Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics 19 (2): 101–123
DOI: 10.2478/jef-2025-0020

# NEGOTIATING WITH TIDES AND TIGERS: LIFE ON THE BOUNDARIES OF BANGLADESH'S FLOODED FOREST*

JANE ORTON
Independent Researcher
e-mail: janeortonuk@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0004-7352-5454

ABSTRACT
The Sundarbans, which stretches from the Bay of Bengal over parts of India and Bangladesh, is the largest mangrove forest in the world, constantly in flux due to the erosion and cyclones that can drastically reshape the land. This article explores how Muslims, Hindus and the Indigenous Munda must negotiate the precarity of life and work on the forest boundaries, and the constant fluctuation of institutions and geography. These communities depend on the forest, negotiating dangers such as tigers, crocodiles, snakes, cyclones and the strict limitations imposed by the Forest Department. This article will explore boundaries, erosion and forest predators in turn, culminating in the argument that the roots developed by the Sundarbans' communities incorporate spiritual collaboration as a form of syncretism. This article argues that, like the mangroves that characterise the Sundarbans, the communities that live on its boundaries have developed a distinctive system of roots that negotiates the unique demands of life in the region.

KEYWORDS: Bangladesh • Sundarbans • boundaries • syncretism • precarity

## INTRODUCTION: A FOREST IN FLUX

Mangroves form the basis of the ecosystem in the Sundarbans of Bangladesh and India. These are trees or shrubs that have adapted to the seasonal variation of freshwater inflow into the tidal forest.[1] The forest is home to the chital or spotted deer, otter, wild boar, rhesus monkey, Royal Bengal tiger, crocodiles, Ganges river dolphins, Irrawaddy dolphins and many fish and birds. The Sundarbans is also a buffer zone, protecting India and Bangladesh from cyclones and tidal waves: without it, millions of people would perish. Economic activity must be carefully managed, but when done responsibly and in dialogue with local people, the forest provides opportunities for fishing, nipa (*golpatta*) palm[2] collection, wood collection and honey collection. The forest has

* With special thanks to Gertrud and Helmut Denzau, Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur and Rubaiyat Mansur Mowgli, whose stunning photography book *Living with Tides and Tigers: The Sundarbans Mangrove Forest* (2009) continues to inspire my wonder at the forest.



ISSN 1736-6518 (print), ISSN 2228-0987 (online)

also been a source of inspiration for great artists and writers from the area.[3] Even more rewarding are the vernacular narratives of the Sundarbans' forest boundary communities. Narratives of the forest goddess Bonbibi are kept alive, as are the stories of her brother Shah Jongoli, the tiger-demon Dokkhin Rai and the young boy Dukhe.

Bangladesh's forest boundary communities encompass a diverse range of religious groups including Muslims, Hindus and the Indigenous Munda,[4] many of whom feel marginalised in some way. Some Munda and Hindus express feeling excluded by the Muslim majority, and members of all communities have expressed feelings of marginalisation as a result of government handling of environmental issues. In particular, there are concerns that the people of the Sundarbans are left in poverty, particularly when forest resources are difficult to access. In the lyrics of one local songwriter, "We all work in the forest. Catch fish, crab and eat…What will I do, where will I go… Children are sleeping at home without eating." (FM1)

Regarding the Munda, indigeneity is a complex concept.[5] The United Nation's definition of 'Indigenous' refers to historically continuous residence in a territory, whereas the Munda, like some other self-identifying Indigenous groups in South Asia, are acknowledged to have migrated from elsewhere. As Benedict Kingsbury (1998: 420) notes, the UN definition of 'Indigenous' "takes a potentially limited, and controversial, view of 'Indigenous peoples' by requiring 'historical continuity with pre-invasion and pre-colonial societies that developed on their territories.'" Elsewhere in South Asia, the Indian government takes into account cultural specificity when designating *Adivasi* (Indigenous) status, rather than historical geographical location. The Bangladeshi term *adibashi* may sound similar to the Indian term *adivasi*, but there are important country-specific points to note.[6] 98 % of Bangladeshi people are categorised as Bengali, with the majority being Muslim. Census results from 2022 (IWGIA 2024) claimed that 1.65 million people were ethnic minorities and Indigenous groups (1% of the national population), although the Bangladesh Indigenous Peoples' Forum estimates the real figure to be around three million and claims that the figure is being deliberately misrepresented in order to marginalise these groups (*Dhaka Tribune* 2022).[7] In addition to shared concerns of marginalisation with other rural communities, some Munda people expressed concerns regarding the division of lands, the treatment of wildlife and the use of Bengali language, as will be discussed later.

I employed a qualitative approach, using both one-on-one semi-structured interviews and informal group discussions. In all cases, informed consent was obtained and interviewees were eager to give their names, even when they admitted to transgressing Forest Department rules, for example using prohibited nets for fishing. In such cases, I have chosen not to give the names here to avoid repercussions for these individuals. It should also be noted that, although I collected information on interviewees ages, these are estimates made by the interviewees themselves. Often, adults said that they did not know their exact age, but made guesses based on things like "I remember being a child during the war with Pakistan." Children and young adults were likely to know their ages exactly.

The majority of interviewees were forest resource extractors and their families, who are among the poorest people in the world. Many men have no single occupation, but rather follow seasonal demands of the forest (honey collecting in April, for example, then spending the rest of the year doing a mixture of fishing, crab collecting

and resource extraction; others might spend six months of the year fishing and another six working in the city of Khuna). Yet others have found a way to avoid the dangers of entering the forest, for example through shrimp farming or nipa palm trading. I interviewed three *gunin*s (Hindu ritual specialists), all of whom have experience of working in the forest themselves. There are cultural prohibitions on women entering the forest, but many women I interviewed said that they, too, must often enter the forest to work. Otherwise, women I interviewed were often involved in shrimp fishing and shell collecting. Exceptions to this socioeconomic group were the three forest guards I interviewed, five students and extended dialogues with two Bengali interpreters and wildlife biologist throughout the fieldwork period.


*Figure 1. Location of Sundarbans in Bangladesh. (Google My Maps, accessed 2024; edited by the author 2025).*

Interviews and group discussions were conducted in March 2023, involving myself and a Bengali translator, in addition to the interviewees. The study site included the main village of Kalabogi, Kalabogi Island, Kalabogi Hindu Sector and Kalabogi Forest Office station, Angtihara village, the Chuna River, Datnekhali village (Munda village) and

Burigoalinee village, including the government housing project and Munda village in Burigoalinee. In almost all cases, these interviews were done in Sundarbans border villages themselves, either in private homes, shared spaces of the village such as temples or shared community areas, or as people went about their work, mending nets, cooking, waiting for the correct tide or, in one case, diving into crocodile-infested water to collect shells. Exceptions were the Forest Department interviews, which took place at the Forest Office station in Kalabogi and on the house boat on which I was staying, which serves as a scientific research station and was my base for the duration of the fieldwork period.

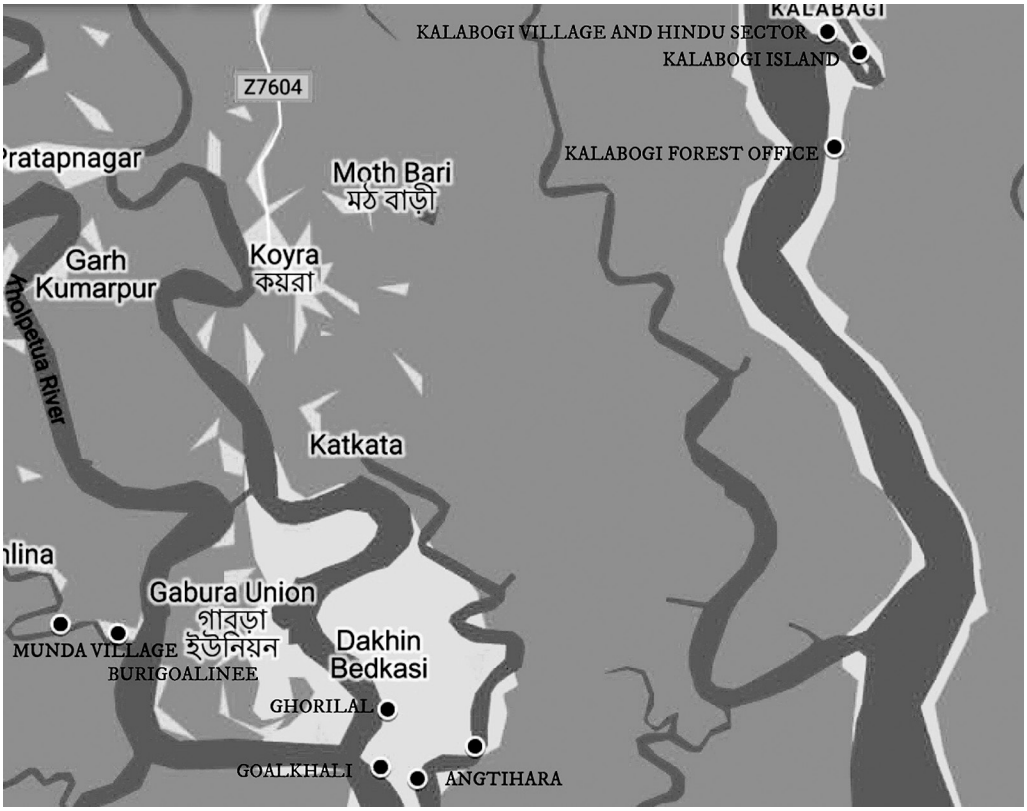


*Figure 2. Map of study site (Google My Maps, accessed 2024; edited by the author 2025).*

