

## Banabibi: The Patron Goddess of the Sundarbans

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### ABSTRACT

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In this article origins of Banabini and some legends regarding this deity which were collected by conducting fieldwork in Mangla (Bagerhat, Khulna) will be discussed. For the innocent people of Sundarbans, Banabibi is a guardian deity who protects them from the wild forces of the jungle. Also called by the names Bandevi, Bandurga, and Byaghradevi she is a guardian deity of the forests worshipped by both the Hindu and the Muslim residents of the Sundarbans. The honey-collectors and woodcutters before entering the forest worship Banabibi for protecting them against the attacks from the tiger.

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## 1. Introduction

The Sundarbans is a region spread in the Ganges delta on the border of India and Bangladesh. It is the largest marshy forest in the world. Sundarbans in the Bangla language means beautiful forest. There are hundreds of islands in the Sundarbans spread over 10 thousand square kilometers. The dense forest spread over the marshy area has a wide variety of animals. Here 50 species of mammals, 315 types of birds and 315 types of reptiles are found. However, the Sundarbans are most famous for the Royal Bengal Tiger. Many times, it attacks the people living here and takes life too. Every year around 60 people fall prey to the Royal Bengal Tiger. Nevertheless, humans and these ferocious animals have lived together in the Sundarbans for centuries.

Their faith unites the villagers of Sundarbans against all these dangers. This faith is towards a goddess. There are Hindus as well as Muslims. All the people of Sundarbans bow towards this goddess before they travel towards the jungles. This goddess of the Hindu-Muslims of Sundarbans is known as “Banabibi”. When animals attack, they do not differentiate between Hindus and Muslims. That is why people of both communities worship Banabibi here. She is called the patron goddess of the Sundarbans. She teaches them that when your need is fulfilled in the forest, then you return. Do not be tempted too much.

## 2. Origin of Banabibi

Various legends can be found in the Sundarbans area regarding the origin of “Bonobibi”. One of the informants said

“Once there lived a merchant who had two beautiful wives. The eldest wife ‘Gulal Bibi’ was exiled to Sundarbans due to the conspiracy of the younger wife. A few days later, she gave birth to twins (one of them was a boy and the other was a girl) and died there. The tigers, crocodiles, monkeys, deer, and pythons of the forest came running when they heard the cries of the two newborns. They raise those two siblings. The boy grew up to be the ‘Bagher Raja’ and the girl became known as ‘Banabibi’.”<sup>i</sup>

According to the book of Historian Satish Chandra Mitra's ‘Jessore O Khulnar Itihas’, King Dokkhin Roy, Merchants Dhonai, Monai, and Ghazi Pir existed at about the same time. Banabibi was born into an Arab fakir family around 1500. Her father's name is Ibrahim, (Berahim in the mantra) and her Mother's name is Gulan Bibi. It is said that They were worried that Ibrahim's first wife, Fulbibi, would not have any children. Later Ibrahim married Golalbibi with the permission of Fulbibi but there was a catch and that catch was Ibrahim would have to fulfill what ‘Fulbibi’ Desired. When Gulanbibi conceives, Fulbibi becomes jealous and sent Gulanbibi into exile in the jungles of Sundarbans. Within a few days, Gulanbibi's house was lighted and two children, Banabibi and Shah Janguli, were born.

Shah janguli was Banabibi's younger brother or twin brother, it is not known for sure. It is said, four maids were sent from heaven to take care of them. Banabibi grew up there with a Madi deer. After realizing his mistake seven years later, Ibrahim came to take Gulanbibi back to Mecca with two children. But Banabibi refused to leave Sundarbavan with his father and go to Mecca, as her heart was connected with the people and animals of Sundarbans, she could not leave them and leave with her father. Shah janguli remains in the forest with Banabibi on his sister's pull.

Another story is told, The Ibrahim-Gulanbibi couple moved from Mecca to Sundarban after suffering from Fulbibi. This is where Banabibi and Shahajanguli are two siblings. After the birth of these two children, the Ibrahim family dominated the Sundarban area.<sup>ii</sup>

The book ‘Banabibir Keramati’ or ‘Banbib Jahurnama’ tells many more stories. It is said, Once playing in the mosque, Banabibi and Shahjungu find two Magic hats. They cling to this magic hat and roamed the eighteenth tide of Hindustan. When Bonabibi and Shah janguli reach the land of eighteen kilns adjacent to Sundarbans, the king who ruled there was the symbol of cruelty and his name was Dokkhin Roy or Raymani. Hearing the mysterious arrival, the king sends a friend named Sanatan Roy to inquire about them. When the informer came and told about the two siblings, the southern verdict was trying to overthrow them from their empire. Dokkhin Roy himself wanted to go to the battlefield, his mother Narayani Stops him. Narayani declared war on them with his troops. There was miraculous power with Banabibi and Shahjungu, after a long battle, Narayani and his forces were forced to give up. However, Banabibi donated half of his acquired empire to Narayani and his son. An alliance developed with Narayani. Banabibi later took over the rule of the Sundarban region, Dokkhin Roy reigns in the deep corner of the jungle.

