

Invisible Influence of Deities on the Culture, Art, and Lifestyle in Mangrove Forest Settlements: The Curious Case of Bonbibi

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Abstract

Stories in paintings are not only creative imaginations but often are reflections of life. Since religion and culture are two pivotal parts of human evolution, art and literature are intertwined with these two aspects of life. If we look back in history, we would observe that the Renaissance period remarkably brought and celebrated religion and religious figures in arts. This paper explores the deep convergence among art, life, religion, and culture in the settlements of the South Coastal belt of Bangladesh. This work at first brings out how religious beliefs and disbeliefs have shaped culture and art in the region. The work secondly traces the influence of culture and art in the daily lives of the people. Findings suggest that people living in coastal area have strengthened their courage based on religious beliefs, and mythical beliefs of Bonbibi (Forest Goddess), which is reflected via diverse worship-artwork and the cultural aesthetics that belongs to society. Religious beliefs also assist people to follow social standards, as a result of which a variety of laws and regulations, cultural ideals, and appropriate infrastructure for living in society are developed. Belief in Bonbibi, on the other hand, provides coastal people the bravery to roam around in everyday life and contributes to the development of culture.

Keywords: Bonbibi; Invisible influence; Art; And lifestyle south coastal people's daily lifestyle.

1. Introduction

From the time of evolution from primates to animals, living in groups, humans began to follow certain rules and regulations in the interest of the tribe, which resulted in the formation of human society or social system. The necessity of the existence of art and its presence in human society has been observed since the time of this complete transformation. The urge to create is part of human nature. Long before the invention of writing, people were able to create the art of drawing and carving. Art has been used for almost the same social purpose since the beginning of human creation. The need for art is to satisfy human beings in general - this satisfaction applies not only to individual life but also to society as a whole. Just as art is used to display something, it is also used for various formalities. The artistic world has also been used for our material needs such as consumer goods or housing needs since time immemorial. In prehistoric human society, the creation of works of art centered on the belief in magic is observed everywhere. In prehistoric human society, all works of art were created because of the belief in magic (examples: cave paintings, Matrika statues, megaliths, etc.).

Along with the various beliefs, religious belief has also taken place equally in creating art. Which we can understand by looking at the artifacts on the pyramids of ancient Egyptian society. Religion had a direct influence on every part of ancient Egyptian society. There, with the help of priests, the rulers or pharaohs were omnipotent and revered as gods. The Egyptians believed in the afterlife, so they saved corpses for reincarnation - known as mummies. For the same purpose, they used to paint on the tombs of the pharaohs or on the walls of the pyramids various events and rituals of their lives. The influence of religion was so pervasive in ancient Egyptian society that their art was completely controlled from every aspect in the chains of strict religious discipline (examples: ancient Egyptian painting, sculpture, architecture, etc.) (Tanveerbd, 2010).

Bangladeshi art encapsulates the countries/social regions and political transformations throughout history. Which was once a single state of Bengal is now split into two parts: Bangladesh's sovereign country and India's state of West Bengal. Islam is the majority religion in Bangladesh, while Hinduism is the majority religion in West Bengal. Ideas and identifications of specific components of culture as tradition have played a significant role in the development of identity in this region, where different cultures continue to collide, throughout history. In Bangladeshi art, the significance of ethnic identity developed through the invention of culture and tradition could be seen. Bangladeshi art and culture are a traditional dramatic performance influenced by both Muslim and Hindu

traditions. Bangladeshi art and culture have a long history that dates back over two thousand years and is still practiced now. Palagan, kobigan, Jari, Sari, Vatialigan, Folk music, Puthipath, kirtton, Gajirpala, Patachitra, MonosarVason, Puppet play alpona and Jatrapala, sculpture painting, and printmaking are among the most renowned forms of Bangladeshi art and culture.

2. Objectives

The purpose of this study is to learn about the significance of ethnic beliefs about art in Bangladesh's south coastal region. As well as to learn about the indigenous art practices in Bangladesh's south coastal region, to investigate the consequences on human living practices through art.

3. Literature Review

Religion and art have a long history together, dating back to the Renaissance. Artists created many artworks based on many religious mythologies. People used to make a variety of creative art objects based on their religious beliefs. All human societies have combined artistic expression with religious practice. The hieroglyphic term for "art" also served as the word for "religion" in the ancient Egyptian language, forming a single notion. Religion liberates art from mundane uses like adorning utensils, clothing, weapons, or houses. Religious art is mankind's sacred inheritance, witnessing our common humanity, from the rocks of Easter Island and Stonehenge to pyramids, temples, and cathedrals.

The role of various arts in world religions is well-known. "In the beginning, there was the Word"—storytelling is one of the most basic artistic manifestations of the human imagination, and stories are told in all religions. For thousands of years, oral and written stories have served as the foundation of religious beliefs. Storytelling creates gods and goddesses in the form of humans, plants, and animals, and connects them to human lives and natural events. The stories are frequently poetically beautiful and metaphorically insightful. They are works of art, with historical facts thrown in for good measure. Although several journals, articles, and books have been written on the lives of local inhabitants, no journal, article, or book has been published on the relationships between their lifestyle and art.

