The Bon Bibi Narrative and Its Interdisciplinary Significance

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Introduction

The Bonbibi narrative belongs to the religious and ecological culture of the Sundarbans, the tidal mangrove region shared by India and Bangladesh. It is known through oral performance, the Bengali verse narrative. *Bonbibi Johuranama*, village shrines, forest rituals, and literary retellings such as Amitav Ghosh's. *The* Hungry Tide. At its center is a struggle over how human beings may enter a dangerous forest without treating it as unlimited property. The story connects religion, literature, anthropology, environmental studies, history, politics, and ethics because it explains survival through relationships among deities, tigers, workers, rulers, refugees, and the mangrove landscape across changing historical conditions (Ghosh, 2005; Jalais, 2010; Sen & Mukherjee, 2020).

The Story of Bonbibi and Shah Jongoli

Bonbibi is commonly described as a guardian of people who enter the Sundarbans to fish, collect honey, cut wood, or gather other forest resources. In major versions of the narrative, she arrives from Arabia with her brother Shah Jongoli and receives a divine mission to establish justice in the region. Their presence challenges the power of Dakshin Rai, a spirit or lord associated with tigers and the forest's dangerous abundance. Bonbibi does not eliminate the wilderness or grant unrestricted human control. Her authority establishes a moral balance in which people may seek livelihood while recognizing that the forest is not solely theirs to possess (Jalais, 2010; Sen & Mukherjee, 2020).

Dukhey, Dhona, and the Test of Greed

The best-known episode concerns Dukhey, a poor boy who enters the forest with a merchant or trader often named Dhona. Seeking wealth, Dhona agrees to sacrifice Dukhey to Dakshin Rai in exchange for access to valuable forest resources. Abandoned and threatened by the tiger-lord, Dukhey calls upon Bonbibi, who rescues him and defeats or restrains Dakshin Rai. She then sends the boy home with sufficient wealth and protection. The episode condemns greed more strongly than ordinary livelihood. Dhona's wrongdoing is not that he enters the forest but that he treats another person as expendable and seeks profit without moral limits (Jalais, 2010; Sen & Mukherjee, 2020).

Dakshin Rai and the Tiger as More than a Villain

Dakshin Rai is sometimes presented as a demon who takes tiger form and desires human flesh, but the figure has a more complex ecological meaning. Tigers are real predators in the Sundarbans, and encounters can be fatal for people whose work requires entering dense mangrove habitat. The narrative translates this danger into a moral and religious personality. Dakshin Rai represents the forest's capacity to resist human occupation, but he is not simply destroyed. In many versions, an agreement limits his power and preserves a place for him within the moral order. This resolution suggests coexistence rather than complete human conquest of nature (Jalais, 2010; Vescovi, 2014).

Religion and Intercommunal Practice

Bonbibi worship is interdisciplinary partly because it crosses conventional religious boundaries. Muslim and Hindu forest workers may both invoke her protection, while the story combines Islamic names, local Bengali forms, Hindu-associated figures, and regional ritual practice. Scholars describe this tradition as a "religion of the forest" grounded in shared livelihood and danger. It should not be romanticized as proof that conflict never exists between communities. Its importance lies in showing how place-based practice can produce forms of cooperation that does not fit neatly inside formal religious categories or imported doctrinal boundaries. The forest becomes a shared moral environment where survival requires mutual recognition (Sen & Mukherjee, 2020; Jalais, 2010).

Anthropology and the Knowledge of Forest Communities

Anthropology examines how people create meaning through ritual, narrative, kinship, labor, and relationships with nonhuman life. The Bonbibi tradition provides an example of knowledge that is not organized as a scientific manual yet still regulates conduct. Before entering the forest, workers may pray, visit shrines, follow inherited restrictions, and interpret danger through stories of divine protection and punishment. These practices express social memory about risk, restraint, and dependence. Anthropological analysis asks how such beliefs function in daily life, who interprets them, and how they change when tourism, conservation law, technology, migration, or market pressure alters traditional resource use and social authority (Jalais, 2010; Siddique, 2026).

