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Bonobibi: An Autoethnographic Study of Eco-Theology and Devotional Practice

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ENG-599: Thesis

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A thesis submitted to the Department of English and Modern Languages in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature

Department of English and Modern Languages

Independent University, Bangladesh

December 2025



Declaration

It is hereby declared that

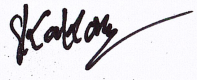
I. The thesis submitted is my own original work completed in partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Arts in English Literature at Independent University, Bangladesh.

II. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this has been appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.

III. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.

IV. I have acknowledged all major sources of help.

Student's Full Name and Signature



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Preface

My encounter with Bonobibi began long before I ever stepped into the Sundarbans. It began in a classroom, in a discussion of *Jungle Nama*, when the story of a forest guardian—part saint, part mother, part law—first entered my imagination. I did not yet know then that this figure would pull me into the mangrove delta itself, or that her name would shape the direction of my fieldwork, my research, and the very way I understand theology.

The journey truly began when I travelled to the Sundarbans with Professor Dr. Razia Sultana Khan, whose teachings first urged me to "go and find Bonobibi" rather than rely solely on the versions preserved in books. It was on that trip—standing on the muddy bank where land and water blur—that the forest revealed itself not only as geography, but as *experience*. The oar-blades creaked, mangrove roots rose and folded like breathing ribs, and a honey collector whispered, "Ma'r naam niye jai"—we enter with the mother's name on our lips. This was not superstition. It was a worldview. A grammar of survival.

I realized then that the Sundarbans was not just a setting for Bonobibi's story—it was the text in which her theology was written.

Over the months that followed, my fieldwork took me through shrines tucked between rivers and forests, through homes where villagers recounted miracles and warnings, through puthimala performances where Bonobibi's story was sung rather than told. The faith I encountered was neither distant nor metaphorical. It lived in gestures, vows, and whispered invocations. A woodcutter bowing before the trees. A mother lighting a diya before her son went

fishing. A Muslim woman offering clay, while her Hindu neighbour recited a couplet in praise of Bonobibi.

In these moments, the categories of *myth, folklore*, and *syncretism* began to fall away. What I witnessed was not merely cultural inheritance but devotion—sometimes quiet, sometimes urgent, always embodied. Bonobibi was not a symbolic figure used to explain ecological tension; she was a presence invoked in the face of danger. For the people I met, faith was not ornamental. It was the condition of survival.

It was in these encounters that the central question of this thesis crystallized: What if Bonobibi is not mythology at all? What if she is theology—vernacular, ecological, interfaith, and alive?

This thesis is an attempt to answer that question. It emerges from the banks of tidal rivers, from interviews spoken in trust, from rituals observed at dusk, and from the emotional honesty with which devotees spoke of protection, fear, and gratitude. It also emerges from the guidance of my teachers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction, Context, and Literature Review

The Sundarbans—a tidal mangrove wilderness shaped by shifting rivers, predators, and storms—has long produced a distinctive mode of human–environment relation. For forest-dependent communities, survival is never merely technical; it is also spiritual. In this region, Bonobibi is invoked not as folklore but as a living guardian whose authority structures moral action, ecological responsibility, and communal identity.

Despite the widespread presence of her shrines, rituals, and oral narratives, scholarly discourse continues to classify Bonobibi within the domains of myth, folklore, or syncretism (Jalais 72; Uddin 104). These categories, while accurate to an extent, fail to account for the ways in which devotees experience her as a divine protector whose influence operates in real time. This chapter establishes the intellectual groundwork for the thesis: it outlines the ecological and cultural background of Bonobibi's worship, identifies the scholarly gap, states the research questions, and surveys existing literature. Together, these elements frame why Bonobibi must be examined through vernacular eco-theology—a term used here to describe theological meaning that arises from lived practice within an ecological setting—rather than through conventional mythic classification.

1.1 Background and Context

Bonobibi's significance cannot be understood without the environmental conditions of the Sundarbans. The forest itself is an unstable borderland where land and water continuously negotiate space through "eighteen tides" (*Jungle Nama 23*)each day. The mangrove terrain, with its unpredictable creeks, quick mud, and presence of Bengal tigers, creates a daily confrontation

with danger. This makes the region a prime example of what Clifford Geertz describes as "a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations" (90).

For honey collectors, fishers, wood gatherers, and boatmen who enter this forest, Bonobibi is not a symbolic relic but an active guardian. Devotees interpret her presence through *mannat* (votive offerings), pre-entry prayers, ritual gestures, oral tales, and puthi recitations. These practices affirm what Leonard Primiano calls vernacular religion—"religion as it is lived," shaped by personal experience rather than institutional doctrine (44).

Bonobibi's worship unites Hindu and Muslim communities in ways rarely seen in South Asian religious landscapes. Sufia Mendez Uddin observes that the Bonobibi devotion "transcends religious boundaries and is rooted in shared ecological vulnerability" (63). This interfaith participation is not syncretism in the doctrinal sense; rather, it reflects a shared dependence on a divine protector who mediates the dangers of the forest.

Bonobibi Johuranama (1989) by Mohammad Munshi further shapes this living tradition. It narrates the moral conflict between the greedy Shah Jangali and the innocent boy Dukhe, offering a clear ethical structure: greed violates the balance of nature, while humility aligns the devotee with divine protection. This narrative continues to influence field rituals, oral performances, and local storytelling today (43).

Through shrines at forest edges, bright clay idols, offerings of rice and sweets, and ritualized invocations before entering the mangrove, Bonobibi's presence becomes interwoven with the ecology of survival. Her relevance persists in contemporary retellings as well, including

Amitav Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* (2021), which reanimates her story through verse and rhythm for modern audiences.

In this landscape—where ecology shapes belief and belief shapes behavior—Bonobibi exists not as a mythic remnant but as a living religious force. Understanding this context is essential to examining how her worship functions as a form of vernacular eco-theology, a concept explored in later chapters.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although Bonobibi occupies a central role in the spiritual and ecological life of Sundarbans communities, her presence has been consistently framed in scholarship through categories such as myth, folklore, cultural symbol, or syncretic adaptation (Jalais 72; Malinowski 98; Eliade 15; Uddin 104; Huq 56). These classifications, while historically grounded, reflect what Asad identifies as the disciplinary shaping of religion through Western epistemologies, which prioritize institutional doctrine and scriptural authority over lived experience (27).

This reliance on inherited categories produces a disciplinary blind spot: Bonobibi's worship is appreciated for its cultural richness but not recognized for its theological structure. Theology—defined here in a soft, practice-oriented sense as a system of ideas about the divine that emerges through ritual, morality, and communal interpretation—has been reserved for traditions with formal institutions or canonical texts. As a result, religious systems that arise from oral, ecological, or ritual contexts remain outside the purview of theological analysis.

Scholars such as Mircea Eliade and Bronislaw Malinowski have historically read figures like Bonobibi as mythic archetypes that encode cultural values (Eliade 15; Malinowski 98). Contemporary research follows similar patterns: Annu Jalais examines Bonobibi primarily in terms of environmental politics (112), Uddin reads her through the lens of communal identity and syncretism (64), and A. B. M. Monirul Huq situates her within climate adaptation narratives (320). While valuable, these perspectives stop short of understanding Bonobibi as a theological presence.

