

The living knowledge of Bonojibis and why it matters

The Bonojibis believe that Bonbibi is the mother of all living beings in the forest, irrespective of Hindu, Muslim, or indigenous communities, extending even to more-than-human beings. This faith enacts a kincentric ontology in which the forest is mayer kol—a nurturing home and source of sustenance for all living beings—that affirms that no being holds a superior rank and flattens anthropocentric relations of domination.

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On the map, we see a dense expanse of forest marked in green, divided between Bangladesh and India. This vast mangrove wilderness, known as the Sundarbans, remains the largest contiguous mangrove forest in the world. Since the colonial period, the name and imagination of the Sundarbans have been widely circulated and institutionalised through state narratives, conservation discourse, and popular representations.

Today, the tourism industry and conservation campaigns continue to portray the Sundarbans as “divine,” “untouched,” “virgin,” and a “natural heaven of beauty,” among other romanticised imaginaries. Such representations exoticise and romanticise the forest, transforming it into a consumable spectacle of wilderness.

Such representations provoke a division between humans and non-humans, advancing the claim that the place should be dedicated solely to nature. Since the colonial period, bureaucratic documents have framed the forest as a space where forest resources are foregrounded while humans appear only as insignificant dots, often rendered invisible on maps. The contemporary declaration of wildlife sanctuaries, alongside the permanent restriction of forest dwellers, has reinforced a fortress model of conservation that frames Bonojibis — forest-dependent communities who sustain their lives through the resources of the Sundarbans — as the principal threat to nature. Thus, in effect, fortress conservation has not only split the forest’s cartography but has also dispossessed the Bonojibis. In essence, the state and other-than-state actors, through their allied ontological assertions about the forest, erase the forest-entangled human. It is as if these people are enemies of the wild, rationalising a discourse of the forest without its people.

These ontological assertions of nature reverberate with the anthropocentric imagination rooted in modernity and imperial understandings of nature, where nature is framed



A mouali collects honey deep inside the Sundarbans, where forest livelihoods remain closely tied to ecological knowledge and survival.

PHOTO: IHTISHAM KABIR

through the dual categories of “waste” and “resource”. Only those elements of nature that serve anthropocentric interests are recognised as valuable or extractable, reducing nature to a passive object within the nature-culture divide. In this framework, the Sundarbans is imagined as pure, Bonojibis are framed as disruptive or as threats, and the “outsider” — including conservation movements, the eco-tourism industry, and state actors — is positioned as the protector of nature while simultaneously enabling its romantic reproduction and extraction.

However, the often-invisible Bonojibis, living at the frontier of nature’s extractive regime in the Sundarbans, reclaim their existence through ecological knowledge and practices rooted in the forest. This understanding affirms that humans are an integral part of forest ecology and ultimately inseparable from the social body of the forest.

The Bonojibis, who live in and

around the forest and sustain their livelihoods from its granaries, especially the devotees of Bonbibi, believe that the jungle is a sacred place. When they enter the forest, they believe they are stepping into the lap of their mother, Bonbibi.

One of the Bonojibis from the Sundarbans delta said that, right before entering the forest, they seek protection from Bonbibi through certain utterances. For instance: “Ma Bonbibi, we are in the forest (‘tomar koley’) because of hunger and scarcity of rice (Peter jalai, bhater jalai bone ash; Ma, tumi rokkha koro). Ma (Bonbibi), you are the ‘Poti’ (sovereign authority) of the jungle. Please save us... Inside the forest, how will we save our lives, and how will we survive? If you do not protect us from tigers, who will take care of us?”

For the devotees of Bonbibi, the imagination of the forest is recalibrated through the metaphor of ‘mayer kol’ (mother’s lap), as they regard

themselves as children of Bonbibi who live and survive in the jungle, just as children do in their mother’s embrace. The Bonojibis imagine the forest as mayer kol, describing it as a ‘pobitra jaiga’ (sacred place) for its devotees. Such imaginaries unfold an ethical relationship between people and place. By animating the forest as a sacred space, like mayer kol, they generate a distinctive moral order that shapes how devotees engage with the forest and wildlife. These ethical or moral guidelines, locally referred to as ‘bachok’ (a set of ritual and ethical practices), are associated with the belief in Bonbibi.