Interviewees were recruited from among curious residents who approached me, by reaching out to contacts of local people I met, and by actively seeking people who were engaged in an activity that put them into contact with the dangers of the forest. The arrival of a foreigner is an event of great interest in many Sundarbans border villages; in many cases, arriving by boat, we were saluted by residents curious to know what we were doing there before we had even set foot on shore or shortly after. Many interviewees were recruited this way. This was the case on Kalabogi Island, in Angtihara, the Munda village of Datnekhali and the Hindu Sector of Kalabogi. In other cases, we approached people whose perspectives we felt were particularly important to hear, par-

ticularly those involved in forest resource extraction and thus risk some of the greatest dangers of the forest. For instance, we approached crab fishers on the shore near Kalabogi, shrimp fishermen in their boats in one of the main rivers outside of Kalabogi, shell collectors who were actually diving into the Chuna River and a man who we had been told had survived a tiger attack. I found that people were remarkably eager to be involved in the interviews, with some participants explicitly saying that they felt that their voices were not being heard by the government, or even by much of the world outside Bangladesh.

I was interested in the ways that the various forest communities negotiated the dangers of the forest, specifically from predators such as tigers, crocodiles and snakes. Interviews began, after introductions, with questions that related to these themes (Do you work in the forest? Is the forest dangerous? What are some of the biggest dangers of the forest? Have you heard of Bonbibi? Does she protect you?). These questions were fluid, building on information interviewees offered themselves. For instance, if someone said he was a honey collector, I might ask whether it was true that this was the most dangerous type of work; if I was speaking to women, I might ask particularly about conventions that regulated their entry into the forest. Having said this, I must stress that the idea that the forest was dangerous was often brought up by interviewees themselves – particularly regarding tigers. When I was speaking to people who were actively engaged in river work at the time, they might emphasise the problem of crocodiles.

Group conversations evolved organically, and what started out as a one-on-one interview often changed into a group conversation as other residents became curious and wanted to have their say. I did not discourage this as people felt that they were not being listened to by the government or outsiders, and were eager to make their views known. This enhanced the quality of the research: people would often qualify statements made by others, enriching the detail and precision of the discussion. People also tended to be more at ease in such situations, particularly as it became clear that I, as an outsider, had no intention of regulating the space or dictating who may speak.

The main interview period was preceded by a journey into the forest of several days, including the sanctuary area of the forest, in which no economic activity is allowed. Although only one interview was conducted during my journey beyond the forest boundary, this trip was extremely important. Annu Jalais (2010: 195) recounts that, upon arriving in the Indian Sundarbans for her fieldwork, residents insisted upon the necessity of experiencing the forest to understand it: the cyclones, salt water, strong winds and fiery sun. Jalais was repeatedly told that she must "not only *hear* stories but also *see* and *feel* the forest for myself" (ibid.). I myself was repeatedly told something similar: I needed to "feel the forest" in order to understand it. I was also told that my mental state was important in gaining knowledge of the forest and protecting myself from its dangers.

This brings me to another point of methodology that is pertinent to this article's theoretical concerns. I use Leonard Primiano's (1995: 52; cf. Valk 2023) concept of 'vernacular religion', which he defines as "religion as it is lived" and which examines the way people experience, understand, and practice religion in everyday life. I also employ vernacular theorising (Briggs 2008), which treats local people as partners in knowledge production, rather than 'objects' of study. This benefits the quality of the research data and process derived due to the centrality of emic categories: as Indigenous scholar Mar-

garet Lyngdoh (2023: 225) argues, "It is meaningless to create new etic paradigms". This approach is ethical, encouraging dialogue that both reflects and respects community-specific meanings. Vernacular theorising does not mean taking everything that people say at face value, but rather taking them seriously and asking questions. For me, it boils down to two things: first, academic theory follows from fieldwork data. Second, local people have insights that can help scholars think about concepts they already use.

Lyngdoh's method draws on the Ontological Turn, which questions the nature–culture binary in addition to pointing out the limits of the concept of cultural relativism (Latour 1993; Franklin 1999; Descola 2011; Heywood 2017).[8] Brian Morris (2022: 140, 48) has criticised scholars of the Ontological Turn for, among other things, "arrogantly dismissing current anthropology" and expressing ontological anti-realism. I do take Morris' point that anthropologists before the Ontological Turn have been attentive to wider socio-cultural contexts. However, I find the insights offered by the Ontological Turn helpful in conducting fieldwork respectfully and curating my findings for scholarly articles, rather than as a claim about reality. In Western terminology, this means being a little Wittgensteinian in my approach to definitions, in particular being open to the influence of local people on my own concepts. For instance, Paolo Heywood (2017: 5) asks "what sort of adjustments to our conceptual schema have to be made" in order to make sense of what local people are telling us? For me, this means adjusting my concept of 'syncretism' to be representative of local people; also, thinking about how people in the Sundarbans can give res earchers insights into scholarly debates about religion.

The co-creation of knowledge with local people has also shaped my concept of 'danger'. I argue that this concept is an important one in understanding Sundarbans communities' relationship with the forest; I had this in mind as a research theme before I began my journey, but the details were shaped through dialogue with local people. For example, although it is right to be cautious about reiterating colonial constructions of the Sundarbans, which perceived the area as a harsh, predator-infested wilderness, I must stress that the point about danger was consistently raised by local people themselves. Ranjan Chakrabarti (2009: 81) argues that "Indigenous and foreign perceptions were sometimes in tune" as "Indigenous people of the Sundarbans perceived the area as harsh and dangerous."[9] This point was borne out in my own fieldwork, in which I was repeatedly told of the dangers of living near and working in the forest by Indigenous and otherwise marginalised rural communities. Upon speaking to residents, it became clear to me that the category of erosion should be included along with the forest predators I originally had in mind, and the issue of cyclones also considered, since these were issues that residents felt added to the precarity of life in the region.

## BOUNDARIES

Not only is the Sundarbans itself a geographical boundary between the Bay of Bengal and the inhabited areas of India and Bangladesh, there are also institutional boundaries that affect forest border communities. It is necessary to get government permission to enter the forest. The lower part of the Sundarbans is a sanctuary, with no economic activity allowed. Moreover, it is illegal to enter the forest at all without a permit. Those enter-

ing for economic activity must obtain the proper permission and adhere to strict rules about resource extraction. Tourist visitors and researchers must be accompanied by an armed guard from the forest department. One point to note is that these boundaries are nuanced: only tourists and researchers need an armed guard, not forest workers.

Such regulations constitute another kind of human-made boundary between the forest itself and those who depend on it. 78% of households situated within 2 km from the forest boundary depend on the forest for their livelihood (Inskip et al. 2013). This might include prawn fishing, crab fishing, nipa palm collection, wood collection and honey collection. Often, government regulations intended to protect the forest create difficulties for communities that depend on it. For example, nets commonly used by shrimp fishermen have been banned by the government. In Kalabogi in particular, this leaves local people in a dilemma, as many people have been forced to switch from farming to fishing after Cyclone Aila destroyed farmland and much of the village itself in 2009. It costs 5,000–6,000 taka (around $40–50) to make one net, so when the forest department confiscates someone's net, he has to work for ten to fifteen days to buy a new one. (FM2)

Another kind of human-made boundary within the Sundarbans is the border between India and Bangladesh. Non-human wildlife does not respect this, with turtles tagged by scientists in India turning up on the Bangladesh side of the forest, for example. Nevertheless, the existence of such a boundary has discernible impacts on the forest. For instance, the damming of major rivers within India has disruptive effects on sedimentation rates (Syvitski et al. 2009) and salinity. These effects are evident on the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans and some consider this the biggest threat to the forest, compounded by the fact that there is little collaboration between India and Bangladesh over the issue.