Yet field realities tell a different story. In the Sundarbans, people do not see Bonobibi as a distant symbol or legend, but as a real force who responds to their needs and shapes their fate. They perform mannat rituals before entering the forest, make offerings at shrines, and recite stories of Bonobibi's protection not as heritage, but as urgent practice. For them, Bonobibi's presence is woven into the risks and decisions of everyday life. The problem this thesis addresses is clear: Why has a living, active faith—experienced and described as real by those who depend on it—been so often mislabeled as mere myth or cultural tradition in academic accounts? This research seeks to correct that misreading by demonstrating, through fieldwork, how Bonobibi worship operates as a genuine religious system rooted in lived experience.

The problem, therefore, is not the absence of scholarship on Bonobibi, but the absence of theological interpretation within that scholarship. By limiting Bonobibi to the categories of myth or folklore, academic discourse overlooks how her worship functions as a coherent moral-ecological system grounded in divine reciprocity and communal obligation. This thesis addresses that gap by examining Bonobibi's worship through the lens of *vernacular eco-theology*,

demonstrating how theology emerges organically from lived practice in an ecologically precarious landscape.

1.3 Research Question:

How does Bonobibi's worship in the Sundarbans function as a form of *vernacular eco-theology* rather than merely as *myth* or *folklore*?

This question investigates how theological meaning is produced through ritual, oral narrative, and ecological practice in a landscape defined by danger and dependence on divine protection.

The supplementary questions this research pursues are: (1) What moral, ecological, and social principles do devotees attribute to Bonobibi's authority? And (2) How do everyday practices such as mannat rituals, shrine offerings, and puthi recitations articulate a lived relationship with the divine?

1.3.2 Hypothesis

This thesis proposes a soft, practice-oriented hypothesis: Bonobibi represents a vernacular form of eco-theology that emerges organically from the lived experience of Sundarbans communities.

In this framework, *eco-theology* refers not to formal doctrinal claims but to a mode of religious thought shaped by ecological vulnerability, interdependence, and moral reciprocity (Ruether 204; Habel 12). Devotees understand Bonobibi as a present, responsive divine force

whose protection is contingent on ethical conduct and humility, as narrated in the *Bonobibi Johuranama*.

This hypothesis does not claim that Bonobibi constitutes theology in the institutional sense. Instead, it argues—following Primiano's concept of vernacular religion—that theological ideas can arise in everyday settings through the interplay of narrative, ritual, environment, and community practice (44). The goal is a nuanced interpretation that respects scholarly caution while acknowledging the lived reality expressed in fieldwork.

1.4 Literature Review

Existing scholarship on the Sundarbans overwhelmingly positions Bonobibi as myth, folklore, or cultural symbol (Jalais 72; Uddin 104; Huq 56), drawing from interpretive traditions shaped by Eliade's theories of *archetypal myth* (15) and Malinowski's view of myth as a charter for social behavior (98). While these perspectives explain Bonobibi's narrative longevity, they do not address how devotees experience her as an active divine presence.

To expand this frame, the review also engages with Geertz's symbolic anthropology, which conceptualizes religion as a cultural system that produces "moods and motivations" through symbolic meaning (89). Bell's *ritual theory* further illuminates how religious meaning emerges from embodied practice rather than doctrinal belief (74). These frameworks lay the groundwork for understanding the practices surrounding Bonobibi—mannat rituals, pre-forest invocations, shrine offerings—as more than folklore.

Primiano's theory of *vernacular religion* then becomes essential, offering a lens that treats everyday religious activity as legitimate theological expression (44). This connects directly with ecological frameworks such as Ruether's *eco-feminist theology* (204) and Habel's work on *green biblical hermeneutics* (12), both of which highlight the sacredness of ecological balance.

Finally, the review draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty's *postcolonial critique of knowledge systems* (06) and Asad's examination of how the category of "religion" is historically constructed through Western epistemologies (27). These perspectives help explain why Bonobibi is often restricted to folkloric classification rather than theological analysis.

Together, these bodies of scholarship form the intellectual backdrop for this thesis, allowing a nuanced interpretation of Bonobibi's worship as *vernacular eco-theology* rooted in everyday survival, ecological reality, and communal ethics.

1.4.1 Bonobibi and Sundarbans Scholarship

Academic discussions of Bonobibi begin with studies focused on the Sundarbans as an ecological, political, and cultural frontier. Among them, Jalais's *Forest of Tigers* remains foundational. Jalais examines the Sundarbans as a "contested landscape" where human–tiger conflict, migration histories, and class divisions shape the lives of forest communities (3). Bonobibi appears in Jalais's work primarily as a *cultural mediator*—a figure invoked to negotiate the relationship between humans, tigers, and the forest's moral order. However, Jalais stops short of framing Bonobibi as a theological presence; the focus remains sociopolitical rather than religious.

Uddin provides a complementary but distinct perspective by foregrounding the interfaith dimension of Bonobibi's worship. In her chapter "Beyond National Borders and Religious Boundaries," Uddin argues that Bonobibi devotion "transcends religious identity and is rooted in shared ecological vulnerability" (63). She situates Bonobibi within the broader context of Hindu–Muslim coexistence, interpreting the tradition as a form of *social syncretism*—a shared ethics of survival that bridges communal divides. While Uddin acknowledges the emotional and ritual depth of Bonobibi worship, her analysis too remains anchored in cultural anthropology rather than theology.

Huq widens the frame by reading Bonobibi through climate adaptation narratives. In his chapter on mythical narratives from the Sundarbans, Huq argues that Bonobibi's story serves as a pedagogical tool, educating contemporary audiences about humility, restraint, and ecological responsibility (320). This interpretation casts Bonobibi as an *ecological symbol*—a moral lesson embedded within a narrative used to negotiate environmental crises. Yet even here, the theological dimension of devotion is not addressed directly.

The textual foundation of the tradition lies in Munshi's *Bonobibi Johuranama*, a puthi manuscript that has shaped oral performances and ritual practices for more than a century. *Johuranama* narrates Bonobibi's conflict with Shah Jangali and the rescue of the innocent boy Dukhe. Its repeated emphasis on humility, moral balance, and devotee protection creates a clear ethical framework. However, scholarship typically treats the *Johuranama* as a *folkloric text* rather than a theological one, despite its ongoing ritual authority in village shrines.

Together, these works establish a rich understanding of Bonobibi as a cultural, ecological, and social figure. However, they also reveal a gap: none interpret Bonobibi worship as a form of theological engagement, despite field evidence showing that devotees perceive her as a present, responsive divine force. This gap—the absence of theological interpretation—is what the present study addresses.

1.4.2 Myth & Folklore Theory

Traditional scholarship on oral narratives like Bonobibi's often draws heavily on classical theories of myth and folklore. These frameworks have shaped how scholars categorize non-institutional religious traditions, frequently positioning figures such as Bonobibi as symbolic rather than theological.

