

## Mythology and Conservation in the Sundarbans: Unveiling the Bon Bibi Narrative from Amitav Ghosh's 'Jungle Nama'

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### Abstract

Nature and humans have always been intricately related to each other. The presence of numerous folk tales, tribal stories, myths and legends from the profundity of dense forests testifies to the close interdependence of forests, human creativity and the narrative – real as well as imagined. In the Indian context, the concept of nature is constructed to a great extent by cultural and mythical narratives. In the remote rural and indigenous communities of India, the conservation of nature has been a significant part of cultural quintessence. Stories have always been a repository of knowledge and have been significant enough to teach, convince, explain, warn and make us conscious. However, in this vast realm of stories, there are some special ones which we have knowingly or unknowingly associated with our lives and have now become an integral part of our existence. Such stories are called myths. Even though the myth is far from the truth, it is still given a lot of importance because it is grounded in culture and faith. Myths are transhistorical and cultural embodiments of cultural knowledge passed on from one generation to another and often accepted by the new generation without any questions asked. The research aims to explore the role of myth in the conservation of nature focusing on the Sundarbans. The myth to be explored in this paper is the myth of Bon Bibi as reconnoitred in *Jungle Nama* by Amitav Ghosh.

*Keywords:* Myth, eco-criticism, Folklore, Cultural Studies, Indian Tradition

Forest and humans have always been intricately related to each other. The presence of numerous folk tales, tribal stories, myths and legends from the profundity of dense forests testifies to the close interdependence of forests, human creativity and the narrative – real as well as imagined. The historical analysis of human interaction with the forests in ancient India is of great significance. The people of ancient India were concerned about the ways forests affected them

and how they were affecting the forests leading to the emergence of measures to conserve the forests. The Vedas and other sacred texts serving as a metaphor of life and a metaphor of event makes for an important element of the philosophical presupposition about the idea of 'forest'. In the sacred '*Prithvi Sukta*' a hymn in '*Rigveda*' solely dedicated to celebrating the bounties of Mother Earth, the forests are revered and the cosmos is seen as a thousand-branched tree (*Rig Veda* 3.8.11). In the Indian context, the concept of nature is constructed to a great extent by cultural and mythical narratives. In the remote rural and indigenous communities of India, the conservation of nature has been a significant part of cultural quintessence. These people develop a spiritual relationship with the environment around them and consider it their paramount responsibility to protect it.

Life in the Sundarbans has always been a mysterious one. The fierce natural attributes of the dense mangrove forests covering the large delta region created by the Ganga, the Brahmaputra, and the Meghna rivers along with their numerous tributaries spanning across West Bengal and Bangladesh constitute a singular phenomenon of the Indian subcontinent. It spreads over ten thousand square km in India as well as Bangladesh and constitutes thousands of habitable and inhabitable islands. In his latest *Story of the Sundarban*, Ghosh writes:

Thousands of islands rise from the rivers' rich silts,  
crowned with forests of mangroves, rising on stilts.  
This is the Sundarban, where great rivers give birth;  
to a vast jungle that joins the Ocean and Earth.

(Ghosh qtd. in Sengupta)

Sundarbans has a unique legacy of human settlement. People live near the untamed nature. Human beings co-habit the mangrove with wild animals where forest has the power to destroy human life and hope. In the backdrop of such locus myth and folklore take up a central position to give the inhabitants a glimmer of hope to hold on to. One such important tradition is the dedication of the patch of wood to God and Goddess calling it the sacred grove. Ovid said, 'Here stands a silent grove black with the shade of oaks; at the sight of it, anyone could say, "There is a god in here!"' (295). Sacred groves can be described as a diminutive version of the ecosystem containing a rich depository of unique biodiversity. According to

Hughes, sacred groves are defined as “segments of landscape containing vegetation, life forms and geographical features, delimited and protected by human societies under the belief that to keep them in a relatively undisturbed state is an expression of an important relationship of humans with the divine or with nature” (224). Sacred grooves consisting of exceptional natural elements are revered and almost always have an oral narrative associated with them. The ‘legend of Bonbibi’ is one such narrative associated with Sundarbans and is extensively explored by Amitav Ghosh. Amitav Ghosh is a well-known post-colonial writer exploring the stories of modern India with the lens of Eco-Criticism. He is particularly interested in nature and its phenomenon and has taken it upon himself to traverse the mysterious Sundarbans. Ghosh’s *Calcutta Chromosome* (1995), *The Glass Palace* (2000), *The Hungry Tide* (2004), *Countdown* (2010), *The Great Derangements* (2016), etc. have eco-criticism as a substantial theme.

