

woman may cause harm to her as well as the child she would conceive. Such belief of Idus let their women in restriction in eating wild animal's meat, such as, deer, bison, wild goat, monkeys, boar, etc.

While sacrifice of animals in various rituals is very common in majority of tribes this is not allowed by the Buddhist tribe like Monpas of Tawang and West Kameng districts. They use varieties of animal products in rituals and animal motifs find a special space in the Monpa oral tradition as well as in their performing art tradition.

### Conclusions

Our discussion provides some indications linking ecology and folk belief systems which traditionally served the purpose of resource conservation in direct or indirect ways. More such tales can be textualised looking at the length and breadth of Arunachal Pradesh which is considered as one of the biodiversity hotspots of India. But this need not be romanticized as we need to look at the other side of the coin which has emerged with the growing influence of money, market and other agents of change. In the last two decades there has been boom in timber trade in Arunachal which ultimately has led to the present predicament of resource use in the province. And that has been done with the active nexus of the people whose narratives are depicted above. With the intervention of Supreme Court such indiscriminate exploitation of forest resource, which goes against the traditional conservation ethics, has come to a temporary halt. There is no doubt that

through such appropriation of natural resources a few powerful elites have accumulated wealth whereas even today people living in interior villages still strive for their livelihoods by upholding traditional sacred or secular belief systems that encode the message of sustainable resource use.

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## Bonbibi: Bridging worlds

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In the archipelago of islands that are the Sundarbans a little-known goddess graces its forests. The story goes that Bonbibi, the 'woman of the forest', was chosen by Allah to protect people who work in the Sundarbans against a greedy man-eating half Brahmin-sage half tiger-demon, Dokkhin Rai. Dokkhin Rai, 'King of the South' (in this case to be understood as referring to Lower Bengal – i.e. the entire region that was once part of the Sundarbans) was a Brahmin sage who lived in the forest. One day, in a fit of greed he decided to feed on humans. For this, he took the form of a tiger. This was possible for him as, through his ascetic powers, he could magically transform himself into anything. His greed increased and soon the sage was refusing to share any of the forest resources with humans. He also started legitimising their killing by calling these a 'tax' (*kar*) – one they had to pay with their lives for the products they usurped from

what he had come to consider as 'his' jungle. Soon his arrogance and greed knew no bounds and he proclaimed himself lord and master of the Sundarbans mangrove (*badabon*) and of all the beings that inhabited it: the 370 million spirits, demons, god-lings, spirits and tigers. With time he became a demon (*rakkhosh*) who preyed on humans. Tigers and spirits became the chosen subjects of Dokkhin Rai and, emboldened by him, also started to terrorise and feed on humans. The trust that had existed between tigers and humans has now been broken.

But Allah, on noticing the frightening deterioration in relations between tigers and humans, decided to take action. In his compassion for the people of the 'land of the eighteen tides' (*athero bhatir desh* – another name for the Sundarbans) he decided to put a stop to Dokkhin Rai's reign of 'terror' and insatiable greed. He chose for this task Bonbibi, a young girl who lived in the forest. Bonbibi's father, Ibrahim, following his second wife's wishes, had abandoned his first wife Gulalbibi

in a forest while she was pregnant. Gulalbibi had given birth to twins but had decided to keep only her son, Shah Jongoli, as she feared not being able to raise them both. A passing deer took pity on the abandoned daughter Bonbibi and became her surrogate mother.

One day, when she had grown up, Bonbibi heard Allah bidding her to free 'the land of the eighteen tides' from the exploitation of the Brahmin man-eating sage Dokkhin Rai who took the form of a tiger. At the same time, Ibrahim returned to retrieve his first wife and children from the forest. But as her mother and brother prepared to leave Bonbibi called out to her brother and told him to accompany her on an urgent task – they had to go to Mecca and Medina. Her brother decided to follow her and together they leave for Medina to receive the blessings of Fatima and from there continue to Mecca to bring back some holy earth. When they arrive in the infamous land of the eighteen tides they call out Allah's name and mix the holy earth of Mecca with the earth of the Sundarbans. Dokkhin Rai hears their call for prayer and resenting their intrusion and their invocation of Allah decides to drive them away. But Dokkhin Rai's mother Narayani appears and insists that it is better for a woman to be fought by another woman and decides to take on Bonbibi. As she starts to lose the conflict, Narayani calls Bonbibi 'friend' (*soi*). Bonbibi, gratified by the appellation, accepts Narayani's 'friendship' and they stop warring.