Malinowski, in Myth in Primitive Psychology, defines myth as a "charter" that legitimizes social norms and behavioral expectations (98). According to this view, myths are functional narratives that anchor collective identity and justify customary practices. Applied to the Sundarbans, Bonobibi's story becomes a charter for humility, restraint, and community ethics—but remains within the realm of social function, not divine presence.

Eliade introduces a different but equally influential frame. For Eliade, myth represents *archetypal truth*, a narrative that reconnects individuals with sacred origins (15). In this model, Bonobibi might be understood as an archetype of the benevolent mother-protector, or as an embodiment of a primordial moral order. Yet Eliade's structural emphasis tends to universalize traditions, flattening the localized ecological and interfaith specificity that makes Bonobibi distinctive.

Both Malinowski and Eliade, despite their differences, share a common limitation: they treat myth as a symbolic category, not as a form of lived theology. Their approaches interpret narrative content, but rarely the everyday practices, rituals, and embodied experiences through which people engage the divine.

More recent folklorists similarly categorize the *Bonobibi Johuranama* as *oral literature*, focusing on its transmission, performance, and stylistic features. While this illuminates the narrative's cultural vitality, it also reinforces a binary between "myth" and "religion" that Asad has critiqued as a product of Western epistemological boundaries (27). In this context, myth becomes a label that inadvertently obscures how forest communities treat Bonobibi as an actual spiritual agent rather than a symbolic story.

Thus, myth and folklore theories provide valuable insight into narrative structure and cultural function, but they do not fully capture the devotional, experiential, and theological dimensions of Bonobibi worship. Recognizing this limitation opens space for alternative frameworks—such as ritual theory and vernacular religion—which allow a more nuanced interpretation of Bonobibi as a living presence.

1.4.3 Ritual & Cultural Anthropology

Anthropological approaches to religion provide crucial tools for understanding Bonobibi's worship as an embodied practice rather than a symbolic remnant of folklore. Among these, Geertz's formulation of religion as a *"cultural system"* is especially influential. Geertz argues that religious symbols produce "long-lasting moods and motivations" by establishing a worldview that feels both real and authoritative (89). When applied to the Sundarbans, Geertz's

framework helps explain how Bonobibi's symbols—shrines, clay images, mannat offerings, ritual gestures—create a sense of spiritual protection amid ecological uncertainty.

Bell's *ritual theory* advances this insight by shifting the analytical focus from belief to practice. In *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell contends that ritual is not simply a reflection of religious ideas but a strategic, embodied action through which meaning is generated (74). This perspective is essential for interpreting pre-forest invocations, votive offerings, and shrine interactions. These practices do not merely express belief in Bonobibi—they actively construct the devotee's relationship with the divine and the forest itself.

Bell's concept of "ritualization", defined as the process by which ordinary actions are distinguished as sacred through repeated, patterned behavior (80), is particularly relevant. For forest workers, tying a red cloth at a shrine, touching the deity's forehead before departure, or reciting lines from the *Johuranama* are not symbolic gestures; they are ritualized acts of survival, integral to entering the forest with moral and spiritual assurance.

These anthropological frameworks collectively illuminate how Bonobibi devotion operates within everyday life. They allow us to see worship as a performative, embodied practice shaped by ecological need, social memory, and communal identity. Unlike myth or folklore theory, which centers narrative, ritual theory centers action—and therefore captures the lived, dynamic, and experiential aspects of Bonobibi worship.

Yet even these approaches tend to avoid the theological dimension, focusing instead on sociocultural function. To address this gap, I use vernacular religion (Primiano 44), a framework that centers lived, everyday faith as experienced and practiced outside institutional control. This

lens clarifies how Bonobibi is encountered as a real, responsive presence, not just a cultural symbol.

1.4.4 Vernacular Religion

The framework of *vernacular religion* offers one of the most productive ways to reinterpret Bonobibi's worship beyond folkloric classification. Primiano defines vernacular religion as "religion as it is lived," emphasizing personal interpretation, local practice, and the dynamic ways communities negotiate the sacred outside institutional structures (44). This approach shifts attention from doctrine to everyday religious creativity, acknowledging that theological meaning often arises organically through practice.

Applying this lens to the Sundarbans allows Bonobibi to be understood on her own terms. Devotees engage with her through mannat offerings, shrine interactions, oral retellings of the *Johuranama*, and pre-forest rituals that blend moral humility with requests for protection. These practices form a locally constructed theology—not formalized in scripture but articulated through gesture, narrative, performance, and ecological experience. The boundaries between Hindu and Muslim ritual vocabularies further demonstrate the adaptability and inclusivity characteristic of vernacular religious systems.

Primiano's model also helps explain why Bonobibi remains relevant despite the absence of institutional authority. Her worship persists through embodied memory, intergenerational storytelling, and the immediate needs of daily survival. This aligns with Bell's argument that religious meaning is often produced through patterns of action rather than doctrinal articulation

(74). In the Sundarbans, the necessity of safe passage through dangerous terrain infuses Bonobibi's rituals with a theological weight that extends beyond folklore.

By foregrounding the experiential aspects of devotion, vernacular religion theory recognizes that believers themselves construct and sustain the sacred. This perspective is essential for framing Bonobibi not simply as a figure of local myth but as part of a living religious world, shaped through the interplay of environment, narrative, community, and practice.

1.4.5 Postcolonial Critique and Knowledge Systems

Postcolonial theorists such as Chakrabarty and Asad offer essential tools for interrogating how categories like *myth*, *religion*, and *theology* have been historically constructed through Western epistemologies. Chakrabarty argues that European intellectual traditions universalized their own concepts of rationality, modernity, and religion, marginalizing local forms of knowledge as "pre-modern" or "folkloric" (6). This critique directly applies to Bonobibi, whose worship has often been relegated to the domain of folklore simply because it exists outside institutional doctrine.

Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* further challenges the assumption that "religion" is a universal category with fixed features. Asad shows that the modern definition of religion—textual, doctrinal, institutionally organized—emerged from specific Christian and colonial histories (27). When these criteria are applied to non-institutional traditions like Bonobibi's, they produce analytical distortions. Practices rooted in ecology, oral narrative, and ritual embodiment are misread as *cultural artifacts* rather than *theological expressions*.

This critique is particularly relevant in the Sundarbans, where Bonobibi's authority is enacted through practice rather than written doctrine. The emphasis on embodied ritual, oral puthi, and ecological moral codes does not fit neatly into Western religious taxonomies. Consequently, academic classifications often default to labels such as "folk goddess," "local myth," or "syncretic symbol." These terms—while descriptively accurate—carry epistemological baggage that obscures how devotees themselves understand Bonobibi: as a real, responsive divine presence.

Postcolonial theory therefore provides a corrective lens. It cautions against imposing external categories and encourages attention to how communities articulate the sacred within their own ecological and cultural contexts. By foregrounding local epistemologies, these critiques open conceptual space for interpreting Bonobibi's worship as *vernacular eco-theology*, grounded not in institutional texts but in lived, embodied, and environmentally situated experience.

