

Explained Culture: How faith in a forest goddess helps the Sundarbans survive

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The Indian Express looks at how a centuries-old folk theatre form and the worship of a forest goddess has helped the islanders understand the power of nature and the limits to human need in this precarious tide country



The Sundarbans is one of the most ecologically vulnerable terrains in the world. Spread between India and Bangladesh, the cluster of islands is picking up the pieces after Amphan, the worst cyclone to hit West Bengal in 100 years swept through it on May 20. But how has a centuries-old folk theatre form and the worship of a forest goddess helped the islanders understand the power of nature and the limits to human need in this precarious tide country? In this cover story for Sunday Eye, The Indian Express tracks this fascinating culture.

Who is Bon Bibi?

Shrines to Bon Bibi and her twin brother Shah Jongoli dot the landscape of the Sundarbans. The followers of Bon Bibi are fishermen, crab-collectors and honey-gatherers — a large chunk of the population of the islands, many of them impoverished — who go into the wild mangroves, teeming with wild animals such as tigers and crocodiles, to earn a livelihood. They believe that only Bon Bibi protects them when they enter the forest.

Theatre of worship

One of the important ways in which people express their belief in Bon Bibi is through Bon Bibi'r Palagaan, a dramatic storytelling form that is enacted throughout the island. The Sundarbans boasts of almost 30 troupes, each performing the plays in various islands through the year and at tourist lodges during the peak September-March season. Traditionally, the performances are held near Bon Bibi temples or villages bordering the forests in the light of solar lamps or bulbs powered by generators. People see the play as a part of their daily life, for it is by the grace of Bon Bibi that they believe they survive in tiger country.

Rules of the wild

The Bon Bibi faith is a check on human greed and acquisition. An unwritten code prohibits islanders from carrying guns or weapons into the forest. They must enter the forest only if they absolutely need to earn a livelihood and not take more — honey or crabs, fish or prawns — than they need. They must not desecrate the forest in any way, by smoking, defecating or washing utensils. According to local lore, poachers, pirates and those who disobey Bon Bibi are attacked by tigers as punishment.



The followers of Bon Bibi are fishermen, crab-collectors and honey-gatherers (Express Photo/Shashi Ghosh)

Syncretic tradition

Hindus and Muslims worship Bon Bibi equally. Legend has it that Bon Bibi came to the Sundarbans with her twin, Shah Jongoli, from Saudi Arabia. The Bon Bibi'r Johuranama (Chronicles of Bon Bibi's Greatness), a 19th-century text, is written in Bengali script, but with the book opening to the right, in Arabic style.

While the plays recounting Bon Bibi's life have not been staged for over three months — a record for the islands — the performers believe that for them to survive the Sundarbans, the palagaan shows will have to go on.

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