Bonbibi's story is always followed by Dukhe's tale. Dukhe (literally 'sadness') was a young boy who lived with his widowed mother grazing other peoples' animals. One day, his village uncle lured him into joining his team to work in the forest as a honey collector. Dukhe's mother did not want him to go but finally allowed him to leave with the recommendation that he should call out to Ma Bonbibi should any harm befall him. The team left for the forest but couldn't locate any bee-hives. Dokkhin Rai then appeared to the uncle, whose name was Dhona (from *dhon* – 'wealth') and promised him seven boats full of honey and wax if he could have Dukhe in return. After some hesitation, the uncle left Dukhe on the banks of Kedokhali island and sailed off. Just as Dukhe was about to be devoured by Dokkhin Rai, he called out to Bonbibi who rescued him and sent her brother Shah Jongoli to beat up Dokkhin Rai. In fear for his life, Dokkhin Rai ran to his friend the Ghazi. Ghazi, who is a pir, suggests Dokkhin Rai ask forgiveness from Bonbibi by calling her 'mother'. He then takes him to Bonbibi and pleads on Dokkhin Rai's behalf. Bonbibi, heeding the Ghazi's intervention, accepts Dokkhin Rai's apology and accepts him as her 'son'.

However, Dokkhin Rai starts arguing that if humans are given a free reign there will be no forest left. So, to be fair and ensure that Dokkhin Rai and his retinue of tigers and spirits stop being a threat to humans, and humans stop being a threat to non-humans (i.e.

wild animals and spirits), Bonbibi elicits promises from Dukhe, Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi that they are all to treat each other as 'brothers'. She does this by forcing Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi to part with some of their wood and gold respectively and by making Dukhe promise that he and his kind heed the injunction that they are to enter the forest only with a *pobitro mon* (pure heart) and *khali hate* (empty handed). She then sends Dukhe back to the village a rich man so that he does not have to work in the forest again.

Following on Dukhe's story, the islanders of the Sundarbans, often explain that they have to identify with Dukhe, whose unflinching belief in Bonbibi saved him, and consider the forest as being only for those who are poor and for those who have no intention of taking more than what they need to survive. This is the 'agreement' between non-humans and humans that permits them both to depend on the forest and yet respect the others' needs. The 'pure heart' means that they have to enter the forest without any greedy or violent disposition, the 'empty hands' mean they have to enter the forest without firearms and only if they do not possess riches or own land. It was only if they honoured their part of the agreement and left the forest and its resources to those who are dispossessed that tigers would respect their part of this arrangement worked out by Bonbibi explained the islanders.

Bonbibi's story is not very old. The *Bonbibi Johuranamah*, the booklet that narrates her story – was written by one little-known Abdur Rahim towards the end of the 1800s, and is written, although in Bengali, from back to front to emulate the Arabic script. The story between the Ghazi and Dokkhin Rai is more famous. The story is a version of an epic poem called *Ray-Mangal* composed by Krishnaram Das in 1686 (it thus predates that of Bonbibi by a couple of hundred years). The historian Richard Eaton believes that this story is a 'personified memory of the penetration of these same forests by Muslim pioneers' i.e. Sufi holy men (read his excellent *The rise of Islam and the Bengal frontier 1204–1760* for more info on how Bengal was Islamised – not through the sword but through agriculture). Today, Dokkhin Rai and the Ghazi are always represented together – marked in Dokkhin Rai's case by the symbol of a human head and the Ghazi through his tomb represented by a little earthen mound (these are also always present in the Bonobibi shrines).