In addition to the Ontological Turn's critique of the nature–culture divide, the divide between 'nature' and 'the human world' has been critiqued in literature specific to the Sundarbans.[10] This has provided useful insights, but there are pertinent considerations regarding the boundaries between the village and the forest in the Sundarbans context (and, indeed, boundaries within the forest itself). This emic distinction between the categories village/forest arose through dialogue with residents about boundaries that meaningfully impact local people.

There are traditionally held boundaries among border communities regarding the forest and who may enter (and when). Hindus and Muslims explained that it is expected that women do not enter the forest for resource extraction. For example, one Muslim woman from Kalabogi island (FM3), told me, "We consider ourselves impure after our menstruation and the forest is our source of income and a very sacred place. We do not want to go to the forest in an impure state and commit atrocities." However, many women are compelled to enter the forest for financial reasons, in spite of the social and religious barriers. However, prohibitions on entering the forest during menstruation also exist within Hindu communities: one 65 year old Hindu woman whom I interviewed at the Monosha shrine in Burigoalinee (FM4), told me, "both my husband and I have to go into the forest. What else can I do if there's problem with women going into the forest? I have to earn living, too. But during our periods, we don't go there." Hence, the various geographical, institutional and traditional boundaries that exist within the Sundarbans are at once impactful, important and fluid.

## EROSION

Life in the Sundarbans is ruled by water. The tides, the seasons and the moon can determine when people go to work, when they arrive at their destination and whether they go at all. It could take outsiders a good ten years to understand the tides and their relationship with the seasons of the moon and the phases of the year (FM5). In Kalabogi, the influence of the tides is evident. Kalabogi is known as *Julanto Para* – the hanging village – because its houses are raised. The floor of each house sits on wooden pillars, to keep it above the water at high tide. Part of Kalabogi is now an island following Cyclone Aila in 2009. During the cyclone, brackish water from the river flooded the village and ruined the crops so there could be no farming for years. Some farming has recently recommenced and other employment includes fishing, crab collection, shrimp and nipa palm collection. All areas of life have been affected, including education: there is a school on the mainland that island children may attend, but often even the children have to work on the island. Since Cyclone Aila, villagers on the island and on Kalabogi mainland have had to switch from farming to fishing as a means of income.

Erosion has pushed villagers into further dependence on the river and forest. A 35 year old shrimp fisherman from Kalabogi (FM6) told me that his father had owned land before the erosion: "I never sold a single piece of land, but everything went [due to] river erosion… River erosion has messed everything up." One 26 year old shrimp fisherman from Kalabogi, whom I interviewed as he was casting his net (FM7), told me,

> Here we have only this Sundarban and the river … and from these we make a living. We have no other choice… where our house was, now you can't find any trace of it… And I still don't know where the river erosion will take us.

In Kalabogi Hindu Sector, erosion is no less a problem. In a group interview with multiple families, one 49 year old man commented (FM8),

> at this moment we don't have any valuable goods or lands that we can sell here and start living somewhere else.… Whatever people earn in a day, they have to live from hand to mouth… we had a lot of land to live on here.… But due to the cyclones and storms, the roads became small.

His neighbour added that some Hindu families have moved to India and that those who are left are solely dependent on the river (ibid.). Another neighbour added that he feels that families in the area have to find a way out (ibid.). Loss of land through river erosion can happen to any community in the Sundarbans: these people were Hindus, but many Muslims were affected by the cyclone that created Kalabogi island. The effects of this loss include precarious housing on rented land and a forced change in livelihood, as well as disruptions in education. For example, although a boat has been arranged to take Kalabogi island children to school on the mainland, some children as young as ten say that they skip school to help their families with the difficult task of earning a living.

The erosion affects not just economic security, education and housing, but also social and family arrangements. I spoke to one family in Kalabogi's Hindu sector on the mainland who lost their home in the cyclone. They have built a new home on rented land, but even this is now being eroded. They explained that they have had to recourse to fishing since losing their land. In addition, their situation has affected the marriage prospects of

their children, particularly their younger son: "No father is willing to marry his daughter to my son due to the condition of our land. I cannot marry my son because of river erosion." (FM9) Others in the village, they tell me, are also concerned about their sons' prospects. As we shall see, marriage is essential in the Sundarbans not just for forming relationships, but also for maintaining group identity. Therefore, river erosion impacts human life far beyond the immediate loss of land.

Kalabogi is just one example. Elsewhere in the Sundarbans, the same problem of erosion threatens livelihoods. Speaking to a fisherwoman on the Chuna river (FM10), I was told that lack of land due to erosion has pushed people into a dependency on working on the river. There is no respite from this, even in old age: One woman, who did not know her age but remembers being a child during the war with Pakistan in 1971 (ibid.), told me, "It's excessively difficult to do a job like this at this age… Now, even fetching the net makes me run out of breath." Members of the Munda community agree: In Datnekhali village, I was told that lack of land, the salinity of the water, sedimentation and the risk of cyclones mean that the Munda are considering moving: "When any disaster takes place, the water is pushed in this direction then the water level rises here… if the embankment is damaged then there will be no other way than running away from here." (FM12)

## FOREST PREDATORS AND THREE FOREST GODDESSES

Working in the Sundarbans and living on its borders involves various kinds of precarity, from cyclones and erosion to the forest's predators. Historically, pirates were also a danger, although, since the Bangladesh government's crackdown on pirates, this has been mitigated.[11] Danger from forest predators such as tigers, snakes, sharks and crocodiles shape border communities' relationship with the forest. Three of the Sundarbans' biggest predators are associated with the Bengali proverb, "the sightings of tigers and crocodiles and the writing of snakes." This proverb captures the sense of inevitability associated with these predators. One of Kalabogi's ritual specialists (FM13) explained the proverb to me as follows: "if God writes in your fortune that a snake will bite you then it will definitely happen; if God writes meeting a tiger in your fortune, then it will definitely happen." However, forest communities are not helpless in the face of these dangers and each community draws upon its religious and cultural roots to mitigate these risks. There are deities available for protection, and individuals can seek security through weapons, confidence and the use of mantras.

The Royal Bengal tiger of the Sundarbans delivers arguably the highest rate of attacks on humans by tigers in the world, with at least 20–30 people killed each year on the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans (Inskip et al. 2013). The real figure is difficult to estimate as attacks tend to go unreported if the person involved did not have a permit to be in the forest.[12] *Mowali*s (honey collectors) are especially vulnerable to tiger attacks (Ferdiousi and Khan 2021). This is due to the nature of honey collection, which requires going deeper into the forest, often crouching down like prey species. The association of the tiger with danger is central to understanding not only people's relationship with the tiger, but also its importance to the forest. Wildlife biologist friends of mine report being told by locals, "without a tiger we don't have a forest" (FM32) and I often heard

the same remark in my own fieldwork from many different people from the Muslim, Hindu and Munda communities. The most common reason given was that tigers protect the forest because people are afraid of them, which disincentivises people from going into the forest to cut down trees.[13]

Bonbibi is a deity who offers protection from tigers and there is evidence that ties her to Islamic literary tradition.[14] According to literary accounts, the Sundarbans were once under the rule of a demon-king known as Dokkhin Rai, the "King of the South" and (in some versions of the story) a half-Brahmin sage. Allah sent Bonbibi to save the Sundarbans, and she banished Dokkhin Rai to the wilderness. When a young boy, Dukhe, was about to be eaten by Dokkhin Rai, Bonbibi sent her brother Shah Jongoli to frighten Dokkhin Rai. Gazi, an Islamic holy man, *pir*, told Dokkhin Rai to ask forgiveness and call Bonbibi mother. Bonbibi accepted Dokkhin Rai as her son, thus accepting his submission. Now, those who enter the forest will find protection from tigers when remembering Bonbibi's name.

Although researchers on the Indian side of the Sundarbans have found Bonbibi still to be associated with Islam (Jalais 2010), in Bangladesh, I was told that Muslims no longer worship Bonbibi. One Muslim said that he sometimes hears Bonbibi stories from his elders, although he himself does not worship her (FM14). Another Muslim remarked, "Earlier Muslims used to perform this *puja* [ritual worship] but now they don't" (FM15). Upon further investigation, I found the situation to be more nuanced. One 26 year old shrimp fisherman from Kalabogi told me that he does not do *pujas* to Bonbibi before entering the forest, "But yes, we believe in Bonbibi" (FM16). Muslim fishermen in Kalabogi also acknowledged that there are Muslim characters in the Bonbibi story (FM17). All the Hindus with whom I spoke told me that they believe in Bonbibi (FM13; FM18; FM19; FM20; FM21; FM22; FM23) and the Munda also call on her when entering the forest. For example, in a group discussion with Munda people, I was told that the Munda have a Bonbibi temple and that everyone in the community prays to her (FM24).

