



# Bonbibi: The guardian spirit of the Sundarbans



The tiger was not far away. He saw the large animal that was coming towards him. Fierce. Greedy. Hungry. Death comes in different ways for different people; for the unfortunate boy named Dukhe, it took the form of the fearsome tiger. And afraid he was, Dukhe. He was, after all, about to die. In that fateful moment of desperation, what else could one do but pray? And the boy prayed:

*"Kohe Maa Bonbibi kotha roile ei shomoy,  
Joldi kore eshe dekho tomar Dukhe mara jai.*

*Karar diyacho maago jodi na palibe,  
Bhatir modhe tomar kolonko roye jabe."*  
In that fateful moment of desperation, Dukhe prayed to Bonbibi to save him. After all, Bonbibi is the Mother of the Forest, the supreme authority of the jungle. She is the benevolent deity who can save believers from the dangers that lie in the depths of the Sundarbans, including the much-feared tiger.

And so, as Dukhe summoned Bonbibi, she came to his rescue—unleashing her powers, "defeating" the tiger, and saving the boy.

Dukhe's tale is, of course, a part of the Bonbibi folklore.

But the goddess is more than a mere mythological character. She is regarded as the guardian spirit of the Sundarbans. For those who live in the surrounding areas, and whose livelihood comes from working in the forest, the notion of Bonbibi as a saviour is strongly embedded in their culture and belief system.

Take the case of Aminur Shana, who lives in a village near the Sundarbans. A honey collector for around 10 years, venturing into the forest has become a part of his everyday life; and so has the vulnerability that comes with it.

He says that fear does not overwhelm him. "I enter the forest in the name of Allah and I feel safe," he explained. And then he added, "But occasionally when I sense any danger of tigers or snakes, I ask Maa Bonbibi for protection."

Seeking refuge from Bonbibi gives him courage. "You are my mother. As your son, protect me from the tigers and other dangers of the forest," Shana would say in his mind when he feels vulnerable.

What is it that makes people like Shana—honey collectors and woodcutters and so on—call upon Bonbibi? What makes this deity so special? Why is a folk deity so important—and relevant to this day—to the people of the Sundarbans?

To answer these questions, we simply need to look at the image that the world's largest mangrove forest has. The Sundarbans is the abode of not just the Royal Bengal Tiger, but also crocodiles and snakes. Moreover, it may be argued that when one finds himself very deep in a large forest, it is instinctive to feel defenceless and vulnerable. And let's not forget the storms which visit time and again.

These harsh realities may have been responsible for the emergence of Bonbibi.

Sutapa Chatterjee Sarkar, in her book, *The Sundarbans: Folk Deities, Monsters and Mortals*, wrote: "In fact, battling with the hostilities of nature was so overwhelming an aspect of the settlers' lives in these areas that it led to the evolution of deities, to whom they could appeal for refuge psychologically during difficult times."

The deities of the forest are the gods and