Ghosh’s latest endeavour is *Jungle Nama: A Story of the Sundarbans* (2021) a graphic verse adaptation of the folk legend of Sundarbans known as ‘The Bon Bibi Johurnama.’ While talking about the genesis of his new work, *The Jungle Nama*, Ghosh states, “In January 2000, I accompanied Annu Jalais and a group of villagers from the Sundarbans, on a trip to a remote island for a Bon Bibi puja. We went in rowboats, and the puja was performed on a mudbank where a tiger’s fresh pugmarks could be seen. It was an amazing experience. You could say that was when the story of *Jungle Nama* began” (Ghosh). A commodious amount of work written between 1200- 1750 has a hint of the presence of supernatural powers in the Sundarbans. The most notable among this cycle is *Johurnama* written by Abdur Rahim in the late nineteenth century. Rahim adapted his work from an epic poem from 1686 called *Ray-mangal* by Krishnaram Das (Jalais 7). *Johurnama* is the story of the birth of Bon Bibi and her brother Shah-Junguli. They are blessed with supernatural power and have an ongoing dispute with Narayani, mother of Dokkhin Ray over the possession of Sundarban’s mangroves. Dokkhin Ray is a clairvoyant and through his mythical powers can take up any form and shape, primarily of a tiger. *Johurnama* comprises Dukhey Jatra (journey of Dukhey) which is a story of a young boy whose life was saved from the seizure of

Dokkhin Ray by the goddess Bonbibi. Forest workers identify themselves as Dukhey and before venturing into the forest they plead to goddess Bonbibi to protect them from the terror of tigers, the same way as she protected Dukhey.

Stories have always been a repository of knowledge and have been significant enough to teach, convince, explain, warn and make us conscious. However, in this vast realm of stories, there are some special ones which we have knowingly or unknowingly associated with our lives and have now become an integral part of our existence. Such stories are called myths. The word 'myth', originated from the Greek word 'Mythos' which the Greek philosophers used in opposition to the word 'Logos.' 'Logos' as defined by Kohanski, is a "logical form of expression that is suitable to the analytical bent of mind" (17). 'Mythos' on the other hand is explained by Hatab (334), as a story which has an emotional effect on listeners and thus not a decisive account". Even though the myth is far from the truth, it is still given a lot of importance because it is grounded in culture and faith. Myth motivates humans to act in a model way and thus give meaning to their existence. Myths are transhistorical and cultural embodiments of cultural knowledge passed on from one generation to another and often accepted by the new generation without any questions asked. As Pattnaik says, "myth is a special kind of communication that establishes a relationship between the macrocosm (universe), mesocosm (society) and microcosm (humans)" (14).

Junglenama is a graphic verse, a coalescence of pictures and text about the journey of Dukhey who became a target of greedy Dhona, his encounter with tiger Dokkhin Rai and his eventual rescue by jungle goddess Bon Bibi. Gosh "tried to use the moral compass that lies within folktale to arouse environmental consciousness among the people of the area" (Sneha 1). The story of Bonbibi is not a mere myth regarding a forest goddess but a congenital adaptive practice of the inhabitants of the mangrove in the backdrop of their ecological awareness and their compliance with the uncongenial forest. This practice persuades the people to conserve the forest and extract resources only for survival and not to satiate their greed. Ghosh believes that the people of Sundarbans understand the need for a balance between their own needs and nature's requirements and

respect it to not disrupt the equilibrium. Their belief in Bonbibi accentuates the need to limit greed which is a positive step in this anthropocentric era. Bonbibi is the protector of all barring caste, gender, creed and, colour difference. All the inhabitants of the mangrove pray to her before entering the forest and she acts benevolent towards all of them.