Crocodiles and sharks are particular dangers for those who work in the rivers. Crocodiles are doing well in the Sundarbans (see Das and Jana 2018 for the demographics affected). The dangers of working in proximity with these and with sharks are acknowledged. One crab fisherman I spoke to as he was mending his nets explained:

> About crocodiles … they live in water and we avoid going into the rivers much … if the crocodile takes a grab at any of us by chance, there is no chance of returning back. These, along with sharks, are the dangers in the water. (FM25)

For local people, the physical geography of the Sundarbans is nudging them into closer proximity to these dangers. Erosion of the land has led to poverty and thus precarious work in the rivers. In the Chuna river, I spoke to people who were diving in to the river to collect shells. Pochi Biswas, a Hindu woman in her 60s (FM19), explained: "I have been doing this work for a long time now. Sometimes catching crabs, sometimes catching fish. Moreover we don't have any land. We have to live on other people's land." Another woman (ibid.) added, "I used to live by the river side. During river erosion, our house got destroyed."

The work is relentless and there is no respite in old age. One woman told me that she will make 200 taka (around $1.64) for one 40kg bag of shells (FM20). After collecting the

shells, she has breakfast before going out again to catch crabs. She expressed her fear of the crocodiles: "There is danger because there are crocodiles in the river.… You already saw how we dive and collect shells.… We have to run with a lot of risks." (Ibid.)

Not all jobs on the Chuna river involve actually diving in, but they can be dangerous nonetheless. Majida, whom I met casting her net for shrimp as she walked along the river bank, explained that there is fear of crocodiles among fisherwomen, as well as fear of sharks. One of Majida's neighbours had her fingers torn off by a shark. Majida did not know her age, but remembers being a child during the War of Independence in 1971. (FM10) Rasheda Khatun, another shrimp fisherwoman on the Chuna river (who does not know her age), agreed. Rasheda's husband used to have a shop here. Now she and her husband are both sick, but Rasheda must work on the river nonetheless. Rasheda recalled a crocodile attack on a fisherman in the area: "Two people were pulling the net; one of them fell over…After some days his body was found floating." (FM26)

For Hindus and Munda, the goddess Ganga protects from crocodile attacks. Ganga ('Mother Ganges') is a river goddess, originally a heavenly river brought down by Shiva. One Hindu woman told me: "We worship Goddess Ganga on the full moon" (FM18). Mantras can also be used against crocodiles. Another Hindu woman (FM27) remarked: "We almost always see crocodiles. Yet we are not afraid to pull the net. Because we have mantras … saying the mantra, we pull the net." Another Hindu woman (FM21) suggested more practical ways of avoiding crocodiles: "if anyone of us hears that there is a crocodile in the river today, we don't go there the following day.… This way we maintain our safety."

Snake bites are a major cause of mortality in the Sundarbans. The forest is home to around 37 species of snake, including the king cobra, common cobra, Russel's viper, common krait, Indian python, rat snake, chequered keelback and green whip snake. Some of these are poisonous and the danger is recognised by Hindus, Muslims and Munda alike. One Muslim woman told me of her fear of venomous snakes such as kraits and cobras and other women in her community agreed: "people die from snake bites" (FM3).

Monosha – also known as Mansa or Manasa – is the Hindu snake goddess, the destroyer of poison and daughter of Shiva. Her story is found in the *Padma Purana* of the Hindu scriptures, *Monosha Mangal* and the *Mahabharata*.[15] When Shiva drank poison, he was freed from that poison by Monosha. The gods of heaven refused to recognise Monosha as a divinity until she received *puja* from a Shiva worshiper. She approached Chand Saudagar, a devoted worshiper of Shiva, but he refused. Monosha killed his six sons and when another son, Lakshinder, was born, Monosha sent Kalnagini (a poisonous female snake) to kill him. His wife Behula prayed to Monosha until Neto took her to Lord Shiva, who brought Chand Saudagar back to life. Chand Saudagar still refused to worship Monosha with the hand he used to worship Shiva, but agreed to worship Monosha with his left hand. Taposi Mondol (FM21), whom I met at the Monosha shrine in Burigoalinee, told me: "if she is worshiped with the left hand, she accepts the worship.… She was satisfied with that."

Today, Hindus and Munda worship Monosha to protect themselves and their families from snake bites. I found a strong conviction among Hindus that Monosha can protect people. Her story is popular in Bengali villages and during the month of Shravan (July/August); reading of texts related to Monosha take place before her *puja*. At the

Monosha shrine in Burigoalinee, Sanjay Mondol (ibid.) told me that songs of Monosha's greatness (Monosha *bhasan gaan*), from the opera that appears in the *Padma Purana*, will be performed in the month of Bhadra (August–September). Rekha Rani (ibid.) explained, "We pray to her and worship her thinking that she is our mother … like the way our own mother is always there like a shelter to us, we pray to Monosha and also think of her as our mother." Taposi added (ibid.), "if ever we see a snake around us, then if we remember Mother Monosha, the snake goes away." Monosha can help in other ways, Taposi (ibid.) added: "Mother Monosha gives warning before danger.… Mother Monosha tells us through dreams that even if you are in danger today, you may not go to work."

Worship of forest deities is also affected by river erosion. In Kalabogi Hindu Sector, Samonesh Chakrabarty (FM8) told me, "We had a Bonbibi temple here. But due to river erosion … [we have] insufficient land, that's why the temple is not here anymore." Elsewhere, the Bonbibi temple survives while others are lost to erosion. Monosha suffers from erosion in other areas of Kalabogi, where villagers showed me the remains of Monosha's temple eroded during last year's monsoon. For Ganga, erosion is also an issue in Kalabogi: Ganga "worship is not done in our place because we don't have enough space for the occasion.… We used to make her idol on the banks of the river and offer her food and bathe there." (FM18)

The selection of forest deities for worship also depends on the kind of relationship one has with the forest, one's family history and the practicalities of river erosion in addition to one's religion. In terms of one's relationship with the forest, this may be affected by the kind of resource extraction one performs.[16] Sufia M. Uddin (2019: 304) argues that the relationship of Hindus and Muslims to the forest is central to the construction of belief and ritual, as "Honey collectors and fisherfolk sacralise the forest at different moments in their lives … annually at the *melā* [festival], before entering, and when they return safely from work in the forest." In terms of one's family history, this selection of deities might include previous encounters with forest predators. For example, "Here, my aunts perform Monosha worship.… My aunt vowed to worship Goddess Monosha when my uncle went to the forest and was bitten by a snake." (FM18)

The fact that different deities are responsible for different areas is pertinent to the question of negotiated relations among human communities and other-than-human animals, as well as the deities themselves.[17] In some cases, such negotiations might involve an offering, as Hindus in Kalabogi sector described to me regarding the Hindu goddesses Kali, in her face as the Goddess of healing, or Durga, who is sometimes seen as another 'face' of the goddess. Krishnapodo Chakrabarty explained in a group chat in Kalabogi (FM8), "Whoever is Kali, is also our Durga. Whenever Durga ma comes in the form of a different face, we perform offerings accordingly." Relations can also take the form of retrospective worship, for instance, in the case mentioned above in which worship of Monosha is performed as thanks for a person's survival of a snake bite. In many cases, the relationship is negotiated psychologically, rather than by making an offering or performing certain rituals. I was told that the important thing was to "keep Bonbibi in mind" when entering the forest (FM12; FM13; FM20; FM21; FM22; FM28), or "remember Monosha" to avoid snake bites (FM21).

This psychological element of negotiation allows for fluidity when it comes to humans' relationships with forest goddesses. Although Bonbibi has Muslim roots, wor-

ship of her is mostly undertaken by Hindus and Munda. Many Muslims now prefer to look to Allah for protection, although some acknowledged that they keep Bonbibi in mind when entering the forest. One Muslim pointed out that many people "keep Bonbibi in mind" when entering the forest (FM17). For some Muslims, at least, Bonbibi has retained some significance. When pressed, Muslim fishermen in Kalabogi reflected that Bonbibi and Allah were responsible for different domains: perhaps Bonbibi protects people from tigers, and Allah protects people from river erosion and storms. Others also suggested this distinction: "Those who go in the forest, they remember Bonbibi" (FM28). Allah is remembered in the village, but "when we go beyond, we have to remember [Bonbibi]" (FM28). Indeed, narratives about Bonbibi are nuanced and dynamic.[18] Among all the Muslims who said they retained some relationship with Bonbibi, this relationship was negotiated by "remembering her" or "keeping her in mind."