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While humans and non-humans exist within the same network of relatedness and sustenance, they mutually cultivate an ethic of survival and care. Such ecological knowledge, embedded in the forest and in everyday practice, shapes a non-anthropocentric sense of self within a web of more-than-human relatedness.

However, this relatedness suggests that forest dwellers should not deplete the forest or its wildlife; they are permitted to take only what is necessary for everyday survival. In any case, if they violate moral norms or associated ecological knowledge, Bonbibi will no longer protect the Bonojibis from tigers or other impending dangers in the forest. Thus, for the Bonojibis, ways of surviving—both making a living and protecting life—cultivate ethical subjects shaped by ecological knowledge.

Some of these common parlances can easily be heard if one roams around the Sundarbans delta. For instance, people often say: “Jungle bachle amra bachbo” (If the forest survives, we will survive), “Jungle na thakle amra thakbo na” (If the forest no longer exists, we will not be able to survive), and “Bonbibi ache bole jongol ache” (The forest exists because of the presence of Ma Bonbibi). All these common parlances of the forest have accumulated through long-term everyday lived experience in the forest, reflecting deeply knotted ties between the forest and its people.

These expressions convey a strong relational sense of place—a relational ontology—reflecting entangled lives with other-than-human beings. Most notably, human existence is mutually embedded with that of non-human beings. For them, the forest is not merely a “resource” but a living, relational entity with agency. Their existence and ways of survival are mutually correlative, challenging anthropocentric modes of becoming grounded in domination and extraction.

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The sacred water world of the Sundarbans

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In Shyamnagar, a coastal upazila of Satkhira bordering the Sundarbans, people live amidst rivers, canals, ponds, and wetlands, yet safe drinking water remains scarce because of rising salinity. In this fragile coastal landscape, water is not merely a physical resource but part of a larger social and cultural world shaped by local beliefs, rituals, and generations of ecological knowledge surrounding hydrology and everyday survival.

In coastal villages, domestic water use, such as drinking, cooking, and bathing, is primarily dependent on ponds. Ponds with good-quality water are mostly owned by landed households. Thus, owning a good pond is a matter of prestige and confers social status in the villages of the Sundarbans. Due to the social and utilitarian value of a good-quality pond, villagers follow certain rituals when one is dug.

Shusila Mandal, a Hindu woman in her mid-eighties and a resident of Golakhali village in Ramjan Nagar Union of Shyamnagar Upazila, shared her experience and said, “I saw in my childhood that before digging a pond, the owner of the household would offer shirni to children and neighbours to keep the pond free from dushon (literally meaning evil spirits) and to obtain sweet water from the pond.” Shirni is considered a sacred food, and it can consist of sweets such as jilapi, batasha, or pitha made with rice, sugar, or other sweet ingredients. She further said, “Now people do not follow this ritual, and that is why the pond water is becoming saline day by day.”

In coastal villages, as with ponds, when people install tubewells, they offer shirni and donate money to religious institutions to appease God so that the tubewell water will remain good. Shusila Mandal’s reminiscence of offering shirni, alongside her concern about dushon affecting pond water, reflects the purity-pollution dimension of water from a cosmological perspective. Her remarks regarding increasing salinity further indicate ecological degradation and climate change, which are raising salinity levels in the water, as well as how people in the Sundarbans are experiencing intergenerational changes both in ritual practices and in water quality. Given the precious value of water, various social customs related to water culture have long been practised among villagers in this region.