1.4.6 Contemporary Retellings

Contemporary literary and visual retellings of Bonobibi demonstrate that her significance extends beyond localized ritual life into broader cultural imagination. Among these, Ghosh's *Jungle Nama* offers a striking modern reanimation of the *Johuranama* narrative. Written in the cadence of *dwipodi poyar* verse, Ghosh's adaptation reintroduces the moral conflict between Dukhe and Shah Jangali to a global readership, emphasizing themes of humility, greed, and ecological reciprocity (27). Although presented as literature, *Jungle Nama* underscores the

continued relevance of Bonobibi's ethical universe and reflects how her story adapts to contemporary environmental anxieties.

Beyond literary retellings, digital media, village theatre, and documentary films also contribute to the ongoing life of the tradition. Tanvir Mokammel's documentary *Bonojatri* explores the lived realities of forest workers and their reliance on Bonobibi for protection, visually capturing the rituals and shrines that structure everyday devotion. These cultural productions affirm what Bell describes as *"ritual continuity"*—the ability of ritual and narrative to migrate across contexts while preserving core meaning (93).

Such retellings matter for this study because they demonstrate that Bonobibi is not an artifact of the past, but a dynamic narrative presence embedded in both local and modern interpretive worlds. They serve as bridges between oral tradition and contemporary expression, illustrating how devotees and artists continually reinterpret her story in light of current ecological pressures and social realities.

By situating Bonobibi within contemporary cultural production, these works further challenge the reduction of her worship to "folklore." Instead, they reveal a living narrative tradition that continues to articulate spiritual authority, ecological ethics, and community identity—a continuity that strengthens the case for understanding her worship as *vernacular eco-theology*.

1.5 Theoretical Foundation

To understand the ecological grounding of this tradition, the thesis draws on *eco-theology*. Radford Ruether argues that religious ethics must be inseparable from ecological responsibility, forming a "mutuality between humans and the earth" (204).

These frameworks position the Sundarbans' environment—not just as a backdrop—but as an active agent shaping religious imagination. Bonobibi's moral universe, in which humility safeguards survival and greed invites danger, aligns closely with these eco-theological insights.

This is critical for understanding Bonobibi devotion, where meaning arises from gestures—touching a shrine, offering rice, tying a protective cloth, reciting a narrative—performed in response to ecological precarity. These rituals construct a lived relationship with the divine, making Bonobibi present in the moments that matter most to forest workers.

1.6 Conclusion

The literature surveyed in this chapter demonstrates that while Bonobibi has been examined as myth, folklore, cultural symbol, and ecological metaphor, her worship has rarely been analyzed through frameworks that take lived religious experience and theological meaning seriously. By integrating insights from vernacular religion, eco-theology, ritual theory, and postcolonial anthropology, this thesis positions Bonobibi's tradition within an interpretive space that acknowledges both its cultural depth and its devotional significance.

Moving forward, the next chapter outlines the methodological and positional foundations of the study. It explains how fieldwork was conducted, how interviews and observations were

recorded and analyzed, and how the researcher's own insider–outsider position shaped the interpretive process. These methodological choices create the bridge between scholarly theory and the lived realities of Bonobibi's devotees, preparing the ground for the ethnographic and analytical chapters that follow.

Chapter 2: Methodology, Positionality, and Fieldwork Design

Studying Bonobibi's worship requires a methodology capable of capturing not only ritual actions and narrative traditions but also the emotional, ecological, and spiritual conditions in which these practices occur. Because this tradition is lived rather than institutionalized, and expressed through gestures, dreams, moral codes, and ecological experiences rather than formal doctrines, a qualitative, ethnographic approach is essential. This chapter outlines the methodological choices that guided the research, including the rationale for ethnography, the researcher's positionality, participant demographics, ethical considerations, and the practical realities of conducting fieldwork in the Sundarbans.

The chapter then expands into the multi-layered processes of data collection—participant observation, semi-structured interviewing, shrine documentation, and ritual witnessing—followed by a discussion of the challenges, emotional labor, interpretive strategies, and analytical methods used to translate field data into meaningful themes. By making the research process transparent, this chapter bridges scholarly theory with the lived experiences documented in the field, preparing the ground for the theological and ecological analysis that unfolds in Chapter 3.

2.1 Methodology & Research Approach

This study employs a qualitative, ethnographic methodology to examine how Bonobibi's worship functions as a lived religious system embedded in the ecological and social realities of the Sundarbans. Because Bonobibi's presence is articulated through ritual gestures, oral narratives, emotional experiences, and embodied interactions with the forest, ethnography provides the most appropriate framework for understanding how theological meaning emerges

from daily practice. Geertz's call for "thick description" emphasizes that religious actions must be interpreted within the cultural worlds that give them significance (6). Following this approach, rituals, mannat offerings, shrine practices, and forest-entry preparations were treated as primary expressions of meaning rather than supplementary cultural details.

The research design draws on interpretive anthropology, which prioritizes participant perspectives and the symbolic systems through which communities make sense of danger, morality, and divine protection. Bell's theory that ritual is a strategic and embodied form of action (74) informed the close observation of shrine behaviors, protective chants, the tying of ritual cloths, and the recitation of the *Johuranama*. These acts were studied not as symbolic folklore but as active theological practices through which devotees construct a relationship with Bonobibi.

Because Bonobibi devotion exists outside institutional structures, the study also incorporates the framework of vernacular religion, defined by Primiano as "religion as it is lived" (44). This approach validates personal interpretations, dreams, spiritual experiences, and inherited knowledge from family elders as legitimate modes of religious expression. It allows the analysis to take devotees' accounts of divine intervention—rescuing lost documents, loosening ropes during a robbery, giving sweet water after prayer—as genuine articulations of lived theology within their worldview.

The fieldwork was conducted across multiple sites in Khulna and the forest-edge villages of the Sundarbans in 2025. Data collection included semi-structured interviews, participant observation, documentation of shrines and ritual spaces, and attendance at puthi recitations, puja

preparations, and forest-entry rituals. Semi-structured interviews were selected to allow participants to shape conversations according to their priorities and experiences, often revealing emotional, moral, and spiritual layers absent in structured questioning.

All participants were informed about the purpose of this research and gave verbal consent for their responses, experiences, and narratives to be included in this thesis. Due to the context of fieldwork in the Sundarbans and the cultural preference for informal oral agreements, consent was obtained verbally rather than in written form, following ethical guidelines for vernacular and community-based research.

Given the ecological instability and danger intrinsic to the Sundarbans, the methodology remained flexible, adapting to tidal schedules, forest pass restrictions, the work rhythms of honey collectors and fishermen, and the seasonal nature of Bonobibi worship. This adaptive method ensured that data was collected in the moments when devotional meaning becomes most visible—at forest boundaries, during ritual preparation, and in discussions shaped by lived experience rather than abstract reflection.

Through this methodological framework, the study captures both the practical realities and the spiritual logic that shape Bonobibi devotion, creating a foundation for the ethnographic analysis presented in the next chapter.

2.2 Researcher Positionality

My role in this study exists along an insider–outsider continuum, shaped by elements of shared cultural background but also by significant differences in lived experience and knowledge. As a

Bengali researcher, I was able to communicate in the local language and engage with some common customs, but I did not presume full familiarity with the religious vocabulary, ritual meanings, or daily realities of Sundarbans communities. In fact, fieldwork repeatedly challenged my assumptions. While my cultural background may have made initial rapport easier, genuine understanding had to be earned—often through listening, observing, and accepting corrections from participants when my interpretations or questions missed the mark. Access to certain spiritual narratives, ritual spaces, and personal reflections was sometimes facilitated by cultural proximity, but often it depended on participants' willingness to educate and correct me. This positionality demanded ongoing humility, self-reflection, and openness to learning what was truly distinct in the lived Bonobibi tradition.