### 3. Legends of Banabibi

According to the Banabibi Panchali (loosely translated as narrative or story) as narrated by the priests, many years ago, An underprivileged mother from a village near the Sundarbans took her baby son Dukhe to the forest to collect honey from two businessmen Dhan and Mann. The mother told the child that he had “another mother like me in the Sundarbans. If you are in any danger, you will call that mother”. One night, Roy appeared in a dream to Dhan and Mann and told them to sacrifice Dukhe instead of wealth. The next thing Dukhe saw was that there was a tiger (some say that the tiger was a soldier of Dokkhin Roy, some say Dokkhin Roy disguised himself as the tiger). 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 how afraid he was, after all, he was about to die. In that fateful moment of desperation what else could one do but pray? And the boy prayed,

*“Kohe Maa Banabibi 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 Banabibi to save him. After all, Banabibi 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. She is the one who rescued him—he floated on the back of a crocodile and reached his mother. Banabibi later received the status of a goddess. The Banabibi temple has the idols of Banabibi’s brother Shah Jangli, Gazi Aulia, son Dukhi, his two uncles Dhan and Mann and Dakshin Roy or the tiger.



The Banabibi temple

A legend was found in the Dangmari area which is situated in Mongla regarding the goddess Banabibi. It is a real-life story of a Woodsman named ‘Debol Mandal’. The legend goes like this

‘It was just a regular day at Sundarbans for Debol Mandal as he was doing his regular work which he did for a living. He was searching for woods to collect and earn some money by selling those. Unfortunately, a tiger was waiting for him, the tiger started attacking him ferociously. When his hopes of escaping from the tiger were starting to fade slowly, he remembered Banabibi, the patron goddess of the Sundarbans, can save him from this life-threatening situation. He started chanting the name of the goddess and a miracle happened. The tiger left him and went into the deep forest. This is how Debol Mandal was saved on that day.’<sup>iii</sup>

Banabibi has become the symbol of communal harmony, especially in Sundarbans. For the people of Sundarbans, She is now considered as one of the part of their struggle life instead of considering her as a deity of temple or mosque.

#### 4. Reverence of Banabibi

Traditionally on 16<sup>th</sup> January or the 1<sup>st</sup> day of the Bengali month ‘Magh’, ‘Ma Banabibi’ is worshiped inside the Sundarbans and the forest-adjacent locality. This is an integral part of the folk culture of South Bengal. One of the places among Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira region where Banabibi is worshiped is Dhangmari village which is adjacent to Sundarbans in Banishanta union of Dakop Upazila of Khulna. There is a canal that separates this village from the Sundarbans. Madhusudan Mandal (61), a priest of the ‘Purbo Dhangmari Sarbajonin Banabibi Mondir’ in this village informed that Banabibi has been worshiped here since 1897 AD. Madhusudan Mandal added,

“I inherited the responsibilities of this temple from my ancestors and Ma Banabibi is worshiped in more than two thousand places every year in the forest adjoining localities and inside the forest. This year, more than three hundred worships of Banabibi has been performed in the area on the west bank of the Pashur river including Dhangmari”<sup>iv</sup>

The Banabibi temple has the idols of Banabibi’s brother Shah Jangli, Gazi Aulia, son Dukhi, his two uncles Dhan and Mann and Dakshin Roy or the tiger. Apart from religious rituals like mantra recitation, offerings, etc prasad and shirni are distributed among the people. Hindus and Muslims both take vows to fulfill their desires. If the wish is fulfilled, the vow will be fulfilled on the day of worship the following year. Rural fairs are held in many places centered on worship.

#### 5. Conclusion

Banabibi worship might not have transcended the local barriers of the Sundarbans to reach the domains of popular religious practices in the mainland cities. But it preaches virtues of forest conservation. Conservation norms safeguarding this largest coastal mangrove forests must recognize place-based customary norms since an isolated body of scientific conservation policies would be inadequate to address the challenges posed by the vulnerable ecology. Banabibi worship is significant in underscoring place-based framings on environmental consciousness in specific conservation landscapes where the dominant conservation ethic is rooted in state-led legal provisions.

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<sup>i</sup> Sri Ojit Bissas (age:60) Occupation: Fisherman, Lives in East Dangmari, Mongla.

<sup>ii</sup> Amena Banu (age: 40) Occupation: Housewife, Lives in Dangmari, Mongla

<sup>iii</sup> Debol Mandal (age: 55) Occupation: woodsman, Lives in Dangmari, Mongla

<sup>iv</sup> Madhusudan Mandal (age 55) Occupation: Priest (Purbo Dhangmari Sarbajonin Banabibi Mondir) , Lives in East Dangmari, Mongla.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.indiatoday.in/fyi/story/bengal-bonbibi-worshipped-both-hindus-and-muslims-356614-2016-12-09>

<sup>6</sup> <https://roar.media/bangla/main/bangladesh/bonbibi-mother-to-humans-and-tigers-of-sundarban>

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