Environmental Ethics and Limits on Extraction

The narrative offers an environmental ethic because Bonbibi protects people who seek subsistence while condemning excessive desire. Recent research in the Bangladeshi Sundarbans describes her worship as an informal institution that historically guided harvesting, limited risk-taking, and

reinforced shared norms. The lesson is not a modern conservation policy in disguise; it emerged from a different religious and economic world. Nevertheless, it challenges the assumption that nature has value only when converted into profit. The forest supports human life but retains its own agency and danger. Ethical access requires humility, restraint, and recognition that resources are finite, politically contested, and unevenly controlled (Siddique, 2026; Sen & Mukherjee, 2020).

Science, Piya's Research, and Local Knowledge

In *The Hungry Tide*, Piya studies river dolphins using scientific observation, mapping, and field methods, while Fokir possesses detailed practical knowledge of currents, channels, animals, and weather. Their cooperation demonstrates that scientific and local knowledge need not be enemies. Piya's equipment can record patterns across time, but she depends on Fokir's embodied understanding of the landscape. The Bonbibi narrative adds a moral dimension by explaining why forest users should limit desire and respect danger. An interdisciplinary approach does not treat every claim as scientifically identical. It examines how different knowledge systems answer different questions and how conservation improves when experts listen to communities (Ghosh, 2005; Vescovi, 2014).

Literature and Amitav Ghosh's Use of the Myth

Ghosh incorporates the Bonbibi story into *The Hungry Tide* rather than presenting it as isolated folklore. The myth shapes characters' understanding of the tiger, the forest, fear, and moral responsibility. It also challenges Kanai, an educated urban translator, whose confidence does not guarantee wisdom in the mangrove environment. Literature allows the narrative to operate symbolically while remaining connected to social history. Ghosh's novel places oral tradition beside diaries, scientific research, memory, and political testimony from competing social positions. This layered form shows that the Sundarbans cannot be explained by one discipline because ecology, language, class, migration, and violence continually interact (Ghosh, 2005; Vescovi, 2014).

The Badabon Trust and Social Development

The Badabon Trust in *The Hungry Tide*, led by Nilima, represents education, health, women's welfare, and community organization. It connects the novel to development studies by showing how institutions mediate between government policy and local need. Nilima's work is valuable, but the novel does not portray philanthropy as neutral or simple. Development organizations can provide schools and services while also creating authority, dependency, or conflict over priorities. Nirmal's political idealism and Nilima's practical institution-building offer contrasting responses to injustice. Their disagreement raises an important interdisciplinary question: should social change begin with immediate services, structural politics, or a combination of both (Ghosh, 2005).

Morichjhapi, Refugees, and Political History

The Morichjhapi episode links the novel to the history of Partition, caste, refugee displacement, and state violence in West Bengal. In 1979, Bengali refugees who had settled on the island were forcibly removed after the government treated the settlement as illegal and environmentally harmful. Accounts describe blockade, violence, and deaths, although exact numbers remain contested. Ghosh uses Nirmal's diary to preserve the memory of people marginalized by official narratives. The episode complicates environmentalism because conservation language can be used against vulnerable communities while powerful development projects receive different treatment. Human rights and ecological protection must therefore be evaluated together rather than presented as automatic opposites (Mallick, 1999; Ghosh, 2005).

Human–Tiger Conflict and Conservation Politics

Tiger conservation in the Sundarbans involves a genuine ethical challenge. Tigers are endangered and ecologically important, while local workers face injury, death, livestock loss, and restrictions on livelihood. A policy that values wildlife but ignores human security can deepen resentment; a policy that removes all protection can destroy habitat and increase long-term risk. The Bonbibi tradition contributes a cultural language of coexistence, but contemporary management also requires scientific monitoring, compensation, safer equipment, healthcare, alternative livelihoods, and participation and decision-making power for forest-dependent communities. Interdisciplinary conservation asks not only how many tigers survive but also who bears the cost of protecting them (Jalais, 2010; Siddique, 2026).