At the same time, I remained an outsider to the ecological risks, occupational hazards, and generational inheritances that define the everyday lives of forest workers. I am not a honey collector navigating tiger zones, nor a boatman timing travel with unpredictable tides. When participants emphasized the seriousness of devotion—such as asking whether I knew what "my God" looked like—they asserted the authority of lived experience over academic distance. Rather than treating these moments as disruptions, I recognized them as evidence of the protective devotion and moral seriousness that shape Bonobibi worship. These emotional exchanges became integral to understanding the depth of belief embedded in the community.

Throughout the research, I maintained a reflexive awareness of how my presence shaped interactions. In some cases, participants softened their tone after initial defensiveness, recognizing the academic purpose of my questions; in others, they adopted a pedagogical stance, insisting I understand Bonobibi not as a symbol but as a real, responsive force. Following

Primiano's assertion that vernacular religion research must center the believer's categories of meaning (44), I approached each encounter with attentiveness, avoiding interpretations that reduced spiritual claims to metaphor or psychological projection.

My positionality also involved recognizing the power dynamics inherent in research. As a university-affiliated investigator, I carried institutional privilege, while many participants—fishermen, boatmen, woodcutters, widows, and puthi reciters—navigated precarious social and economic conditions. Ethical engagement required acknowledging this imbalance and ensuring that the representation of their narratives remained respectful, accurate, and free from exoticization.

Ultimately, my dual position—culturally proximate yet experientially distinct—shaped both the possibilities and limitations of this study. It allowed deep access to spiritual narratives and ritual practices while preserving the analytical distance needed to interpret them within broader theoretical frameworks. This positional awareness forms an essential foundation for the ethical and methodological choices outlined in the following sections.

2.3 Participants & Ethics

The participants in this study represent a range of forest-dependent communities in the Sundarbans, including honey collectors, fishers, boatmen, forest workers, village elders, puthi reciters, shrine caretakers, and devotees encountered at forest-entry ritual sites. Approximately twenty-five to thirty individuals contributed insights during the broader fieldwork process, with

seven to ten participants selected for in-depth analysis based on the richness of their narratives, the clarity of their devotional expressions, and their direct relationship with rituals of Bonobibi worship.

Participants varied in age, gender, occupation, and religious identity. Both Hindus and Muslims participated fully in the study, reflecting the interfaith nature of Bonobibi devotion noted by Uddin, who emphasizes that this worship "transcends religious boundaries and is rooted in shared vulnerability to the forest" (63). The diversity of the participant group allowed the research to document different layers of belief—from dreams and divine interventions to ecological observations, ritual habits, and intergenerational teachings.

Ethical considerations guided every stage of fieldwork. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, either verbal or written depending on participant literacy and comfort. Participants were informed of the academic purpose of the research, their right to decline any question, and their option to withdraw at any time. Names and identifying details have been altered unless individuals explicitly granted permission to be identified. This was especially important for forest workers, whose livelihood depends on government permits, and for women who spoke openly about spiritual experiences, domestic roles, or fears associated with forest journeys.

The emotional intensity of the interviews also required careful ethical engagement. Several participants expressed strong devotion, anger at skepticism, or deep personal memories. One participant sharply questioned my assumptions by asking whether I knew "how my God looks," asserting his authority as a believer and protector of the goddess's dignity. These

moments were approached not as confrontations but as meaningful expressions of faith, reflecting the seriousness with which devotees relate to Bonobibi. Documenting such exchanges demanded sensitivity, patience, and reflexive awareness.

In addition to conversational ethics, the research honored ritual boundaries. Photography, audio recordings, and note-taking were restricted or modified in sacred spaces when requested. Certain shrine activities, such as offerings tied to personal vows or healing rituals, were observed only when participants granted explicit permission. This approach followed Primiano's principle that vernacular religion research must respect "the believer's interpretive world" (44) rather than impose external expectations of openness or accessibility.

Given the ecological dangers of the Sundarbans—tiger habitats, unstable mudbanks, tidal surges, and forest restrictions—participant welfare was prioritized. Interviews were conducted in safe spaces like boats, village courtyards, markets, and shrine perimeters rather than deep forest interiors. Care was taken not to distract participants during high-risk activities such as forest entry, boat docking, or honey collection.

By adhering to these ethical commitments, the study aimed to protect both the safety and dignity of participants while accurately representing the lived religious experiences that shape Bonobibi worship. Their voices and stories form the foundation for the analysis that follows.

2.4 Fieldwork Process

2.4.1 Research Sites and Duration

Fieldwork was conducted between 2024 and 2025 in multiple locations across Khulna and the forest-edge villages of the Sundarbans. Research sites included Dhengmari, Chadpai Range, Karamjal, local market areas, river ghats, forest-pass checkpoints, and Bonobibi shrines situated along forest boundaries. The multi-sited nature of the research allowed for a holistic understanding of how rituals, narratives, and devotional practices differ across ecological zones and occupational groups.

2.4.2 Participant Observation

Participant observation was a central component of the fieldwork process. Ritual activities such as pre-forest invocations, mannat offerings, and puthi recitations were observed in real time. At several forest-entry points, groups of fishermen and honey collectors stood before small clay idols of Bonobibi, placing rice, sindoor, coins, and sweets before requesting her protection. These moments revealed the emotional gravity of the rituals—participants approached the shrine with palpable fear, reverence, and urgency. Bell's concept of ritual as "strategic and embodied action" (74) was particularly relevant: the ritual gestures were not symbolic performances, but actions believed to materially influence one's safety inside the forest.

2.4.3 Gender and Intergenerational Transmission

Observation extended to Bonobibi Puja preparations, including gatherings where women organized offerings, cleaned shrine spaces, and guided younger community members in the proper ways to approach the deity. These events illuminated the gendered dimensions of devotion and the intergenerational transmission of ritual knowledge.

2.4.4 Navigating Ecological Terrain

Fieldwork required navigating the ecological realities of the Sundarbans. Travel involved small wooden boats moving along tidal rivers, entering areas where currents, mudbanks, and shifting channels made navigation unpredictable. Forest rangers at Chadpai emphasized forest protocols: regulated entry times, tiger warnings, and the need to stay within authorized ranges. Being physically present in these zones was crucial to understanding why devotees describe Bonobibi's protection as essential rather than symbolic. As Geertz argues, religious meaning becomes fully comprehensible only within the "local world of significance" where it is enacted (14). During boat journeys, participants often shared spontaneous narratives about divine intervention—accounts of being saved from tigers, finding lost documents through dreams, or encountering Bonobibi in moments of despair. These river-bound conversations revealed how belief is shaped not only by ritual spaces but by the movement through dangerous ecological terrain.