For the islanders, Bonbibi goes against the distinctions of caste, class and religion. This is the reason why those who work in the forest as fishers and crab-collectors stress the fact that they have to consider all *jatis* – whether Brahmin or Malo, rich or poor, Hindu or Muslim, or even human or animal – 'equal'. Tigers and humans 'share the same food', they explain, because they both depend on the forest – tigers eat fish and crabs like the villagers, and like them, tigers are greedy for wood. These facts not only make tigers equal to humans but it also 'ties' them to humans.

Also, Dokkhin Rai, the Ghazi and Bonbibi have to be placed together in shrines, point out the villagers, to show how different *jatis* and must coexist and come to an agreement when dealing with the forest. Many Sundarbans islanders say that the most

important factor for ensuring their safety in the forest, apart from entering the forest 'empty handed' and 'pure hearted', is that they should entrust their lives to Bonbibi, live up to her injunctions and not dwell on their differences. ❖

## Primal vs. Primitive: Observations on the Ecology of Rain in Gujarati Folksongs

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Folksongs are often referred to as expressions of a primitive society, or as primitive expressions of a social group. But this notion of primitive has pejorative overtones, implying that the society that produced or uses such cultural elements may be crude or less developed, maybe even undeveloped, in some way. Thus, when examining Gujarati folksongs, some analysts have called attention to their primitive qualities. They note, for example, their expressions and attitudes concerning rain, a natural phenomenon, and explain that the sentiments expressed in such songs derive from the simple and less-developed social systems that fall victim to such natural elements.

However, it is also possible that such attitudes can be viewed from a different perspective, one that is supported by an examination of similar attitudes expressed in the hymns of the Rigveda. When we examine these hymns, there is no doubt that they express many similar attitudes toward the natural environment that we find in Gujarati folksongs. Additionally, particularly in their outlook toward rain, we find attitudes that have been consistent for millennia. Analysis of the similarity of ecological attitudes in these different cultural expressions, created thousands of years apart, may suggest a primal source for the attitudes articulated in selected Gujarati folksongs, one that is fundamental to human existence, rather than simply the outpourings of undeveloped minds. Therefore, it is important to examine the differences and similarities between the Rigveda and selected Gujarati folksongs regarding the relationship between humans and rain, to determine the "nature" of the continuity of such attitudes and sentiments.

India lies in a region of the world that has a particularly complex relationship with rain and rainfall. Situated in a climatic zone that is affected by monsoons, the effects of rain (and drought) are more intense here. Therefore, we should expect that the cultures of the

region have paid more attention to matters of rain than in other regions with less variable patterns.

Folklorists (Chaudhury, 1971) have suggested that our attraction to folk literature stems from its explanations of the puzzles of life developed by primitive societies. Thus, the vagaries of nature become the very source of folk expressions in their various forms, and ecology and nature the very subject and force that cause these verbalizations. It can be argued that such a connection to the natural world, and the need for explanation of it, is not a primitive urge but a primal one. Thus, such a desire existing in sophisticated societies as well as primitive ones indicates some inherent quality beyond a desire to explain phenomena that requires advanced skills to understand. Rather, this ongoing need speaks to a continuous and continuing characteristic built into humans, one that goes beyond reverting to primitive explanations.

We can explore this phenomenon through an examination of continuing expressions of sentiments and feelings across thousands of years, providing evidence of a continuous strain of attaching man to nature in its life-giving properties, particularly regarding rain and rainfall. When folklorists (Bhagwat, 1958) have examined some of these expressions they have found connections to ancient texts, suggesting an historical, rather than a modern, source for some of the attitudes expressed. In particular, studies of Gujarati folksongs have postulated Vedic roots (Gupta, 1964, Chandervaker, 1963), suggesting that these attitudes toward rain spring from an essential ecology embedded within the cultural psyche and, in a period of increasing global warming, provide a counterbalancing primal concern toward respect for the environment.

The attitudes expressed in the Rigveda are an indication of the relationship of the humans to the natural world, and may encompass beseeching, praising, expressing fear and giving thanks, besides providing descriptive information. Though the descriptive information is helpful in providing a context for the emotional component, it is the emotional/attitudinal concepts that provide an indication of the ecological