

The cost of conservation in THE SUNDARBANS

Debt, hunger, and survival

MD RAIHAN RAJU

Every year, the Sundarbans is closed to Bonojibis during June, July, and August, a period that coincides with the breeding season of fish and other aquatic species. According to forest officials, the ban is intended to preserve biodiversity and maintain the ecological balance of the Sundarbans by ensuring the undisturbed reproduction and regeneration of aquatic species. The closure also allows the forest to recover from the intensive human activity of the honey-harvesting and fishing seasons, when large numbers of Bonojibis enter the forest and place significant pressure on its resources. In addition, the restricted period supports the natural regeneration of trees and other vegetation, contributing to broader ecological restoration. While this period is commonly described as a time of regeneration for the mangrove ecosystem, Bonojibis challenge this

impact on livelihoods in the districts of Khulna, Satkhira, and Bagerhat, especially for Bonojibis who have no alternative livelihood options or are unable to take up seasonal work. There is no survey on how many people actually depend on the forest; however, some NGOs working with Bonojibis estimate that approximately 15–17 lakh people are directly or indirectly dependent on the Sundarbans for their livelihoods. Among them, around 5–7 lakh people rely directly on the forest and its waterways for their daily survival, while the rest are involved in various forms of trade and commerce. As a result, the ban affects a large population whose income depends on the resources of the Sundarbans.

How do the Bonojibis survive during the forest closure? To compensate fishers from the Sundarbans region, the government provides occasional relief, mainly in the form of rice. However, many fishers note that this assistance is insufficient, and irregular distribution often excludes those who are most in need. A fisherman from Mathurapur village said, “In our village, around 200 people from 80 families are actively engaged in fishing, but many do not have jele cards (fishing cards). Fishing cards have been issued in the names of about 100 individuals. As a result, the rice meant for 100 fishers is divided among 200 recipients, reducing the amount each person receives. Instead of the expected share, many fishers receive only around 30–40 kilograms of rice. Now tell me, can a family survive on 30–40 kilograms of rice for three months?”

Only a few Bonojibis are able to save enough income before the ban to sustain themselves during these three months. Many are forced to temporarily change professions, often migrating to cities for manual labour, although this shift is difficult for those accustomed to forest-based livelihoods.

Under such circumstances, some individuals turn to illegal activities such as theft, poaching, and the use of poison for fishing, practices that, according to local accounts, sometimes continue with the tacit approval of local authorities.

According to local fishers, the



Traditional fishing boats (dingas) remain moored along the riverbanks during the three-month seasonal closure of the Sundarbans. While the ban is intended to support ecological regeneration, it leaves thousands of Bonojibis without their primary source of income.

PHOTOS: MD RAIHAN RAJU



A Bonojibi settlement on the edge of the Sundarbans waterways. For many families, the June-to-August forest closure brings severe financial hardship, while relief assistance often falls short of meeting household needs.

narrative, arguing that it facilitates the activities of “bon-kheko” rather than effectively conserving aquatic species, which ultimately brings immense suffering to the Bonojibis.

The livelihood impact of the seasonal forest ban

The seasonal ban has a significant

for them during the following months to repay the debt at a higher interest rate. As a result, each three-month closure leads to nearly six months of financial strain, as workers struggle to repay loans while managing household expenses, often trapping them in a continuous cycle of indebtedness.

An elderly Bonojibi from Munshiganj in Satkhira, who has depended on the forest for more than four decades, criticised government-led conservation measures during the breeding season. “In the name of protecting the forest,” he said, “the government has taken the jungle away from those of us who have lived off its resources for generations and handed it over to the bon-kheko.”

Another fisher from Mathurapur echoed the sentiment. “Have you ever seen a fisherman enter the forest with weapons to kill a tiger?” he asked. “We go to the jungle with a dinga and fishing nets (jal-dhorar o dinga). Do we kill tigers or use poison for fishing? Why has the jungle been taken away from us?”

The remarks illustrate how Bonojibis distinguish themselves from those they describe as bon-kheko, literally “forest-eating people”, whom they accuse of exploiting and destroying the forest for profit. According to the elderly Bonojibi, the real threats to the Sundarbans often operate during the very period when ordinary forest-dependent communities are barred from entering.

“If you enter the jungle during the breeding season, you can easily see what is happening,” he said. “The bon-kheko set traps to catch deer, place poisoned bait to kill tigers for the illegal trade in their body parts, and use poison for fishing to maximise profits. The forest is now open to them because they can afford to pay high bribes. There is little surveillance during this period. The forest is closed to us, but not to the bon-kheko.”

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A 300-year-old shrine and the legend of Oggean Thakur

MINTU DESHWARA

Nestled along the waterlogged margins of Kawadighi Haor in Moulvibazar Sadar Upazila, the temple of Oggean Thakur stands as one of the most intriguing spiritual sites in the Sylhet region. For nearly three centuries, it has drawn pilgrims, the afflicted, and the curious alike. People of different faiths arrive bearing vows, seeking solace, and hoping to hear the distant sound of drums drifting across the water after dark.

Known locally as Oggean Thakur-er Mandir, the shrine's origins are inseparable from the extraordinary life of the man for whom it was built. Today, it remains an active place of devotion. Candles illuminate the shrine each evening, Paush Sankranti remains its most important annual observance, and stories of the saint continue to circulate among the villages surrounding the haor.

The story begins with a boy named Keshab. According to the account preserved in the Srihatta chronicle compiled by scholar Achyutcharan Chowdhury Tattvanidhi, Keshab was born in Burikona village in Moulvibazar. As a young man, he was regarded as simple-minded and easily deceived. Shepherd boys would often steal the rice and bananas he carried home from households he visited. His elder brother would scold him, yet Keshab never seemed troubled by the losses.