Momotaj Begum, a 40-year-old



An earthenware vessel locally known as a “mathi”, used in the practice of “bosano pani” (settled water) for drinking and cooking purposes.

woman and resident of Gabura Union in Shyamnagar Upazila, shared, “If I go to fetch water from my neighbour’s pond, then I must return with a bhora kolshi (a pitcher filled completely with water).” In coastal villages, a bhora kolshi symbolises prosperity for landed households. A household that owns a pond does not allow anyone who comes to collect water to return with an empty pitcher by crossing the middle of the household courtyard. These are social norms associated with collecting water from ponds that villagers are expected to obey. Returning with an empty pitcher is considered a symbol of “ku-lokkhon” (a bad omen). It symbolises adversity and the future decline of the landed household. Villagers are therefore required to follow the rules surrounding water, which are shaped by the materiality of water itself and its relationship with local inhabitants.

In this social landscape, villagers widely use pond water for drinking and cooking, either directly or through Pond Sand Filters (PSFs) attached to ponds, along with other sources. Generally, there are very few PSFs in the region. One PSF is often located far away from another. To avoid the burden and time involved in collecting water, women try to collect water from ponds near their houses. When they fetch water without using a PSF, they collect it and keep it in an earthenware or aluminium pitcher for around one day. Local people refer to this

practice as “bosano pani” (settled water).

Women also use fitkiri (alum) to purify drinking water. After collecting water from the pond, they put fitkiri into the pitcher and keep it there for several hours or a full day so that the dirt and impurities settle at the bottom of the pitcher. This is one of their traditional practices and forms of embodied knowledge for purifying water for drinking and cooking. To ensure the availability of potable water, they follow several other rituals and practices in their daily lives.

At the peak of the summer season, when most pond water almost dries up, villagers arrange marriages between frogs to appease the gods of rain and water so that rain will come soon and their ponds will fill with rainwater that can then be used for various purposes. Though this traditional practice is now very rarely observed, it still exists among some Hindu believers, whereas in the Muslim community this ritual is considered shirk or haram.

Villagers also sense the probability of rain by observing the behaviour of non-humans. Villagers often say that if a group of ants carries their eggs in their mouths from one place to another, rain will come soon. It is also believed that if frogs croak in a pond, ditch, or pool, then rain will arrive shortly. In the coastal belt, the sound of croaking serves as a cue for impending rainwater. In the Sundarbans, the uses of water transcend domestic purposes and

extend to other aspects of society through beliefs and practices in multiple ways.

In the Sundarbans, villagers believe that ponds are places of disposal where they throw away unused para pani (sanctified water) or tabish (amulets) given by a religious leader or kabiraj (folk healer considered a spiritually powerful person). Villagers believe that pond water will destroy the dushon, or spiritual power, of that para pani and tabish. Sometimes villagers take special vows at the edge or steps of a pond so that they can rid themselves of dushon. In coastal areas, para pani is closely associated

with faith across religions. In some cases, villagers use para pani to obtain relief from illness. Sometimes a kabiraj gives the condition that the water used as sanctified water must be brought from the middle of the pond before sunrise so that the pond water remains as pure and clean as possible.

In this landscape, villagers also use para pani during childbirth. They believe that if para pani is used during childbirth, labour pain will be minimised. The dhatri (midwife) offers the pregnant woman this para pani, which has been provided or collected from the kabiraj or religious leader. Like para pani, other forms of water, such as river



A woman bathes in river water as part of a ritual of purification from dushon (pollution) and illness.

water, are also deeply embedded in the everyday beliefs, practices, and water world of the Sundarbans.

Bakul Begum, a resident of Datinakhali village in Shyamnagar, said that if someone has just recovered from a fever, they should take a bath in river water. According to her, river water is flowing water. People believe that it will wash away all illnesses, and that the salinity of the river will destroy germs and pathogens in the body. That person has to dip into the river water either three times or seven times. If someone follows this ritual, they will be purified and freed from

the evil eye (dushon) and illness.

In the coastal area of the Sundarbans, water, by both its nature and necessity, has always been an epistemologically present and relational entity connected to people and place. In this landscape, water is not only a vital source of sustenance but is also deeply embedded within everyday life and at the core of human existence and dwelling.

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