The Sundarbans have a fascinating history of human settlements, including the arrival of the Mughals, Portuguese, and Magh pirates from the Arakan coast, resulting in a mixed racial identity of Buddhists and Muslims. Bengal has a long history of peaceful coexistence between various ethnic backgrounds. The Sundarbans' beauty is a wonderful invention of God, but it still hides a variety of scares. People here have been helped by numerous gods and goddesses to defend themselves from tigers, lions, snakes, crocodiles, and other threats since ancient times (Seth)¹. The gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans have taken the form of particular icons to fulfill the desires of the native Sundarbans people, much as the gods and goddesses of the Vedic period took the form of various idols to fulfill the desires of the people. The sun gods, the god of the sky, the wind god, and the god of the earth, were regarded as fire in the Vedic era. They were all admired in the same way. Brahma is Vishnu's navel, and Maheshwar is Vishnu's depiction, according to the BrahmakaivartaPurana. Many gods and goddesses, yaksas, rakshas, humans, insects, plants, and other creatures have been formed from Vishnu's limbs. The gods and goddesses of the Sundarbans are no different from the traditional gods and goddesses. The imagery of the Sundarbans, gods, and goddesses, however, shows Hindu-Islamic elements since it was produced much later. Many gods and goddesses have been produced as symbols of Muslim and Hindu culture and ambitions. And in this case, the first thing that comes to mind is the Sundarbans' supreme goddess, Bonbibi. This common culture or desire is represented by 'Bonbibi.' Both Hindus and Muslims idolize her as a goddess, as such she is adorned with high respect (Das).

Bengalis, both Muslim and Hindu, have flourished in the world's most heavily populated area. The Goddess Bonbibi, worshipped by both Hindus and Muslims in the deep Sundarbans forest on the Bengal coast, is perhaps the best symbol of this long tradition of Hindu-Muslim cohabitation (Daniyal, 2016). The goddess is something more than a mythological figure. She is revered as the Sundarbans' guardian spirit. The concept of Bonbibi as a savior is deeply rooted in the community and belief system of those who live in the surrounding areas and make their living working in the forest. Bonbibi has also been represented in Bengali literature and oral history using the age-old *punthi* (manuscript).

The belief – that Bonbibi would help humans if they take only what they need – can be seen in the Sundarbans' forested areas, where she is respected with simplicity and ritual purity. Anyone, Hindu or Muslim, can mention her simply by reading the beginning and end of the '*BonbibiJohuranama*' (a 19th-century booklet) with partners reading the middle parts. The booklet is brief enough to read in the few hours it takes to walk through the forest along a jungle path. Before honey collectors and fishermen enter the Sundarbans, the above extract from *Johuranama*, which narrates the tale of "Bonbibi," is chanted in the forest edge villages. Described as 'forest workers,' these people have moved into the forests for a living throughout history. The precious blessing of the forest goddess is their only source of protection (Sen and Jenia, 2020). Bonbibi's father was from Mecca, according to the *punthiBonbibiJahuranama*. She also has a younger brother named Shah Jangli. DakkinRai, a terrifying and fearsome supernatural creature, is also included in the script (Haider, 2019).

According to a legend, Bonbibi's greatest threat was DokhinRai, a forest-dwelling Brahmin sage who, in a violent rage, decided to feed on humans. As a result, he assumed the shape of a tiger. He avoided sharing any forest resources with humans because he was selfish, and he justified the killing of humans as a means of *kawr*, or taxation.

¹Seth, Alok Nath. *Eisomoy.gold*. 23 December 2020. Document.

DokhinRai seems to have behaved as a cruel *zamindar* or landlord. He finally declared himself to be the supreme ruler of the mangroves and transformed into a demon, which preyed on humans. All tigers and forest spirits were his subjects, he tortured humans, and hence the formerly existing trust between animals and humans was violated (Basar, 2012). Because of the suffering, Allah selected Bonbibi, a young girl from the jungle, to bring an end to DokhinRai's reign. Bonbibi was abandoned by her mother when she was a baby and adopted by a deer. She called her twin Brother Shah Jongoli (both *bon* and *jongol* mean jungle) to her side when she got Allah's message. The siblings traveled to Medina to collect Fatima's blessings, then to Mecca, from where they returned and came to the Sundarbans with some blessed land (Bhattacharyya, 2016).

The Sundarbans is a landmark of ancient heritage of mythological and historical events. Human-nature-wildlife interactions have given birth to a new dimension of Sundarbans' cultural environment, which includes both visible and conceptual history (for example honey collection, religious festivals, myths, music and dance, and traditional mask-making). Nearly 3.5 million people directly depend on the provisional and cultural services of Sundarbans for their livelihood (Saha, 2017).

In the coastal village, there are two statues of Bonbibi as follows:

1. In one of the statues, she wore a hat, braided hair, wore neckless, and wore pajamas and shoes. Somewhere on the back of a tiger and a boy on his lap. Fans believe the statue in his lap is Dukhe.
2. Another statue features a crown on the head, a necklace of bones and a garland of wildflowers, ornaments all around, and a boy statue on the lap.

