibi* is redefined as *Bonmata*. But, in the islands near the forests, rituals are still not clearly defined and *Bonbibi* still holds sway over all religious groups.

For Hindus, the veneration of *Bonbibi* ultimately transformed into veneration of other saints as well. She was regarded as a source of power, the power of protection from all kinds of danger and disasters and not necessarily those in the Sundarbans alone. For example, sacrificing a hen or a rooster was permitted by *Bonbibi* and usually done by those who work in the forest before entering the forest. The fowl is later brought home and consumed, for that is what the ethos of the forest says as laid down by her. Although this practice is common, it is not mandatory, for it depends upon the capability of a person to do so. In most of the undeveloped regions of the *Sundarbans*, sacred rituals are defined by socio-economic conditions, which do not hold any religious significance whatsoever and thus are identical across communities.

Bonbibi's narrative and her emergence in the forest brings out the Islamic element in the forefront mingled with the lived experience of the *Sundarbans*. This element twists and turns from region to region varying as to where *Bonbibi's* presence is necessary to where *Bonbibi's* presence is primarily for pleasure. An important thing to keep in mind is that *Bonbibi* or *Dakhin Ray* ultimately became vehicles of communication between people and the gods about their hopes, desire and needs in a language that was meaningful to the people, both Hindu and Muslim. The Islamic element is intricately tangled with the Bengaliness of the region, in which the Hindus are participants.

The *Bonbibi Johuranama* narrates the victorious battle between *Narayani* (mother of *Dakhin Ray*, the Hindu tiger god) and *Bonbibi*, in which the *Sundarbans* get divided into areas to be ruled by *Dakhin Ray* under *Bonbibi's* supervision and the areas to be ruled directly by her. Through this story, the *Johuranama* narrates the cultural life of the people of the

Sundarbans: the ways they understand their religion, their deities, their own history, and the ways the divine interacts with them. In many places, *Bonbibi's* veneration is conducted as a mother-daughter relationship, she is taken to be like any other terrestrial being with super human powers rather than a goddess. The *Johuranama* also explains the entangling of a global religious faith, i.e. Islam, with the traits of a community, i.e. the *Sundarbani*, and how the global has been localized in a way to be suitable to people living in that area alone and nowhere else.

IV.

Bonbibi's story, as told in the *Johuranama*, begins with *Berahim fakir*, living in Makkah and married to *Phulbibi*, a wife unable to conceive. Saddened by this, *Phulbibi* insisted that her husband pray at the grave of the Prophet, to do which *Berahim* headed to Madina. The Prophet responded to him, after consulting the Qur'an and Fatima the keeper of Paradise, that *Berahim* would have two children, but only if he married for a second time. *Berahim* went back and explained what had transpired. *Phulbibi* was deeply saddened by the news, but granted her husband leave to take a second wife, with the condition that he must fulfil one wish of hers whenever she would ask for it. *Berahim* married again, this time to *Gulalbibi*, and soon she was pregnant. Hearing this, *Phulbibi* asked for her wish, which was to banish *Gulalbibi*. *Berahim* did so, leaving his pregnant wife in the forest where she gave birth to two children, as predicted by Fatima: *Bonbibi* and *Shah Jongoli*. Out of fear, *Gulalbibi* abandoned one of the children, *Bonbibi*; by Allah's command, she was raised by a deer, but later reunited with her mother and brother. The reunion was short lived, but *Shah Jongoli* accompanied his sister on a divine mission to the forest, i.e. the *Sundarbans*. Before going into the swampy forest, they paid a visit to the grave of Muhammad. From her grave, Fatima instructed *Bonbibi* to be merciful and kind and protect all those who sought her protection in the swampy forest. After performing a series of prayers, both brother and

sister proceeded towards the *Sundarbans* and the low-lying regions over which they would reign.