## SPIRITUAL COLLABORATION

Sundarbans border residents retain their distinctive faiths, which offer community-specific routes to negotiating the dangers of the forest. This is seen in the ritual specialists of the Sundarbans. *Gunin*s are Hindu ritual specialists who offer jungle protection in the form of mantras. Subodh Mondol, a 65 year old *gunin* from Kalabogi (FM13), described his role thus: "Suppose a man is caught by a tiger, then the general public without *gunin* is less likely to move forward.… The only way to survive is weapons, confidence and this mantra of ours." The Munda, likewise, use mantras in exchange for safety. For Muslims, *pir*s offer rituals and a protective handkerchief that plays a similar role to that provided to Hindus by *gunin*s. Having said this, there is also an awareness of other groups and spiritual collaboration among communities who nonetheless retain their distinct religious identities.

This is a revised conception of religious syncretism that is site-specific to the Sundarbans border communities. The concept of religious syncretism has a contentious history[19] and has 'spawned' a number of scholarly books and articles, including journal issues entirely dedicated to debating whether or not we should continue to use the concept. The chief concerns about religious syncretism as a scholarly concept centre on the fact that 1) it has historically been defined in such a way as to assume an essential form of an 'authentic' religion, elements of which are adopted by a smaller, 'new' religion and 2) syncretism is taken to be a universal category, which, because it applies to all religions equally well, adds nothing to our concept of religion (Drogue 2001).[20] My instinct is that abandoning the concept is ill-advised and results in a sort of academic whack-a-mole, eliminating terms as they undergo pejoration. Syncretism – the mixing of elements of different religions – does occur and we do need a way to talk about it.

I propose that the concept of syncretism should be reframed, but in terms defined by local people themselves. This, I argue, is a way of respecting the communities with whom we collaborate and also offers insight onto recent scholarly debates about syncretism as a concept, as well as 'religion' itself. As Gregory Alles (2001: 438) points out, "calling for people to stop talking about syncretism is much like calling for people to stop talking about religion. It is not going to happen." In fact, some scholars *are* calling for people to stop talking about religion, at least as a *sui generis* category. Russell

McCutcheon (2003) objects to the idea of 'religion' as a meaningful concept, associating the term with Euro-centric Christian protestant theology and the history of colonialism. Talal Asad (1993) argues that we should rather ask how theoretical discourse defines religion and how power creates it.

A problem is that this approach does not seem to capture the nature of religion for many people; indeed, 'religion' is an important, widely used concept by Westerners and non-Westerners alike.[21] In order to use both 'religion' and 'syncretism' ethically, we should begin from local people, especially since the initial complaint was that supposing religion to be *sui generis* implied that those in historically powerful positions determined how religion is to be conceived. For Sundarbans residents, I found that 'religion' does not have the political dimension that Asad identifies.[22]

Religion can be a means of collaboration between communities when it comes to negotiating the dangers of the forest. Forest border communities, I argue, partake in syncretism as spiritual collaboration, which does not imply deviation from 'pure' religions. This idea was expressed to me by community members themselves. One Muslim explained:

> we Muslims take some amulets from the Hindus, such as chanted soil, and Hindus also use the handkerchiefs of many Muslim masters. I myself have seen a chanted handkerchief once held up and shown to a tiger; the tiger ran away and was never found again. We do not have the power to understand that Allah has given such power inside that handkerchief. Everyone's beliefs are different. (FM29)

In the same village, Subodh Mondol (FM13), a Hindu *gunin* told me: "We are all human beings living in the world as different castes. Everyone practices their own religion." Subodh himself acknowledged this kind of spiritual collaboration between Hinduism and Islam, saying, "This mantra contains the most verses of the Quran. The mantra that I have is more like the mantra of an infidel. Ali is also named here and so is Kali. This is called the infidel mantra." (Ibid.)

I argue that the flux of the Sundarbans demands similar fluidity of its people, at the same time as underlining the importance of the communities' distinct roots and spiritual collaboration with other communities. For instance, the Munda trace their origins to Ranchi, in India, in Jharkhand, where there were Sadri speaking Munda: "In search of work, they gradually came to Bangladesh.… After independence, the country got divided and many couldn't go back to India." (FM12) These roots are an important part of Munda identity, and inform the Munda's religion today.[23] The importance of preserving these roots is reflected in the comparisons and distinctions made by community members between their own religion and others': "The Sun is our God. We worship it so it comes back to us every day. Just as Muslims pray to Allah facing the East, similarly we pray to the Sun facing east." (FM11)

In a group chat with Munda people in Burigoalinee (FM24), community members listed some Hindu deities along with Munda ones. Shopon Shardar explained, "Yes, we have Bonbibi. Also, Gangadebi. There is a Bonbibi Temple, we perform the *puja* there.… Yes everyone does it. Everyone takes God's name, whatever God it is. Be it Krishna or Bonbibi, everyone prays. Everyone performs their religion." This sentiment was shared by others in the group: "Basically, we Mundas have three Lords", Renuka Munda (ibid.) told me. "Ikirbonga, Gurubonga and Shinbonga … one is hills, another

is river and one is the sun." These Lords protect the Munda from the dangers of Sundarbans, Koishala Munda (ibid.) informed me, although the Lord of the Sundarbans is acknowledged to be Bonbibi: "We pray to them first, then Bonbibi, while entering the forest." In Datnekali, Pradip Munda agreed that Hindus and Munda share some of the same gods, explaining,

> In our Sadri language, we have Ikirbonga or the Shivganga.… Then 'Gangadebi; 'Bonbibi' … both we and Hindus have the same gods, but due to our Sadri language we name them like that. We have been using these names since our early ancestors have been worshipping. (FM12)

This acknowledgement that some deities are shared with Hindus should not be taken to mean that the Munda do not have their own distinct religious identity. This is a particularly important point to note, given the history of categorisation of Indigenous religions of South Asia, which, as Scheid and Lyngdoh (2025: 330) note, "have historically been externally designated as Hindu." They reference Nirmal Kumar Bose's (1953) and Mysore Narasimhachar Srinivas (1956) who propose anthropological models in which Indigenous groups are absorbed into Hinduism. The problem with these models is that they erase important distinctions between communities and undermine the distinct identities of Indigenous people. Moreover, although Bonbibi is historically a Muslim deity, we see that Hindus also integrate her into their spiritual realms. Doing so does not make either group any less 'Hindu' or any less 'Munda'.

As Rita Astuti (1995) points out, Indigenous groups have their own ways of defining group identity. This is important to note, as these community-specific definitions are obscured if we try to impose etic categorisations. Munda people I interviewed, like other communities, do insist on their distinct religious identity. Indeed, while drawing attention to similarities and shared deities between religious groups, people in the Sundarbans repeatedly framed religion as something that helps maintain boundaries between communities and that needs to be maintained itself in order for communities to persist and community identity to be protected. In a group chat with members of the Munda community in Burigoalinee, Shantosh Munda and Nilkanto Munda remember one missionary fondly. However, even though some people converted to Christianity, eventually the community decided to convert only if everyone in the village wanted this, as Bengalis and Munda alike avoid marriage between different religions: "Otherwise, how will we get our next generation married?" (FM30) In this sense, religion for the Munda is an important way of retaining their identity.

I got the impression from interviewees that it was not the incorporation of Hindu deities (such as Ganga), or Muslim deities (such as Bonbibi) that was a threat to Munda identity, but rather the erosion of language and cultural practices. Some Munda feel that their traditions are also being eroded, particularly traditional institutions such as the village leader and chief of village collectives: "According to the old tradition, this village had a leader.… But after we started living with the Bengalis, this tradition slowly disappeared." (FM12) Shantosh Munda (FM30) hinted that relations between groups are hindered by linguistic differences, saying, "I talk in my language and cannot talk properly in Bangla.… That's why we are kind of abandoned by the Bengalis." Shantosh was quick to reassure my interpreter, a Bengali woman, that "There is nothing to feel bad" for her personally, but he felt that when the Munda started to speak in Bengali, their relationship with the land changed.

Shantosh felt that the Munda's relationship with the forest was also changing partly because of government regulations prohibiting the use of traditional 'bow and arrow':

> [Animals] would see this weapon and wouldn't dare to come close to us. That's why we could do farming well.… But after we moved here, we all are mixed together with the Bengalis. Some of them would harm or harass those animals, then the tigers got furious and started attacking us. (Ibid.)

Nilkanto Munda (ibid.) wholeheartedly agreed with Shantosh's assessment, adding, "we cannot practise this [bow and arrow] anymore because of the government. Earlier during the Landlord period, while cultivating we could use this weapon to hunt independently."