A village-wide fair was organized by the Mandal family of Holdia village of Joynagar police station on the occasion of Jatal Puja of Bonbibi, throughout the holy month of *Magh*. The event has been going to this forest fair of Haldia village for about two hundred and fifty years. The fair lasts for three days, and the center of this fair is the identity of the culture and art of the people of the coastal region (Basar, 2012).

4. Method

This research has been completed by both primary and secondary data, though the main discussion has been arranged by survey because there is less information about the topic in secondary data processes. The research has firstly conceptualized ideas from interviews and then analyzed those pieces of information. The necessary information has been gathered to demonstrate how coastal people's lifestyle, beliefs, and daily earning ways relate to art in Bangladesh and making a unique way by their handicrafts. This also provides insight into their contribution to contemporary art practice in our country. This research will be performed mainly through a qualitative approach based on primary and secondary information.

5. Discussion

The art culture of the coastal people can be traced back to Bonbibi. Along with the folklore of the people of the coast, folk art has developed around Bonbibi. Folk culture or folk literature is the creation of a single human group. It is not possible to build the body of civilization without culture. This is because culture is the best policy to make for civilization. Culture in its simplest type refers to the concepts, customs, and social behavior of specific individuals or a society. Moreover, it denotes the humanities, events, actions, and objects that clearly show or represent one a thing abstract or theoretical of a human intellectual action regarded put together. We have a tendency to conjointly relate culture to the attitudes and behavior characteristic of a particular group whether it is a hip-hop culture or a drug culture. We have a tendency to mirror culture. A civilization may be a series of actions taken, by that a society or a place reaches a complicated stage of social and cultural development and an institution, wherever the method of civilization not solely brings higher individual self-control but conjointly the transformations of attitudes and values. This stage of human social and cultural development and therefore the institution is taken into an account most advanced to realize a specific finish of what we have a tendency to nowadays. When civilizations fail or fall, cultures become extinct too. However, robust cultures have the potential to avoid wasting civilizations from failing or falling. Culture is what we tend to art. The higher it becomes, the additional it delivers (Academy, 2021).

The Sundarbans' distinct folk culture developed from a complicated connection between man, his livelihood practices, and a typical mangrove forest ecosystem steeped with mysticism and natural danger. The myth of Bonbibi, particularly the narrative of Dukhe, provides confidence in their fear-filled lives, a promise of a secure existence despite all odds. It was promptly accepted in the new migrants' mental horizons and created a different cultural set-up in all its probability. Folklore is the sum of all the rhymes, songs, proverbs, folk tales, and works of art, fairy tales, and vows that have been propagated by the common people. The meaning of folklore is rooted in folk culture, and the role of the people of the coastal region in maintaining this folk culture is immense. These people from the coast make a variety of artifacts for the Bonbibi fair and various cultural practices can be seen on the occasion of the Bonbibi worship. *Palagaan* is one of the aesthetic cultures centered on Bonbibi. Bonbibi's *palagaan* expands on the story given in *Johuranama* by drawing on local mythology. The story's narrative may be divided into three parts as follows:

- The birth of Janmakhanda or Bonbibi on the tidal land
- Narayani-r Jung vs. Narayani
- DukheyJatra or Dukhey's tribulations

Bonbibi's *palagaan*, being a folk performance, is adaptable in terms of structure and performance, and therefore develops with time. In the form of *Johuranama*, the mythological oral traditions were transcribed, recorded, and

printed (Mandal, n.d).The people of the coast have been making idols of Bonbibi for the purpose of her worship when the Bengal was partitioned in 1947 on communal lines. When people from the coastal areas go to the Sundarbans for livelihood, they put a red mark on the trees which are considered to be a symbol of Bonbibi. They pay homage to Bonbibi and then go to the forest to earn a living.The most ancient art and craft among the aesthetic subjects in the history of Bengal handicrafts. Publicly made arts and crafts are the main subjects in the experimentation of any kind of culture from the historical point of view. The socio-economic and cultural position of the people, their spiritual and intellectual development, and the basic social criteria are handicraft materials. Apart from sculpture coastal creative people also play an equal role in the development of handicrafts on the occasion of Bonbibi puja. In order to earn a living, they have to make these works of art all the time.

6. Conclusion

People's aesthetic senses and symbolic ideas are expressed through folk art in any civilization. This form of art can also be seen as a reflection of society's folklore and way of life. The art that began among the people of the coastal region centered on Bonbibi has continued to spread through time. Bonbibi represents hope and vitality. All these beliefs are centered on myth and are accompanied by rituals, religious and magical ceremonies, and the hard realities of survival struggle, interwoven into the matrix of their culture, forming a distinct cultural heritage and worldview that is firmly buried in the social psyche of this folk society, cutting across castes and creeds. The aesthetics of the art generated around Bonbibi are expressed through the coastal region's people's beliefs and the creativity produced. However, as this religious belief spread, so did their ability to think creatively.

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