Reaching there, they heard about *Dakhin Ray*, the Hindu ruler of the low-lying regions, and his oppressive behaviour towards the poor. Ray is the title bestowed on the ruling elite and tax collectors in rural Bengal. *Shah Jangoli* gave the *adhan* (call to prayer) and when *Dakhin Ray* heard this, he readied himself for battle, but his mother *Narayani* suggested that instead of him, she would fight the female trespasser in the region. Fatima had endowed *Bonbibi* with superhuman strength and so *Bonbibi* was able to defeat *Narayani*. At that juncture, *Narayani* promised *Bonbibi* that she and her people would be her servants forever and that any lord ruling in these areas would be loyal to her. Hearing this, *Bonbibi* let *Narayani* go. *Shah Jangoli* gave the call to prayer and *Bonbibi* took *Narayani* on her lap and informed her that *Narayani* and *Dakhin Ray* would still have power over the land, with *Bonbibi* and her brother *Shah Jangoli* assisting them in ensuring peace and tranquility. The next section of the *Johuranama* speaks about *Bonbibi's* journey from village to village to establish her dominion and giving *Kedokhali* (the land of tears) to *Dakhin Ray* as his kingdom. Islam had arrived in this littoral region.

The myth of *Bonbibi* is followed by *Dukhe's* tale, about a young boy who lived with his widowed mother and who grazed other people's animals. His uncle *Dhona* lured him into joining his team of honey collectors in the forest. *Dukhe* fell prey to the envious eyes of *Dakhin Ray*, who ordered the uncle to leave him in the forest in exchange for seven boats filled with honey and wax. *Dhona* thus left *Dukhe* on the banks of *Kedokhali* and sailed off. Just when *Dukhe* was about to be devoured by *Dakhin Ray* he called out to *Bonbibi*, who rescued him. *Gazi pir*, a friend of *Dakhin Ray*, suggested that *Dakhin Ray* ask for forgiveness and call *Bonbibi* "Maa." *Dukhe* was finally sent to his mother as a rich man who would no longer have to work in the forest.

V.

The story of *Bonbibi* and *Dukhe* embodies the harmony between the forest ethos as laid down by *Bonbibi* and the desires and aspirations of locals, who believe in *Bonbibi*'s injunctions to enter the forest with a pure heart and no evil in mind. *Dukhe* in the *Johuranama* is identified as an ideal by the people of the *Sundarbans*, a boy whose unflinching belief in *Bonbibi* saved him and who considered the forest as a refuge for the poor and needy rather than for the greedy like *Dhona*. Even the agreement between *Dakhin Ray* and *Bonbibi* expresses the idea of mutual sustenance of non-humans and humans in the same place. It is an economic agreement that meets religious sentiments, where *Bonbibi*'s story is a prelude to the equitable sharing of the economic resources of the forest between humans and animals, which is why in many a place, *Dakhin Ray* is worshiped in a much grander way, the idea being to keep this non-human deity satisfied.

The *Sundarbans* thus becomes a region where the assimilation of religion and economy is a result of answering local aspirations where they are tied to their "relatedness" with the non-human world, which gives them the same symbolic mother, i.e. *Bonbibi*.¹⁷ Religion is morphed in a way that suits both their economic and social lives, with no connection with the outside world, for it is a form that was born in these marshy lands for the marsh people residing there. This sort of amalgamation became a relief from the harsh life of those who live close to the forest, constantly subjected to the whims of nature, and having to endanger their lives in the forests. Thus, it can be rightfully said that "Islamic egalitarianism," to borrow Annu Jalais's term, was ushered in by *Bonbibi* after defeating *Dakhin Ray*, and by establishing a truce—the idea that the forest is a "commons"—between different *jatis*, between humans and non-humans and between Hindus or Muslims."¹⁸ *Bonbibi* is thus seen as breaking away from religious boundaries, *jati* classifications and class distinctions.

VI.

¹⁷ Jalais, *Forest of Tigers*, 74.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 75

The religious culture of the area includes a broad spectrum of divinities, in which *pirs*, saints and religious figures from rivers to the distant Himalayas are included. The inclusion of Muslim divinities is also seen in the rich tradition of folk ballads like *Ray-Mangal*, passed on orally through generations. Such ballads give an idea about the inclusion of Islamic super humans as extremely fluid and expandable beings, making the indigenous and exogenous elements come together. There is a Bengali emphasis on divine power which extends to include prominent women of Islam like *Fatima*, *Amina* and *Bonbibi*. The poems and ballads emerging from these regions clearly emphasize foreign ideas infiltrating the religious universe of the Bengali countryside.¹⁹ By the time of the earliest census report in the late nineteenth century, the *Sundarbans* and the other low-lying areas of Bengal were overwhelmingly Muslim and the holy men's intermediary status helped in easing the local community's transfer of religious allegiances from non-Islam to Islam, in which Islam was not a closed system with definite and rigid borders, but rather extremely porous, tenuous and shifting.