2.4.5 Interviews in Context

Interviews were conducted in organic, context-sensitive environments: on boats during idle periods, in courtyards, beside tea stalls, outside shrines, and at forest-pass checkpoints. Semi-

structured interviews allowed participants to guide conversations according to their emotional rhythms and priorities. Many narrated memories that flowed between childhood lessons, forest tragedies, divine interventions, family rituals, and inherited fears. Several participants spoke in a mix of Bangla dialects, requiring attentive listening and contextual interpretation during transcription.

2.4.6 Documentation of Sacred Spaces

Photographs, sketches, and written descriptions were used to document shrine architecture; arrangement of ritual offerings; types of idols; symbolic objects such as clay tigers, brass vessels, and colored cloths; and environmental cues like water salinity, mangrove density, or proximity to tiger-prone areas. These observations formed part of the ritual ecology of Bonobibi devotion, where the physical environment and sacred space constantly interact.

2.4.7 Challenges and Limitations

Fieldwork encountered quite a few environmental and logistical challenges. Tidal cycles determined accessibility; heavy rains restricted travel; forest passes limited movement; and conversations were occasionally interrupted by work demands, safety warnings, or approaching storms. Participants sometimes became emotional or confrontational when discussing sacred matters, requiring patience and sensitivity. These obstacles were embraced as part of the research reality, informing the depth of insight achieved.

2.4.8 Summary of Fieldwork Approach

Overall, the fieldwork process combined anthropological method with ecological immersion, allowing the study to capture Bonobibi devotion as a lived, embodied, and environmentally anchored religious world.

2.5 Transcribing, Coding, and Analysis

All interviews, conversations, and observational notes were transcribed manually to preserve tone, emotional inflection, pauses, hesitations, and shifts in dialect. Manual transcription also allowed for the retention of culturally significant phrasing—such as devotional exclamations, ritual vocabulary, and local idioms—that carry theological or emotional weight within the community. Where necessary, brief clarifying notes were added to contextualize terms without altering meaning or voice.

The transcribed material was analyzed through a thematic coding process, drawing from interpretive anthropology rather than quantitative categorization. Codes were not predetermined; they emerged inductively through repeated readings of the field data, consistent with Primiano's principle that vernacular religious meaning must arise from within the community's own interpretive logic (44). This approach ensured that thematic categories reflected participant perspectives rather than external theoretical assumptions.

2.5.1 Divine Protection

Narratives describing Bonobibi rescuing devotees from tigers, resolving conflicts, restoring lost items, warning devotees through dreams, or intervening during danger.

2.5.2 Moral Regulation

Expressions centered on humility, avoidance of greed, truthfulness, and the consequences of moral failure—directly aligned with the ethical universe described in the Bonobibi Johuranama.

2.5.3 Ecological Knowledge and Interpretation

Beliefs linking water salinity, forest conditions, tiger behavior, illness, and accidents to Bonobibi's governance or displeasure.

2.5.4 Interfaith Devotional Unity

Accounts from Muslim and Hindu participants describing shared rituals, collaborative offerings, and mutual acknowledgment of Bonobibi's authority.

2.5.5 Ritual Praxis

Descriptions of specific gestures: touching the shrine before entering the forest, offering rice or sweets, tying protective red cloths, and reciting puthi lines aloud.

2.5.6 Consequences of Disbelief

Stories linking accidents, misfortune, financial loss, or frightening encounters with moments of forgotten prayer or lack of respect toward the goddess.

Bell's argument that ritual meaning is produced through "embodied, patterned action" (80) guided the integration of observational data with interview themes. Field notes documenting ritual gestures, shrine arrangements, emotive expressions during prayer, and embodied fear at forest boundaries were coded alongside verbal narratives. This triangulation produced a more complete understanding of the ritual ecology of Bonobibi devotion.

The analysis followed a hermeneutic model, moving iteratively between field data, theoretical frameworks, and the broader ecological context of the Sundarbans. Geertz's insight that understanding religion requires situating action within the "local world of significance" (14) shaped this interpretive process. Each theme was examined not simply for its narrative content but for what it revealed about how devotees conceptualize divine presence, ecological danger, moral responsibility, and communal belonging.

Triangulation across interviews, observations, and textual sources—particularly the *Johuranama* and contemporary reiterations like *Jungle Nama*—helped ensure reliability. When multiple participants independently reported similar experiences of protection, warnings, or moral consequences, these convergences reinforced the thematic interpretation. Variations in narrative tone or emphasis were treated as meaningful cultural differences rather than inconsistencies.

Through this process of transcription, coding, and interpretive analysis, the field data became a structured foundation for the ethnographic findings presented in Chapter 3.

2.6 Conclusion

The methodological decisions outlined in this chapter—rooted in ethnography, interpretive anthropology, vernacular religion studies, and ecological attentiveness—provide the foundation for understanding how Bonobibi's presence is articulated through lived practice. By detailing the research approach, researcher positionality, participant dynamics, ethical considerations, fieldwork realities, and the processes of transcription and thematic analysis, this chapter has made transparent the interpretive pathway through which raw field data becomes scholarly insight.

Chapter 3: Theology in Practice: Rituals, Shrines, Narratives, and Case Studies

This chapter presents the ethnographic findings of the study, drawing directly from field interviews, ritual observations, and shrine documentation collected across Khulna and the Sundarbans. While previous scholarship has approached Bonobibi primarily as a figure of folklore or cultural symbolism, the data gathered during fieldwork reveals a far more active and intimate relationship between devotees and the goddess. For forest workers, boatmen, puthi reciters, and village residents, Bonobibi is not a narrative artifact but a living presence whose protection, guidance, and authority shape daily decisions, moral judgment, ecological interpretation, and emotional life.

Through detailed accounts of ritual practices, dream narratives, divine interventions, and moral teachings passed down across generations, this chapter demonstrates how Bonobibi's worship operates as a form of lived theology—an embodied system of belief enacted through gesture, speech, memory, and ecological responsiveness. Bonobibi's authority emerges through pre-forest invocations, shrine offerings, mannat practices, seasonal pujas, and the performance of the *Johuranama*. In these acts, devotees articulate understandings of divine protection, ethical restraint, interfaith belonging, and the moral ecology of the forest.

The case studies presented here illustrate how theological meaning is generated not through formal doctrine but through the interplay of danger, devotion, communal memory, and environment. By foregrounding the voices and experiences of participants, this chapter brings

into focus the dynamic religious world in which Bonobibi's presence is felt, negotiated, and reaffirmed.

3.1 Rituals and Shrines

Rituals dedicated to Bonobibi form the foundation of her devotional world, structuring how forest-dependent communities understand danger, moral responsibility, and divine protection. These rituals are not isolated events; they are woven into the rhythms of daily life and the ecological uncertainties of the Sundarbans. Observing these practices firsthand revealed that Bonobibi's presence is maintained through a series of embodied, patterned actions that transform ecological fear into spiritual assurance.

Most shrines to Bonobibi are located at liminal points—river ghats, forest-entry checkpoints, junctions between freshwater and brackish water, or along embankments where villagers begin their journeys. These shrines vary in size from small clay idols sheltered under tin roofs to more elaborate structures containing images of Bonobibi, Shah Jangali, Dakshin Rai, and Dokkhin Rai's tiger attendants. Offerings of rice, sweets, sindoor, coconut, red cloth, and coins are placed before the deity, forming a material vocabulary of devotion.