The events of what Nilkanto called the "Landlord period" were also blamed by other Munda interviewees for the erosion of Munda identity. Pradip Munda recounted how "early ancestors of the Munda" were brought by landlords from India to cut the forests: "They saw that they could cultivate rice and live here just like they did in India" (FM12). Pradip added that the expectation was that Munda would be given land by *Pratapaditya* (landowners), who had arranged their move to the area. However, this did not happen: "Basically the lands belonged to the Munda but after independence when the Muslims came.… The lands … were taken." Pradip said this was done through legal documents, of which the Munda lacked knowledge: "if Mundas were educated back then, then they could've owned even minimal lands" (ibid.).[24] Pradip's friend Narayan Munda added that employment opportunities have also decreased in recent years (FM11).[25]

The Sundarbans' physical geography and precarious conditions demand fluidity of forest borders religion, but this does not erode the distinct identities of these groups. Rather than seeing syncretism as a force that religions passively experience, we might appreciate the agency of the people who practice these religions when negotiating the demands of the forest. That is, while community-specific approaches to negotiating the dangers of the forest are foundational, communities also collaborate spiritually, utilising elements of other religions, such as deities, mantras and physical objects such as amulets.

The forest's demands prompt not only spiritual collaboration among communities, but also innovation using the resources available. In a group discussion at the Munda housing project near Burigoalinee (FM30), I was told that the Munda had no possessions when they came there, so they used the mud of the Sundarbans to make their temples and shrines: "Mundas … cannot bring idols here. So we lift the soil in this way and worship our mother Bonbibi." In spite of the fact that the Munda trace their origins elsewhere, and now worry that they will have to move, many Munda feel a strong connection to the forest. "We have come this far from Ranchi loving the forest all the time", Shantosh Munda (ibid.) said. "And we are still in love with this forest."

## CONCLUSION

Border communities negotiate the dangers of the forest using community specific means, but also collaborate regarding deities, mantras and physical objects such as amulets. These syncretic practices do not erase the distinct religious identity of these groups.

Interviewees repeatedly framed religion as something that helps maintain boundaries between communities, but that should be maintained itself in order for communities to persist. This adds to the broader theoretical debate about religious syncretism, which, in the Sundarbans context, can be seen as spiritual collaboration between communities, with 'religion' being a useful category in maintaining group identities. This framing of syncretism is site-specific to the Sundarbans, and cannot be imposed on other places. Regardless, there are new questions to be asked about how syncretism can be conceived in other geographical areas, using the methodology of vernacular theorising.

Jacob Pandian (2006: 233) recommends conceptualising syncretism as an aspect of globalisation and transnationalism. I think there is room for this kind of framing in some contexts, but I must stress that this is not how it was presented to me by the people I interviewed. In the Sundarbans context, what I am describing as syncretic practices do not carry the implication of illegitimacy, nor connection with the "global supermarket of culture" (ibid.: 232). Far from 'syncretism' being rehabilitated by a single revision of its meaning made by scholars at their writing desks, it should rather be constantly revised while in the field, in collaboration with the communities we study.

I also argued that the concept of danger is important in understanding border communities' relationship with the forest, whether from erosion and cyclones, or from forest predators. Forest boundary communities are not helpless in the face of these dangers and residents negotiate them via a distinctive system of cultural roots in response to the unique demands of life in the region. Although these roots are community-specific, they do include collaboration between communities. Dangerous though the forest may be, communities can protect themselves with an understanding of its spiritual demands. Profulla Chackroboti, a *gunin* in his 80s from Kalabogi, describes it thus:

> Whatever you do, if you have the perfect sense for it, you can overcome that situation. You must not have pride for anything in your mind. You should be always jolly and mindful. The forest is just like that. The forest has its own religion. (FM22)

## NOTES

**1** Mangroves have developed a sophisticated root system that ensures sufficient oxygen intake despite daily inundation in brackish water, negotiating the constantly eroding banks of the Sundarbans islands. They are an energetic pathway in relation to other life forms. Organic matter such as roots, leaves, bark and wood is produced, becoming available for other lifeforms such as bacteria, fungi and herbivores. These in turn feed other animals such as the tiger.

**2** The nipa palm is also known as mangrove palm and is the only palm suited to the mangrove biome. Collection of this is highly regulated: collectors must leave three palms on every tree they harvest.

**3** Acclaimed Indian writer Amitav Ghosh immortalised the Sundarbans in his novel, *The Hungry Tide* (2005) and his retelling of the Bonbibi legend, *Jungle Nama* (2021).

**4** The Munda are an Indigenous group living in the Sundarbans who originally trace their origins to Ranchi in India. According to the criteria of cultural specificity or self-designation, they would qualify *adibashi* (Indigenous) status. However, according to those who insist on continuous historical residence, the Munda do not qualify as *adibashi*. See also endnote 6.

**5** For a discussion of the complexities of "Indigenous religion", see Kraft et al. 2020, who note that Indigenous religions do not necessarily have common characteristics (cf. Erueti 2020 for a general overview regarding Asian and African nations).

**6** *Adibashi* is widely taken to be synonymous with 'Indigenous peoples' or 'original inhabitant'. Government ministers have claimed that there are no Indigenous people living in Bangladesh, or that Bengalis are the true *adibashi*s, not the 'tribals' who, according to then Foreign Minister Dipu Moni (*BD News 24* 2011), are immigrants from a few centuries ago. This, Prashanta Tripura (2015) argues, has led to the further marginalisation of self-identifying Indigenous groups.

**7** Much of the debate has focused on Indigenous groups living in the Chittagong Hill Tracts region (CHT), but it is pertinent to the Sundarbans. Kawser Ahmed (2010: 50) notes that Bangladesh abstained in the voting on the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, on the grounds that "the entire population had been living on the land for the past several millennia, making everyone Indigenous to the land." Government remarks have drawn criticism from community leaders. Sanjeev Drong, Secretary General of the Bangladesh Forum for the Indigenous People points to the ILO Convention (169), Article 1, which lists self-identification as Indigenous or tribal as a fundamental criterion for determining indigeneity (*Daily Star* 2011).

**8** Rather than taking a purely deconstructive approach, Martin Holbraad and Morten Axel Pedersen (2017) note that the Ontological Turn can construct new accounts. For example, Graham Harvey (2012) does this by asking ontological questions (cf. Heywood 2017, who makes a similar point). Other scholars attempt to reflect faithfully the relationships between communities and their environment: Davide Torri (2021) attends to localised Himalayan cosmologies and I have (Orton 2024) similarly stressed the importance of site-specific perspectives. Of particular value is the contribution of Indigenous scholars who produce studies of their own communities, such as Lyngdoh's (2022) study of the Khasi ethnic community.

**9** A parallel concern is the relationship between Indigenous communities and the natural world, which Claire Scheid (2022) argues should not be romanticised.

**10** Writing of the Indian Sundarbans, Jalais (2010: 7; see also 19, note 13) addresses the political use of the term 'nature' and its impact on local people. She argues that the Sundarbans' geography is used as an excuse by the authorities to take a laissez-faire approach to the economic issues of the Sundarbans: "because such ventures are costly but also because of the widespread belief held by those in power that these islands are 'best left to nature.'" Jalais sees this as an excuse made in the hope that inhabitants will seek refuge elsewhere.

**11** Having said this, Nasir Uddin et al. (2023) argue that "by 2018, the success of Bangladesh's counter-pirate campaign had resulted in perpetrator replacement, as tiger specialist poaching teams and opportunistic tiger poachers took advantage of market opportunities created by the pirates' decline."

**12** Tigers are also endangered and tiger population numbers themselves are also difficult to estimate. Previous findings have been pessimistic, although recent studies suggest that the Sundarbans may have one of the largest remaining tiger populations in the world, perhaps having 335–500 tigers in total (Barlow 2009).

**13** For example, Helal Murol, a 32 year old shrimp farmer from Angtihara (FM14), Rekha Rani, a Hindu woman from Burigoalinee (FM21), Rasheda Khatun, a fisherwoman on the Chuna river (FM26), Murol Huda, a Muslim crab fisherman and honey collector from Golkhali (FM25), Munda community members at Burigoalinee (FM30), Koishala Munda (FM24) and Kabirul Islam, a 22 year old student from Golkhali (FM31). Although opinion on the tiger is not uniform, I noticed that community members often challenged each other when it was suggested that the dangers of tigers outweighed their benefit.

**14** Bonbibi's story was formalised in Abdur Rahim's 19th-century *Bonbibi Johuranamah*, although many Sundarbans residents believe that oral versions of the Bonbibi story are much older. An English translation of Abdur Rahim's work is not available, but excerpts can be found

at the Otibeguni online archive (see Bonobibi Jahuranama n.d.). See Eaton 1990 for Dokkhin Rai's 17th-century links in the Bengali epic poem *Ray Mangal* (Das 1958).