Popular literature from the seventeenth century such as the Mymensingh ballads evolved amongst the communities of people who were open to accepting any sort of religious figure, human or super human, which would help them in coping with everyday problems. What has to be understood is that when Bengali communities started incorporating these ritualistic practices and beliefs into their lives it was not as "incorporating Islam" into their system, it in no way challenging their existing techniques or beliefs or advocating their outright abandonment. What they believed in was a set of systems, setting aside their religious connotations, to enrich their lives in this new place. The holy men or *pirs* in the sixteenth century brought to the Sundarbans something new, a set of occult skills, the ability to cure sickness and read minds.

Bengali literature of the sixteenth-seventeenth centuries are the biggest proof of this, romances, epics, narratives and

¹⁹ Eaton, *Rise of Islam*.

devotional poems.²⁰ The sixteenth century poet *Haji Muhammad* identified the Prophet's daughter *Fatima* with *Jagat-janini* (Mother of the world), *Abraham* with *Prabhu* (Lord) or more frequently *Niranjan* (one without color).²¹ In the eighteenth century, the poet Ali Raja identified Allah with *Niranjan* or *Jagat Isvar* (God of the universe). While the Turks were planting the institutional foundations of Islamic rituals, Bengali poets on the other hand were deepening the semantic meaning of these rituals through their writings by reconciling the lore and even the superhuman agencies of foreign origins with those of the local culture. The poets and the ballad writers were pioneers in bringing together the local and the global through the translation of the wide range of literature into the Bengali language, and the Islamic civilization was ushered into the Bengali cultural universe.²² The authors of the literature presented Islamic ideas in imagery that made them familiar to the rural population of the region to that end, suffused with Bengali folk and Hindu religious ideas. But, in doing so, many of them did feel anguish. Thus, in the seventeenth century *Abd al-Nabi* wrote about his apprehensiveness in rendering Islamic scriptures in Bengali, for it might annoy Allah.²³

However, this tension was of little interest to the rural masses who easily approachable identified with the newer practices. An amalgamation of the "Arabic" with the "Bengali" from prolonged cultural contact was visible in the course of which Allah had various superhuman agencies like *Bonbibi* and *Shah Jongoli*, beings who could gradually seep into local cosmologies.

Apart from the emergence of *Bonbibi*, another such figure is that of *Satya Pir*. There have been over a hundred manuscripts

20 The Turks built mosques in Bengal with Arabic inscriptions, but we have no idea as to how non-Muslims perceived such places. It is only in the premodern literature that we begin to learn more about this.

21 Sayid Sultan, *Nabi-Bamsa*, ed. Ahmed Sharif (Dhaka: Bangla Academy, 1978), 1.

22 This tradition has been termed by Eaton as Persinization, as a result of the prolonged contact of Persianized Turks with the Bengalis since the thirteenth century. Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, 276.

23 Abd-al Nabi, *Vijaya Hamza, Muslim Bengali Sahitya* (Dacca: Pakistan Publications, 1965), 214-15.

concerning this cult dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Tony K. Stewart's work has been pioneering, he translated representative samples of the *pir's* literature in trying to trace the cult's evolution over time.²⁴ Its emergence coincided with the growth of agrarian communities throughout southern Bengal at this time. Poets like *Shakanrcharya* in 1664 and *Krishnahari Das* connect *Satya Pir* with *Satya Narayana* and treat him as a form of the Brahmanic god *Vishnu*.²⁵ *Satya Pir's* cult has been understood by many as a classic example of the synthesis between Bengali folk religion, Islam and Hinduism. John Wise's writings on *Mubarra Ghazi*, another legendary *pir* of the region, about how he cleared the forests of the *Sundarbans* for human habitation, denote the amalgamation of religion and geography.²⁶ There is also another nineteenth century narrative about a patron saint called *Bagerhat* of *Khulna* district in the *Sundarbans*, who cleared the local jungle to prepare it for rice cultivation, converting the local population into accepting the new beliefs and making the place suitable for human habitation.²⁷