The architecture and placement of these shrines reflect what Bell identifies as "ritualized space", where everyday environments become channels of sacred mediation (81). For devotees, standing before these shrines marks a transition from the relative safety of the village to the moral and ecological uncertainties of the forest. It is here that they seek divine sanctions, acknowledging that the boundaries they are about to cross are governed by Bonobibi's protection.

3.1.1 Pre-Forest Invocations

One of the most significant ritual moments occurs just before entering the forest. Fishers and honey collectors stand before the shrine, join their hands, bow their heads, and speak brief invocations such as "*Ma'r naam nao*" (invoke Mother's name) or "Ma amader rokkha korun" (Mother, protect us). These invocations are often accompanied by the touching of the idol's feet, the placement of rice or sweets before the goddess, and the tying of a red protective cloth on the boat or around the wrist.

Participants frequently described this moment as one of moral alignment: "If your intention is pure, Bonobibi will protect you." The invocation thus serves not only as a plea for safety but as a declaration of ethical stance—humility, honesty, and restraint. Violating this moral order, especially through greed, is believed to invite danger, echoing the warnings embedded in the *Johuranama.*

3.1.2 Mannat Offerings and Personal Vows

Mannat practices—vows made to Bonobibi in exchange for protection or assistance—constitute another key ritual form. Devotees promise offerings such as sweets, a sari, incense, or small monetary gifts if they return safely from the forest or if a specific request is fulfilled. Mannat offerings are deeply personal and often tied to family needs, financial survival, or health concerns. These acts reflect what Primiano describes as "vernacular theological negotiation," where individuals enter into reciprocal relationships with the divine (44).

During fieldwork, participants recounted stories of fulfilled vows: a boat saved from storm damage, a lost document recovered after prayer, or a child's illness resolved following a promise to make an offering. Such narratives reinforce the perceived reciprocity between devotee and deity.

3.1.3 Seasonal Pujas and Community Gatherings

In addition to everyday rituals, communities organize larger Bonobibi Puja events during specific times of the year, particularly at the start of honey-collecting season. Women often take a vital role in preparing offerings, cleaning shrine areas, arranging clay idols, and guiding younger members through the ritual sequence. The puja combines narrative performance, ritual choreography, and communal feasting, creating what Geertz calls a "religious performance that both expresses and reinforces worldview" (112).

3.1.4 Significance of Ritual Practice

Across these rituals, the central thread is the understanding that Bonobibi's protection is conditional on ethical conduct and activated through ritual engagement. Rituals articulate a theological worldview in which divine presence is inseparable from ecological awareness and moral responsibility. By engaging with Bonobibi at shrine sites, devotees transform fear into agency, danger into navigable terrain, and uncertainty into spiritual confidence.

3.2 Case Studies

The following case studies draw from the interviews conducted during fieldwork and illustrate how Bonobibi's presence is experienced, narrated, and embodied by devotees in the Sundarbans. These accounts reveal the depth of theological meaning embedded in everyday life—how danger, survival, morality, and divine protection interweave to form a living religious world. Each narrative reflects a different facet of vernacular eco-theology, demonstrating how belief emerges from the interaction between ecology, memory, and embodied practice.

3.2.1 Case Study 1: "If Your Intention Is Pure, She Will Protect You"

Participant 1, A fisherman in his late forties described Bonobibi as the ultimate arbiter of moral conduct in the forest. Before entering the mangroves, he stands before her shrine, places rice at her feet and whispers a short invocation for protection. "If your intention is pure," he said, "she will show you the way." He recounted how a companion who lied about his catch and showed greed in the forest later faced a near-fatal encounter with a tiger. For him, the forest is regulated by a divine moral economy where ethical conduct directly impacts survival. This aligns with the ethical lessons embedded in the *Johuranama* and illustrates how devotees interpret ecological events through a theological lens.

3.2.2 Case Study 2: The Challenging Devotee and the Question of Faith

One participant reacted sharply when asked how he understood Bonobibi's appearance. He replied, "Do you know how YOUR God looks?" His tone shifted into a protective defense of the goddess, reflecting both deep devotion and a refusal to let academic curiosity trivialize sacred

experience. After the initial confrontation, he softened, offering stories of his father and grandfather, who taught him that Bonobibi watches over those who enter the forest with sincerity. His emotional response highlighted how Bonobibi worship is intertwined with dignity, identity, and generational memory. The exchange underscores Primiano's assertion that vernacular religion research must respect "the believer's interpretive authority" (44).

3.2.3 Case Study 3: Dream Guidance and Divine Intervention

A young devotee shared a personal story about repeatedly dreaming of Bonobibi during a period of uncertainty in his life. In one dream, she appeared near a clearing in the forest, signaling him to turn back from a journey he later learned would have placed him in a tiger-prone zone. He interpreted this as a direct act of divine intervention, explaining that Bonobibi communicates through dreams to warn or reassure her devotees. This reflects a widespread belief that dreams function as a spiritual medium, reinforcing the idea that Bonobibi is an active guardian whose presence transcends physical ritual spaces.

3.2.4 Case Study 4: The Sweet Water Miracle

Several participants described an experience in which once-salty pond water became sweet after prayers for Bonobibi's help. One woman recalled a time of water scarcity when her family prayed for relief; shortly afterward, they found the water in a nearby pond had turned sweet enough to drink. Whether interpreted as a natural fluctuation or divine intervention, the narrative reveals how devotees perceive ecological events as part of Bonobibi's governance. Such stories

enact a form of eco-theological reasoning, linking environmental conditions to divine compassion.

3.2.5 Case Study 5: Ritual Integrity and Consequences of Disbelief

A boatman narrated an incident involving a new worker who entered the forest without offering even a simple prayer. "He laughed and said nothing would happen," the boatman recalled. That evening, the man slipped from the boat, injuring his leg severely. For the informant, this was not coincidence but divine correction for arrogance. He emphasized that Bonobibi does not punish out of malice but enforces humility, reminding devotees that the forest must be approached with respect. This narrative demonstrates the role of moral consequence in the theological logic of the Sundarbans.

3.2.6 Case Study 6: Interfaith Devotion in Everyday Life

Multiple participants stressed that Bonobibi is revered by Hindus and Muslims alike. One Muslim fisher described her as "our Ma," while a Hindu participant explained that her Muslim neighbours prepare offerings for Bonobibi Puja with as much sincerity as any Hindu household. The Muslim participant said " We don't enter the temple but we help out the Hindus to take all the preparation for Ma Bonobibi's Pooja. Ritual roles—offering preparation, shrine cleaning, storytelling—are shared across communities, reinforcing a vernacular interfaith identity that emerges from shared ecological vulnerability rather than doctrinal bridges. As Uddin notes, Bonobibi devotion "is sustained through common dependence on the forest" rather than formal religious synthesis (63).

3.3.7 Case Study 7: "She Saved My Life" — The Robbery Incident

"When I was coming back by boat that night, the robbers caught me. They tied my hands with rope so tight I couldn't even move. Then they pushed me to the forest river like I was nothing. I thought, this is it… I won't survive today.