What appeared to be simplicity, however, may have concealed something deeper.

After one such incident, Keshab did not return home. Instead, he disappeared into the dense forest beyond the village, a wilderness known for its tigers and wild buffaloes. When he failed to return, his family searched for him and eventually assumed that he had died.

Three days later, he came back. Keshab addressed every man as Jetha and every woman as Jethi, extending familial respect to everyone he met. Villagers found the habit unusual but gradually accepted it. Yet traces of the old Keshab remained. He still spent time with the shepherd boys as before.

One evening, as the herdsmen worried

about cattle that had wandered off, Keshab calmly told each of them exactly where their animals could be found. The boys returned home astonished, and news of the incident spread through neighbouring villages.

Soon people began arriving at his doorstep. The sick, the grieving, and those burdened by personal troubles sought his help. Many believed they found relief through his presence, words, or touch.

A story involving a villager named Binandaram Dhar further strengthened his reputation. Upon seeing him one day, Keshab remarked casually, “Jetha, the mangoes on your tree are ripe. Why haven't you brought me any?”

It was not mango season. Perplexed, Binandaram returned home and reportedly found ripe mangoes hanging from his tree.

Around this period, a Pir named Qutub Shah arrived in the area. The meeting between the wandering mystic and the



A stone marker seals the spot where, according to local tradition, Oggean Thakur disappeared from the temple.

village ascetic would become central to local tradition. During what was described as a state of spiritual ecstasy, Keshab approached the Pir and picked up saliva that Qutub Shah had spat onto the ground.

Rather than expressing anger, the Pir addressed him affectionately as “Oggean”, a word that roughly means “unlearned” but is often understood to refer to someone whose wisdom transcends formal learning. From that moment, local tradition holds,



The temple of Oggean Thakur in Rajnagar Upazila, Moulvibazar, a revered spiritual site visited by people of different faiths.

PHOTOS: MINTU DESHWARA

Keshab became known as Oggean Thakur.

Among the many legends attached to him, none is more enduring than the story of his boat.

On a stretch of high, dry land, variously identified as the Adampur Hills, Barshijura, or even Kailasahar in present-day Tripura, Oggean Thakur had a boat named Banamali constructed.

The boat was then launched. According to local belief, it sailed not across water but across nearly four miles of dry ground.

The route became known as Oggeaner Kara, while the surrounding area came to be called Oggean Jangal. A verse commemorating the event survives in local memory:

“Sabe Bol Hari Hari. /Oggean Sawari Nao Jaito Antehari.”

(All together, say Hari Hari. /Oggean's passenger boat goes to Antehari.)

For devotees, the story reflects a belief found across Bengali devotional traditions: that spiritually awakened figures exist in a relationship with the world that transcends ordinary limits.

Another interesting legend concerns sounds heard across the haor after nightfall.

Villagers, including Abdus Salam, Basit Mia, and Malik Mia of Birimabad, recount

hearing drums and cymbals drifting over the waters of Kawadighi Haor. Devotees believe the sounds come from Oggean Thakur and his companions, still rowing across the haor as they once did in life. Those fortunate enough to be listening, they say, can still hear them.

In his later years, Oggean Thakur embraced a more ascetic life. He took up residence at the temple and devoted himself to constant devotional chanting. Visitors continued to arrive from early morning seeking blessings, guidance, and healing.

Then, one morning, he did not emerge. The day passed. Then another. Soon a week had gone by.

On the eighth day, villagers forced open the temple door. Inside, they found no trace of him. Instead, there was only a hole in the ground.

The prevailing belief is that he departed this world through this opening rather than dying in any ordinary sense. Local tradition further holds that offerings of milk and bananas placed inside the hole later appeared floating in a nearby pond.

The opening has since been sealed with stones, but belief in the miracle endures.

The temple stands in Birimabad village in Ekatuna Union, on the edge of Kawadighi

Haor. Older residents recall a time when four ponds surrounded the shrine. According to local accounts, Oggean Thakur could dive into one pond and emerge from another. Today, only the eastern pond remains, while much of the surrounding precinct has become open land.

Despite the passage of centuries, the shrine continues to function as a centre of worship and community life. Candles are lit each evening, and Paush Sankranti attracts devotees from across the region.

One of the most striking features of the site is its appeal across religious boundaries. Hindus, Muslims, and people of other faiths continue to visit, fulfil vows, and seek blessings associated with Oggean Thakur.

A seasonal fair known as Baruni was once held here over several days. Although the fair has faded in recent years, the tradition of gathering around the shrine remains alive.

Babul Sutradhar, general secretary of the Sri Sri Oggean Thakur Temple Management Committee, said the number of regular devotees continues to grow. However, the shrine faces practical challenges. The access road remains in poor condition, and water and sanitation facilities are inadequate for the number of visitors it receives.

Local tradition holds that the temple was established after Oggean Thakur attained spiritual realisation and that it is around three hundred years old. Whether or not its precise age can be established, the shrine conveys a striking sense of continuity. Its moss-covered stones, surviving pond, and candles glowing at dusk evoke an endurance that transcends chronology.

The shrine occupies a distinctive place in the cultural landscape of Sylhet. It is at once a Hindu temple, a sacred site shaped by the memory of Pir Qutub Shah, and a gathering place that welcomes people across religious boundaries.

Members of the temple management committee have suggested developing the area as a heritage and cultural tourism destination. The history of the haor, the life of an extraordinary spiritual figure, and the living traditions of a multi-faith community could together create a destination of considerable cultural significance.

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