Junglenama written in dwipod poyar meter (couplets of around 24 syllables broken into roughly equal lines) has alluring illustrations by Salman Toor that add more exuberance to the novel. Ghosh begins the novel by introducing the demon king Dokkhin Roy who haunts the mangrove and pry on the lives of innocent villagers in the guise of a tiger. When the forest goddess got to know about his terror, she and her brother Shah Jongoli came from far Arab to help the villagers. Dokkhin Roy was so full of himself that he sent an army to fight the brother-sister duo but his army was brutally destroyed. They came back saying, "They're too strong, they wailed, 'this is a fearsome pair'" (Ghosh 7). A fierce fight between Bonbibi and Dokkhin Roy followed and he was confined to a particular area of the forest. The southern part of the forest was given to him which had all the resources and no human was allowed to enter it. Likewise, he was constricted to his part and was prohibited from entering the other part of the forest. Although a clear distinction was created by Bonbibi which resulted in the availability of enough resources for villages greed and desires know no bounds. One such greedy villager was Dhona. He was rich and already had plenty to live a luxurious life but the avarice to want more led him to the forbidden part of the mangrove. He planned,

That spring Dhona was seized by an aching desire;  
I'll go the mangrove, seven ships will I hire,  
There's much to be had there, I'll take all I can see;  
Honey, wax timber, and all of it for free. (Ghosh 9)

Although Dhona was reasoned by his brother Mona that the biggest gift of life is contentment and that greed always results in disaster in the mangrove. But Dhona couldn't be stopped and he gathered all the resources essential for his voyage and also hired his poor nephew Dukey to be used as bait when need be. Dukhey was young and credulous and couldn't understand the greed behind his uncle's sudden love for him. But his mother was wise enough to see

past the deceit. She asked Dukhey to not participate in this deception but all in vain. When her requests did not work on her son, she warned him about the terror of Dokkhin Roy and taught him a prayer to call Bonbibi if he found himself in a life-threatening situation. She says,

There's someone you can turn to when in need of succour,  
She's the lady of the Jungle, Maa Bon bibi;  
She'll protect you with her brother Shah Jongoli. (Ghosh 20)

In the turn of events, Dhona met the shape-shifter, Dokkhin Roy. The tiger promised to load Dhona's ship with all kinds of forest riches in return for Dukhey's life. The greed of Dhona was strong enough to overthrow any humanity left in him and he made a venomous plan to leave the boy there. Sooner than later Dukhey understood the conspiracy woven against him by his uncle. Although he pleaded with his uncle and reminded him of his howling mother Dhona had his riches to focus on. Dukhey, left alone in the territory of Dokkhin Roy was trembling and waiting for a barbaric death when he remembered his mother's advice. He pleaded to the Forest goddess, Bon Bibi in the meter of wonder and asked for rescue. Bon Bibi showed up and along with her brother Shah Jongli taught the tiger a lesson. He was forgiven on one condition,

Never again, said she, could he hunt a human,  
If he should yield a temptation;  
It's you who will be hunted. Make sure your words are not broken.

(Ghosh 44)

By the end of the story, Bon Bibi sends Dukhey back home to his loving mother with more riches than his uncle so that he can live a comfortable life. Dukhey reconciled with his uncle and his uncle arranged a marriage for Dukhey. Now, Dukhey was not sad anymore and lived happily. Ghosh ends the novel with the lines,

All you need to do is be content with what you've got,  
To be always craving more is a demon's lot. (Ghosh 56)

Ghosh's *Junglenama*, a modern adaptation of a traditional fable is rooted in the relationship between humans and forests; predator and prey; and animate and non-animate things. It presents hope and a way for the peaceful existence of all the elements on Earth. Ghosh in this story traced the root cause of violence to greed. When people like

rich merchant Dhona, and the shape-shifter beast Dokkhin Roy seek to take more than they need from the forest, it disturbs the harmonious equilibrium and Forest fights back in the form of Bon Bibi. The moral of the story is *parimiti*, measure, and *parimitachar*, moderation. Nature asks humans and non-human organisms to moderate greed and to share her bounty equally.