**15** English translations are available as follows: *Padma Purana* 2009, Haq 2015, and *Mahabharata* 2009.

**16** Jalais (2010: 10) argues that, on the Indian side of the Sundarbans, (mostly female) prawn seed collectors "took up the worship of Kali as they saw in her a deity more appropriate to be the patron of their 'violent' occupation". I did not observe this in my fieldwork on the Bangladesh side of the Sundarbans.

**17** Stephan Dudeck (2022: 68) considers mutuality and exchange in establishing social relations. Speaking of the Khanty in Western Siberia, Dudeck gives the example of offerings given to the bear and to deities.

**18** I have elsewhere discussed (Orton forthcoming) how these narratives differ within and between communities, and individuals themselves may hedge, qualify and develop their own views over time.

**19** See Lincoln 2001 for an overview of common objections and an argument that these objections are mutually incompatible.

**20** Bruce Lincoln (2001: 457) contends that recent attempts to recode syncretism as hybridity is "refreshing and surely well-intentioned" yet still problematic. Conversely, Art Leete (2022: 89) finds 'hybridity' to be a useful concept in its own right, pointing out that it "makes vague the borderlines between nature and society … [making it] especially relevant for comprehending the animistic worldview of Indigenous peoples."

**21** Mike Hulme (2016: 239) remarks that climate and other environmental policies "need to tap into intrinsic, deeply held values and motives if cultural innovation and change are to be lasting and effective". Such an ambition necessitates sensitivity to how religion operates in site-specific contexts.

**22** That is not to deny that there are valid questions to be asked in this respect, for example regarding the Bangladesh government's definition of 'indigeneity' and its erasure of religious identity. I simply mean that, in my fieldwork, interviewees frequently reflected on the concept of religion, but did not express this to me in the political terms Asad (1993) mentions.

**23** "When Krishna Prada Munda went to the Ranchi, he brought the name of the Gods.… He brought a book from there." (FM11)

**24** See Christian Rosales (2022: 239) for the argument that, for Indigenous groups "a land may be delineated, occupied, utilised, and collectively owned through the concept of territoriality", for example through cultural practices or cultivation, rather than formal legal delineations.

**25** Especially with the rise in shrimp cultivation. Lack of land, increase in water salinity and natural disasters all contribute to this situation. Pradip explained, "the fact is that in the place where you live there might be a natural disaster" (FM12).

## SOURCES

FM – fieldwork materials from 2023 (unless otherwise stated), consisting of the following interviews:

FM1. Alluddin Morol, Goalkhali (Muslim fisherman and honey collector, 26)
FM2. Shrimp fishermen, Kalabogi (Muslim men in their 20s)
FM3. Sakhina, Kalabogi island (Muslim woman in her 30s)
FM4. Durga Mondel, Burigoalinee (Hindu woman, 65)
FM5. Rubai Mansur, Kalabogi (Sundarbans guide from Khulna)
FM6. Shrimp fisherman, Kalabogi (Muslim, 35)
FM7. Shrimp fisherman, Kalabogi (Muslim, 26)
FM8. Group interview with Hindus, Kalabogi Hindu Sector. Ashok Chakrabarty (28); Krishnapodo Chakrabarty (early 20s); Samonesh Chakrabarty (49); Provash Chakrabarty (72)
FM9. Sunil and Sumoti Jordar, Kalabogi Hindu Sector (Hindu man and woman, 65 and 55)
FM10. Majida, Chuna River (Shrimp fisherwoman)
FM11. Narayan Munda Datnekhali (Munda man, early 50s)
FM12. Pradip Munda, Datnekhali (Munda man, 35)
FM13. Subodh Mondol, Kalabogi Hindu Sector (Hindu carpenter, forest worker, agricultural worker and gunin, 65)
FM14. Muhammad Helal Murol, Angtihara (Muslim shrimp farmer, 32)
FM15. Rustom Sana, Kalabogi (Muslim crab fisherman, 26)
FM16. Omor Faruk, Kalabogi (Muslim shrimp fisherman, 26)
FM17. Lavlu Morol, Kalabogi (Muslim shrimp fisherman, 35)
FM18. Sulata Mondol, Kalabogi (Hindu woman, early 30s)
FM19. Interview with Hindu shell collectors, Chuna river. Pochi Biswas (60s); Sathi Biswas (30s)
FM20. Hiru Dasi, Chuna river (Hindi shell collector)
FM21. Group interview with Hindus at the Monosha shrine, Burigoalinee. Rekha Rani (30s); Sanjay Mondol (40s); Durga Mondel (65); Taposi Mondol (mid-20s); Sathi Biswas (30s)
FM22. Profulla Chakrabarty, Kalabogi Hindu Sector (*gunin*, 80s)
FM23. Satish Mondol, Kalabogi
FM24. Group interview with Munda people, Ashray Prokolpo Government Project. Shopon Shardar (49); Koishala Munda (early 60s); Renuka Munda (17)
FM25. Murol Huda, Golkhali (Muslim crab fisherman in his 50s)
FM26. Rasheda Khatun, Chuna river (shrimp fisherwoman)
FM27. Puspo Rani Gain, Kalabogi Hindu Sector (50)
FM28. Nurjahan, Kalabogi island (estimates her age as 60 or 70)
FM29. Group interview, Kalabogi. Mohammad Ashraful Islam (70); Hakim Sheikh (Muslim nipa palm trader, 49)
FM30. Group interview with Munda people, Burigoalinee. Shantosh Munda (60s) and Nilkanto Munda (60s)
FM31. Kabirul Islam (male student from Golkhali, 22)
FM32. Private conversation with Tessa McGregor. Altai Republic 2006

Materials are kept in the authors' personal collection and permission has been obtained to disclose the informants' names in the article. In all cases, informed consent was obtained and interviewees were eager to give their names, even when they admitted to transgressing Forest Department rules, for example using prohibited nets for fishing. In such cases, I have chosen not to give the names here to avoid repercussions for these individuals. Where pertinent, I have included information regarding the individual's religion and profession (although the latter can fluctuate

according to the season or even the time of day). Many people do not know their age, so I have included this information where known.

## REFERENCES


Ahmed, Kawser. 2010. Defining 'Indigenous' in Bangladesh: International Law in Domestic Context. – *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 17 (1): 47–73. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1163/157181110X12595859744169.

Alles, Gregory D. 2001. The Greeks in the Caribbean: Reflections on Derek Walcott, Homer and Syncretism. – *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* (Special Issue: *Retrofitting Syncretism?*) 27 (3): 425–452. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41299214 (accessed August 19, 2024).

Asad, Talal. 1993. The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category. – *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 27–54.

Astuti, Rita. 1995. "The Vezo Are Not a Kind of People": Identity, Difference, and 'Ethnicity' among a Fishing People of Western Madagascar. – *American Ethnologist* 22 (3): 464–482. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1525/ae.1995.22.3.02a00010.

Barlow, Adam C. D. 2009. The Sundarbans Tiger: Adaptation, Population Status, and Conflict Management. A PhD Thesis. University Of Minnesota.

*BD News 24*. 2011. 'Indigenous People' a Misnomer: Moni. – *BD News 24*, July 26, 2011. https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/indigenous-people-a-misnomer-moni (accessed August 5, 2025).

Bonobibi Jahuranama. No date. Bonobibi Jahuranama. Bonobibi Jahuranama. – *Otibeguni*. https://otibeguni.com/stories/bonobibi-jahuranama/ (accessed August 7, 2025).

Bose, Nirmal Kumar. 1953. The Hindu Method of Tribal Absorption. – *Cultural Anthropology and Other Essays*. Calcutta: Indian Associated Publishing Company Ltd, 156–170.

Briggs, Charles L. 2008. Disciplining Folkloristics. – *Journal of Folklore Research* (Special Issue: *Grand Theory*) 45 (1): 91–105. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2979/JFR.2008.45.1.91.

Chakrabarti, Ranjan. 2009. Local People and the Global Tiger: An Environmental History of the Sundarbans. – *Global Environment* (2) 3: 72–95. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3197/ge.2009.020304.

*Daily Star*. 2011. It's Indigenous or Adivasi, Insist Leaders of the Community. – *The Daily Star*, August 5, 2011. https://www.thedailystar.net/news-detail-197312 (accessed October 3, 2023).

Das, Chandan Surabhi and Rabindranath Jana. 2018. Human–Crocodile Conflict in the Indian Sundarban: An Analysis of Spatio-Temporal Incidences in Relation to People's Livelihood. – *Oryx* 52 (4): 661–668. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S0030605316001502.

Das, Krishnaram. 1958. Raimangal. – *Kabi Krishnaram Daser Granthabali*, edited by Satyanarayan Bhattacharya. Kolkata: Calcutta University Press, 260–345.