Legends of the *pirs* can be found in Bengali Hindu literature of the seventeenth century like *Ray-Mangala*, composed in 1686, which contains a conflict between a tiger god named *Dakhin Ray*, sovereign deity of the *Sundarbans* and with whom also fought *Bonbibi*, and a Muslim named *Badi Ghazi Khan*, personification of the Muslim intrusion into the area. Although the encounter between these two was hostile in the beginning, it was later resolved when it was decided that *Dakhin Ray* would be worshiped along with *Badi Gazi Khan*.²⁸ In this way, *Badi Gazi Khan* was established as the local representative of another *pir* named *Pir 'Umar Shah*, who was credited with

²⁴ Eaton, *Rise of Islam*, 280.

²⁵ Dinesh Chandra Sen, *The Folk Literature of Bengal* (1920; repr. Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1985), 99-102.

²⁶ Wise, "The Muhammadans of Eastern Bengal," *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* 63 (1894): 40.

²⁷ Syed Murtaza Ali, *Saints of East Pakistan* (Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1971), 41.

²⁸ Ashutosh Bhattacharyya, "The Tiger-Cult and its Literature in Lower Bengal," *Main in India* 27 (1947): 49-50

establishing Islam in the region.²⁹ *Pir ‘Umar Shah* was said to be from Iran, he came to live in the Noakhali jungles in the early eighteenth century, where he cleared a considerable area with the help of his followers. In 1734 Mughal authorities declared this a separate *pargana* appointing collectors of the revenue, or *zamindars*. The first two collectors were *Pir ‘Umar Shah’s* sons, one of whom built a mosque in the region.³⁰ Thus, the intrusion of Mughal authority and Islam in *Noakhali* happened simultaneously more or less.

The Islamization of Bengal however could not have been complete without *Shah Jalal Mujarrad* of the fourteenth century, who is seen both as a holy warrior who accelerated the transformation of Hindu Bengal into Muslim Bengal as well as from the prism of the agrarian revolution of transforming Bengal from a pre-agrarian to an agrarian economy.³¹ In this case, too, religious transformation resulted in a change in the economic system of the region. More such examples can be found in the sixteenth century, the pioneer among which is *Mukunduram’s Chandi-Mangala*, which celebrates the human form of the Goddess *Chandi* and her human agent *Kalaketu*. *Chandi-Mangala* is often understood as an epic, which dramatizes the civilization building process in the Bengal delta, specifically its introduction into the agrarian world from formerly forested lands. Muslim pioneers, unambiguously present in the epic, were entrusted with the important process of clearing the forest and establishing local markets. The poet clearly made himself familiar with the happenings of his time, especially events concerning Muslims who were reclaiming forest lands under the leadership of *pirs* or Islamic leaders.

Through Bengali literature of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the people of the lower deltaic region kept alive the

29 The information about *Pir ‘Umar Shah* is available from the British records of the eighteenth century, cited in W. H. Thompson, *Final Report on the Sundarbans and Settlement Operations in the District of Noakhali, 1914-1919* (Calcutta: Secretariat Book Depot, 1919), 24, 60-61.

30 J. E. Webster, *Eastern Bengal and Assam District Gazetteers: Noakhali* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1911), 100-101.

31 Ahmed, *Bengal Muslims*, 106-13.

memories of the charismatic *pirs* and other Muslim saints, whose authority rested on their connection with the forest, the wild and dangerous domain that they managed to subdue, their entry to the supernatural unknown world, which made it easier for them to win over the trust of the locals residing there, and their undying connection with mosques they are believed to have built, thereby institutionalizing the cult of Islam.