“Capitalism only survives in circumstances of discontent. It makes people want more, more and more. And now, you know, we are the endpoint of that wanting more. It has brought us to this planetary catastrophe that is going to end human civilization as we know it” (Sreevatsa). Humans have never been able to keep their irrational desires in check. They are following the anthropocentric trend and consider themselves to be the finest creation of God and all the elements of nature are there to serve them. In this selfish journey, they are destroying the robust environment. Early humans interacted with nature in different ways. They used to live amidst nature and were dependent on it for their food, shelter, clothes, etc. Although they extracted their livelihood from the forests, they never let greed disrupt the balance. They believed that God resides in nature and that to respect nature is to worship God. The concept of sacred grooves developed from this chain of thoughts as well. Sacred grooves or *Kaavu* are patches of forested land that are protected by beliefs based on religion or local folklore. They are remnants of local forest types that previously covered an entire region. Rural communities relied on this myth of the presence of God in the forest to protect it. The significant taboos and traditional rules in these sacred grooves help to keep their integrity and save biodiversity. For instance, *Iringole Kaavu*, a 25-acre sacred groove is one of the largest sacred grooves in Kerala. According to the reports of the Kerala Forest Research Institute, it is home to 185 species of flowering plants, 95 species of butterflies and 55 species of birds. *Kammadam Kaavu*, another sacred grove in southern India has five brooks flowing through it and it is home to rare leeches. *Ponnakudom Kaavu* in Ernakulam is home to rare flora such as *Syzygium travancoricum* (*Vathamkollimaram*) a medicinal plant. Many studies have reported a higher count of flora and fauna species in the sacred grooves than in the adjoining forests.

Sacred groves have rules, taboos and myths on the use of resources in that area. Forest deities are to be consented to to make any decision regarding the grove. The rules are expected to be followed and violation leads to punishment. People believe that the forest deity is invincible and is observing all the activities of the forest. The general belief is that if one tries to destroy the harmonious relationship between humans and the forest, the deity will punish them. Social, religious and environmental taboos enhance the sanctity of sacred groves and promote species conservation (Parthasarathy 3). Deep religious respect for nature is the primary reason for the preservation of sacred groves. Other than respect for nature, fear is also a significant driving factor in nature conservation. The fear of being punished if one decides to take more than what is required is one of the reasons that indigenous communities protect the sacred groves. In India, the infringement of the rules and disturbing the holiness of the grove is considered a sin and is believed to result in disease, natural calamities, famine, etc. Resource extraction from sacred groves is considered to be a serious offence and the indigenous communities believe that the person responsible for the destruction would be reborn as an urchin for thousands of years (Chandrakanth 199-211).

Though adequate evidence shows that sacred groves are significant for biodiversity conservation, in recent times there are indications that they are threatened by cultural changes, neglect, violation of rules and taboos, weakening of traditional beliefs, changing socio-economic conditions, etc. These threats have led to alterations in size and are often sacrificed to construct concrete structures such as parking spaces, buildings, and auditoriums for modern temples. The fear is that this threat will keep on escalating as the younger generation is not subservient to the myths and taboos of the forest. This necessitates developing alternate strategies more suitable to the socio-cultural environment of the sacred grove. Government and individuals must work together with the indigenous people to conserve our sacred groves. Cheryll Glotfelty, a famous environmentalist remarks:

We have reached the age of environmental limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support systems. We are there. Either we change our ways or we face



global catastrophe, destroying much beauty and exterminating countless fellow species in our headlong race to apocalypse. (20)

Amitav Ghosh's graphic novel *Junglenama* is a warning to humans to check their growing desires. Ghosh emphasizes the necessity for limits and for humans to recognize boundaries. To conclude, the earth should be a place where humans observe certain limits about the earth, and about the world, to the environment.

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