Denzau, Gertrud; Helmut Denzau, Elisabeth Fahrni Mansur and Rubaiyat Mansur Mowgli. 2009. Living with Tides and Tigers – *The Sundarbans Mangrove Forest*. Dhaka: mowgliz production.

Descola, Philippe. 2011. Human Natures. – *Quaderns* 27: 11–25.

*Dhaka Tribune*. 2022. Ethnic Minorities Missing from Census, Say Indigenous Activists. – *Dhaka Tribune*, August 11, 2022. https://www.dhakatribune.com/world/south-asia/275476/ethnic-minorities-missing-from-census-say (accessed October 2, 2023).

Droge, Arthur J. 2001. Retrofitting/Retiring "Syncretism". – *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* (Special Issue: *Retrofitting Syncretism?*): 27 (3): 375–387. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41299211 (accessed August 19, 2024).

Dudeck, Stephan. 2022. Hybridity in a Western Siberian Bear Ceremony. – *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 16 (2): 43–85. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2022-0013.

Eaton, R. M. 1990. Human Settlement and Colonization in the Sundarbans, 1200–1750. – *Journal of the Agriculture, Food and Human Values Society* 7: 6–16. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01530432.

Erueti, Andrew. 2020. The UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples: A Mixed Model of Interpretation. – *UNDRIP Implementation: Comparative Approaches, Indigenous Voices from CANZUS*. Waterloo, ON: Centre for International Governance Innovation, 9–31. http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep24304.5 (accessed February 22, 2024).

Ferdiousi, Jannatul and M. Monirul H. Khan. 2021. Human-Wildlife Conflict along the Edge of the Sundarbans Mangrove Forest in Satkhira, Bangladesh. – *Jahangirnagar University Journal of Biological Science* 10 (1–2): 59–70. DOI: https://doi.org/10.3329/jujbs.v10i1-2.60849.

Franklin, Adrian.1999. *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity*. London: SAGE. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446217764.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2005. *The Hungry Tide*. London: HarperCollins.

Ghosh, Amitav. 2021. *Jungle Nama.* London: John Murray.

Harvey, Graham. 2012. Things Act: Casual Indigenous Statements about the Performance of Object-persons. – *Vernacular Religion in Everyday Life: Expressions of Belief*, edited by Marion Bowman and Ülo Valk. Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 194–210.

Haq, Kaiser. 2015. *The Triumph of the Snake Goddess*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674089136.

Heywood, Paolo. 2017. Ontological Turn. – *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology*, edited by Felix Stein. DOI: http://doi.org/10.29164/17ontology.

Holbraad, Martin and Morten Axel Pedersen. 2017. *The Ontological Turn: An Anthropological Exposition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316218907.

Hulme, Mike. 2016. Climate Change: Varieties of Religious Engagement. – *Routledge Handbook of Religion and Ecology*, edited by Willis Jenkins, Mary Evelyn Tucker and John Grim. London: Routledge, 239–248. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315764788.

IWGIA. 2024. The Indigenous World 2024: Bangladesh. – *International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs*. https://iwgia.org/en/bangladesh/5363-iw-2024-bangladesh.html (accessed August 5, 2025).

Inskip, Chloe; Martin Ridout, Zubair Fahad, Rowan Tully, Adam Barlow, Christina Greenwood Barlow, Md. Anwar Islam, Thomas Roberts and Douglas MacMillan. 2013. Human–Tiger Conflict in Context: Risks to Lives and Livelihoods in the Bangladesh Sundarbans. – *Human Ecology* 41 (2): 169–186. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-012-9556-6.

Jalais, Annu. 2010. *Forest of Tigers: People, Politics and Environment in the Sundarbans*. London: Routledge.

Kingsbury, Benedict. 1998. 'Indigenous Peoples' in International Law: A Constructivist Approach to the Asian Controversy. – *American Journal of International Law* 92 (3): 414–457. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2997916.

Kraft, Siv Ellen; Bjørn Ola Tafjord, Arkotong Longkumar, Gregory D. Alles and Greg Johnson. 2020. *Indigenous Religion(s): Local Grounds, Global Networks*. London: Routledge. DOI: https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021513.

Latour, Bruno. 1993. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Leete, Art. 2022. Finno-Ugric Indigenous Knowledge, Hybridity and Co-Creation in Research: The Komi Case. – *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 16 (2): 86–103. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2022-0014.

Lincoln, Bruce. 2001. Retiring Syncretism. – *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* (Special Issue: *Retrofitting Syncretism?*) 27 (3): 453–459. https://www.jstor.org/stable/41299215 (accessed June 20, 2025).

Lyngdoh, Margaret. 2022. Landscapes of Enchantment and Their Usage: A Critical Case-Study from the Khasi Ethnic Community, Northeast India. – *Religion and Senses of Place*. *Religion and The Senses*, edited by Graham Harvey and Opinderjit Kaur Takhar. Sheffield: Equinox, 160–176.

Lyngdoh, Margaret. 2023. Telling the Transformation: Vernacular Tradition-Tropes to Interpret Narratives about Were-Snakes Among the Khasis in Northeast India. – *Indigenous Religious Traditions* 1 (2): 219–250. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1558/irt.26309.

*Mahabharata*. 2009. *Mahabharata*, translated by John D. Smith. London: Penguin.

McCutcheon, Russell T. 2003. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Morris, Brian. 2022. *Anthropology and Dialectical Naturalism: A Philosophical Manifesto*. Montreal; Chicago, IL; London: Black Rose Books.

Orton, Jane. 2024. Subjugation and Survival: Animal and Nature Narratives in the Himalayas. – *Narrative Culture* 11 (2): 121–145. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/ncu.2024.a941974.

Orton, Jane. Forthcoming. Talking About Tigers: The Sundarbans Forest Tiger and the People Who Live in Its Shadow. – *Anthropos* 121 (1).

*Padma Purana*. 2009. *Padma Purana*, translated by N. A. Deshpande. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt. Ltd.

Pandian, Jacob. 2006. Syncretism in Religion. – *Anthropos* 101 (1): 229–233. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40466631 (accessed June 20, 2025).

Primiano, Leonard Norman. 1995. Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife. – *Western Folklore* (Special Edition: *Reflexivity and the Study of Belief*) 54 (1): 37–56. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/1499910.

Rahim, Abdur. *Bonbibi Johuranamah*. https://library.otibeguni.com/read/11/pdf (accessed September 16, 2025).

Rosales, Christian A. 2022. Territories of Fire: Indigenous Communities, Land, And Anarchy Among A Highland People In Mindoro. – *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 16 (2): 239–272. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2022-0021.

Scheid, Claire and Margaret Lyngdoh. 2025. India. – *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Indigenous Religions*, edited by Afe Adogame and Graham Harvey. London: Routledge, 330–345.

Scheid, Claire S. 2022. Indigenous Religions in the Asian Uplands: Perspectives on Landscape in Northeast India. – *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, edited by David Ludden. New York: Oxford University Press. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.648.

Srinivas, Mysore Narasimhachar. 1956. A Note on Sanskritization and Westernization. – *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 15 (4): 481–496. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2307/2941919.

Syvitski, James P. M.; Albert J. Kettner, Irina Overeem, Eric W. H. Hutton, Mark T. Hannon, G. Robert Brakenridge, John Day, Charles Vörösmarty, Yoshiki Saito, Liviu Giosan and Robert J. Nicholls. 2009. Sinking Deltas Due to Human Activities. – *Nature Geoscience* 2: 681–686. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1038/ngeo629.

Torri, Davide. 2021. Trees, Birds and Other Non-Humans: Mythological Entanglements with Landscape, Flora, Fauna and Spirits of the Himalayas. – *Lagoonscapes* 1 (2): 181–198. DOI: https://doi.org/10.30687/LGSP//2021/02/003.

Tripura, Prashanta. 2015. Identity Grabbing: The Official Position against Indigeneity Undermines Bangladesh's 'Adibashi' Minorities. – *Himal Southasian* 28 (3), September 7. https://www.himalmag.com/identity-grabbing/ (accessed February 22, 2024).

Uddin, Nasir; Sam Enoch, Abishek Harihar, Rob S. A. Pickles and Alice C. Hughes. 2023. Tigers at a Crossroads: Shedding Light on the Role of Bangladesh in the Illegal Trade of this Iconic Big Cat. – *Conservation Science and Practice* 5 (7). DOI: https://doi.org/10.1111/csp2.12952.

Uddin, Sufia M. 2019. Religion, Nature, and Life in the Sundarbans. – *Asian Ethnology* 78 (2): 289–310. https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26845329 (accessed February 22, 2024).

Valk, Ülo. 2023. The Instrumental Vernacular. – *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 17 (2): 1–11. DOI: https://doi.org/10.2478/jef-2023-0014.