These three points are the most important features that explain the establishment of a global religion into the local. The case of *Pir 'Umar Shah* and his descendants becoming landholders is an example of religion getting transformed into landholding rights, leading to the rise to a new class of men in Bengal called "religious gentry," who played a decisive role in establishing Islamic institutions in the Bengal countryside during the Mughal period. Contemporary Europeans, on whose records we rely, saw Bengali society through binary lenses, but the approach detailed above offers a more nuanced view of the situation. Instead of visualizing the population as two separate ritual and social groups, i.e. Hindu and Muslim, one can visualize them as people who in their ongoing struggle with life's tribulations picked and chose from a wide array of instruments available to them. In this regard, Dusan Zbavitel's work on premodern Myanmar is relevant to Bengal. He argues that although the culture of Mynamar is a by-product of Hinduism and Islam, this is a single Bengali folk culture.³² This applies equally to Bengali folk religion as well and its festivals.

VII.

In contemporary times, this mixture of culture, religion and geography is visible in the various forms of festivals that currently exist in the *Sundarbans*. The deities worshipped in the *Sundarbans* can be divided into four categories: forest deities, deities protecting people from natural disasters, those offering protection from diseases and deities who protect people from

³² Dusan Zbavitel, *Bengali Literature*, vol. 9, fasc. 3 of *A History of Indian Literature*, ed. Jan Gonda (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1976).

external attacks.³³ The principle forest deities today are *Bonbibi*, of Islamic origin, and *Narayani*, of Hindu origin. These deities are worshiped in small shacks made underneath trees like *asshatha*, *bel*, *pakur* or *shaora* because of the belief that these trees live long and as a result the shack or *than*, in the local tongue, will also last long. Another long-standing belief among locals is that due to the Islamization of the region, *Bondevi* and *Bondurga* were morphed into *Bonbibi*.

In the second category are *Bishalakkhi*, *Chandi*, *Badarpir*, *Hijli* and *Bijlisaheb*, who are worshiped for protection from natural disasters, especially by people who regularly sail the rivers or seas for work. While *Bishalakkhi* and *Chandi* are deities of Hindu origin *Badarpir* is of Islamic origin, he is a deity who is always remembered while traveling through the innumerable waterways of the Sundarbans. But, similar to the perception of *Bonbibi* being morphed from a Hindu deity, *Badarpir's* emergence is also believed from a forgotten Hindu tradition.

Sitola, *Olai chandi*, *Roktangaji*, *Ponchanon* and *Raktokali* are some of the deities who are worshiped for protection against diseases. *Sundarban's* peculiar environment makes its people susceptible to innumerable diseases like cholera, pox, food poisoning, pneumonia and typhoid. The same environment also makes it difficult to develop adequate medical facilities in the region, which leads to the creation of innumerable such deities with enormous power cure and save them from death.

The next category are those protecting people from external attacks. The appearance of these deities provides a window into the history of the *Sundarbans* and speaks a great deal about the socio-political structure of its past. *Ganga*, *Padma*, *Matla* and *Rupnarayan* are the principle rivers of the *Sundarbans*, all of which end in the Bay of Bengal, which make it easier for any ship to sail through the backwaters and enter the region.³⁴ Thus, it became a desired object of control both for foreign powers like the British or Portuguese as well as the

33 Najibul Islam Mondol, *Sundarban Lok Sanskriti Bisesh Sonkhya* (Kolkata: Jiyon Kathi, 2010).

34 Ibid.

pirates who were rampaging the seas. Coupled with these were the local rulers, all of which had made life difficult for the locals. These deities are fierce, being heavily built to give an impression of strength and vigor: *Dakhin Ray*, *Jam*, *Dharma*, *Ponchanondo*, *Ateshwar* and *Narayani*. These deities were an answer to these problems. They were created to provide solace to people and to affirm the unique culture of the place.

VIII.

This paper has tried to sketch some of the divinities, *Bonbibi* most prominent among them, worshipped in the *Sundarbans* and in each case, it has shown that present-day religious labels of Hindu or Muslim cannot be applied to them. While the context of their creation has admittedly been the Islamisation of Bengal, the term Islamisation to describe that process is incomplete, for it elides the radical ways in which Islam itself was transformed, localized, or if one prefers Bengalicised, by the region in which it was trying to take root. The result was a unique religious worldview: not quite Islamic, but not quite Hindu either. It was a faith system that was singularly suited to meet the needs of the people there—a heterodox pantheon in a littoral world that is ruled by the movement of waves and tides.