Gender and Bonbibi's Protective Authority

Bonbibi's position as a female guardian adds a gender dimension to the narrative. She possesses authority over a landscape associated with masculine labor, predation, and commercial danger. Her power is protective but not passive; she confronts Dakshin Rai, sets limits, and restores the abandoned child. At the same time, interpreting her simply as a modern feminist symbol would ignore the specific religious context in which the story developed. Gender analysis should ask how female sacred authority relates to the everyday lives of women in forest communities, including their roles in households, markets, disaster recovery, resource collection, and mourning after tiger attacks (Sen & Mukherjee, 2020; Jalais, 2010).

How the Narrative Is Changing

Bonbibi practice is not frozen in the past. Climate change, salinity, cyclones, erosion, migration, mechanized extraction, tourism, and new conservation rules are transforming the Sundarbans. Recent field research suggests that the moral authority of the tradition may weaken or change as livelihoods

and institutions shift. At the same time, artists, writers, activists, and communities continue to reinterpret Bonbibi for new audiences. Change does not necessarily mean disappearance. Traditions survive by being used, debated, and adapted. The important question is whether new representations respect the knowledge and agency of forest communities or turn their religion into a decorative symbol for outsiders (Siddique, 2026).

Interdisciplinary Connections Chart

Topic	Relevant disciplines	Central connection
Bonbibi and Dakshin Rai	Religion, folklore, anthropology	Sacred figures organize shared ideas about protection, danger, justice, and forest access.
Dukhey and Dhona	Ethics, economics, literature	The sacrifice episode condemns greed and the treatment of vulnerable people as expendable resources.
Badabon Trust	Education, development studies, public policy	The trust shows how local institutions connect welfare, schooling, health, and political authority.
Piya and Fokir	Marine biology, conservation, Indigenous and local knowledge.	Scientific observation and practical environmental knowledge become mutually dependent.
Morichjhapi	History, refugee studies, political ecology, human rights.	Displacement reveals conflict among conservation policy, citizenship, caste, and state power.
Tigers and forest livelihoods	Ecology, risk studies, ethics	Conservation must protect wildlife while addressing the safety and rights of forest-dependent communities.

Character Guide

Character	Role and significance
Piya	A cetologist whose field research represents scientific inquiry and the need to learn from local knowledge.
Kanai	An urban translator and businessman whose confidence is challenged by the forest and its social histories.
Nilima	Founder of the Badabon Trust and a practical organizer of community services, education, and welfare.
Nirmal	An idealistic teacher whose diary preserves political memory, especially the Morichjhapi tragedy.
Fokir	A fisherman whose detailed environmental knowledge guides Piya despite linguistic and class differences.
Moyna	Fokir's wife, whose ambitions for education and family stability complicate romantic views of traditional life.
Kusum	A refugee connected to Morichjhapi whose experience links personal loss with state violence and displacement.

Conclusion

The Bonbibi story describes a moral order in which vulnerable people may seek livelihood without granting greed unlimited authority over the forest. Dukhey's rescue, Dhona's betrayal, Dakshin Rai's tiger form, and Bonbibi's protective rule connect religion with ecological risk and social justice. In *The Hungry Tide*, the narrative opens into science, anthropology, literature, development, refugee history, conservation, gender, and political ethics. Its interdisciplinary significance comes from the Sundarbans themselves: tides disregard borders, tigers cross human boundaries, and livelihoods depend on both natural systems and social institutions. Bonbibi remains meaningful because the story asks how humans can survive in a powerful landscape without claiming absolute ownership of it (Ghosh, 2005; Jalais, 2010; Sen & Mukherjee, 2020).

Works Cited

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