I didn't shout. I didn't fight. I just called Ma Bonobibi in my mind. Quietly. From that fear inside my chest. And right after that… the rope loosened. I swear to you, it wasn't my strength. I didn't pull anything. It just loosened by itself. The moment I felt that slack, I slipped free, then I started to swim, reached the land and ran. The robbers didn't even notice. That night, I believe she saved me. If she hadn't answered, I wouldn't be sitting here telling you this."

Whether interpreted literally or metaphorically, the story embodies a deep personal conviction: Bonobibi intervenes directly to save devotees in moments of life-threatening danger.

These case studies illustrate how Bonobibi's presence is experienced as real, immediate, and morally consequential. Together, they reveal a religious world where theology arises not from institutional doctrine but through the lived experiences that shape the daily interaction between humans, danger, and the divine.

Synthesis: What the Interviews reveal about Bonobibi

Across these interviews, a consistent pattern emerged that directly supports my central claim: Bonobibi is not merely a mythological figure preserved through folklore, but a living theological authority actively shaping moral behavior, ecological interpretation, and community identity in the Sundarbans. What I understood from these conversations is that devotees do not engage with

Bonobibi as a distant narrative character; rather, they relate to her as an immediate guardian whose presence is felt, interpreted, and enacted in daily life. Each participant approached Bonobibi through a framework of moral accountability, ecological vulnerability, and personal experience, suggesting that her significance operates on a theological rather than mythological plane.

My investigation centered on how devotees articulate their relationship with Bonobibi in real, lived contexts—danger, uncertainty, moral choice, interfaith coexistence, and natural phenomena. The interviews revealed five critical insights. First, morality is not abstract: humility, honesty, and intention are believed to have direct consequences in the forest. This moral economy mirrors the ethical universe of the *Johuranama*, demonstrating that theology here is rooted in survival, not doctrine. Second, devotees repeatedly frame ecological events—water turning sweet, dreams, tiger encounters, storms, or sudden escapes—as expressions of divine agency. This suggests a theological ecology where environmental change is inseparable from spiritual interpretation.

Third, the interviews show that Bonobibi devotion is deeply affective and intergenerational. Emotional responses, such as defensiveness or reverence, indicate not simply belief but identity: Bonobibi is woven into the moral fabric of family memory and community ethics. Fourth, the boundary between Hindu and Muslim practice dissolves in lived devotion, revealing a vernacular theology of coexistence. The forest becomes a shared sacred space where doctrinal distinctions lose meaning in the face of collective vulnerability.

Finally, these accounts collectively demonstrate that Bonobibi's authority is enacted through lived experience, not institutional religion. Protection, warning, punishment, and intervention are expressed through personal stories that function as theological testimony. This validates my claim that Bonobibi should be situated within theology, not merely mythology: she is approached, interpreted, and relied upon as a divine arbiter whose presence structures both ecological understanding and moral life.

In essence, the interviews confirm that Bonobibi is not simply remembered; she is experienced. Her theology is not taught through scripture but emerges through the lived negotiations between humans, danger, and the divine landscape of the Sundarbans.

3.3 Practices as Theological Calls

The devotional practices surrounding Bonobibi do more than express cultural heritage; they perform clear theological functions within the lives of forest-dependent communities. Through ritual gestures, moral narratives, dream experiences, and interfaith participation, devotees articulate a coherent understanding of divine agency, ethical obligation, and ecological order. These practices operate as lived theology, shaping how people interpret danger, moral failure, survival, misfortune, and protection. Rather than existing as symbolic folklore, Bonobibi's worship functions as a dynamic religious system embedded in everyday life.

3.3.1 Divine Agency and Protection

Devotees consistently describe Bonobibi as an active protector who intervenes in moments of danger. Stories of being saved from robbery, warned through dreams, or guided away from tiger-

prone zones reveal a worldview in which Bonobibi responds to sincere invocation. This belief reflects what Bell describes as the "efficacy of ritual action", where gestures performed with intention are believed to influence real-world outcomes (74). The pre-forest invocation, the ritual touch of the idol's feet, and the tying of protective cloths are therefore theological acts: they acknowledge divine sovereignty and activate a relationship of trust with Bonobibi.

3.3.2 Moral Regulation and Ethical Conduct

A central theological function of Bonobibi's worship is the regulation of moral behavior. Devotees repeatedly emphasize that greed, dishonesty, and arrogance invite danger, while humility, honesty, and sincerity invite protection. These moral principles echo the ethical universe depicted in the *Johuranama*, where Bonobibi protects the innocent Dukhe and punishes the greedy Shah Jangali. Participants interpret forest accidents, tiger attacks, or sudden misfortune as consequences of violated moral order. This reflects a form of vernacular theodicy—a community's explanation of how divine justice operates within ecological reality.

3.3.4 Ecological Interpretation through Theological Lens

Many participants understand the forest's ecological conditions—tides, water salinity, tiger movements, and storm cycles—as expressions of Bonobibi's will or warnings. When water becomes sweet after prayer or when the forest feels unusually silent before danger, devotees interpret these signs theologically. This aligns with eco-theological insights offered by Ruether, who argues that religious meaning often emerges through an imaginative engagement with the

natural world (204). For Sundarbans communities, environmental knowledge is inseparable from divine governance, forming a locally articulated eco-theological worldview.

3.3.5 Ritual as Negotiation of Divine Reciprocity

Offerings, vows, and ritual gestures express a theology of reciprocity: devotees act ethically and sincerely, and Bonobibi offers protection in return. Mannat practices exemplify this relationship, functioning as negotiated exchanges between devotee and deity. As Primiano notes, vernacular religion often involves personalized "theological negotiation" shaped by the believer's immediate circumstances (44). In this system, ritual practice is not symbolic but relational—each gesture renews the covenant between the community and Bonobibi.

3.3.6 Interfaith Belonging and Communal Theology

Bonobibi's worship operates within an interfaith devotional world, where Hindus and Muslims participate in shared rituals, offerings, and narrative traditions. Devotees describe Bonobibi as "our Ma" regardless of their religious identity, reflecting a theology of belonging rooted not in doctrinal affiliation but in shared ecological vulnerability. As Uddin observes, this form of devotion "is sustained through common dependence on the forest" rather than through institutional synthesis (63). Theologically, this demonstrates how Bonobibi functions as a unifying moral authority across communities.

3.3.8 Consequences of Disbelief and Theological Boundaries

The consequences attributed to neglected rituals or disbelief—injury, misfortune, accidents—form another theological function. Devotees interpret such events as reminders of Bonobibi's authority and markers of moral correction. These narratives set clear theological boundaries: devotion must be sincere; arrogance invites danger; safety cannot be assumed without divine sanction. This logic shapes behavior in profound ways, disciplining not only the body but the moral conscience of the devotee.

Through these practices, Bonobibi devotion operates as a full religious system with doctrines of protection, morality, reciprocity, ecological interpretation, and communal identity—articulated not through formal scripture but through the lived experiences of those who depend on the forest and the divine for survival.

3.4 Texts and Representation

Bonobibi's presence in the Sundarbans is sustained not only through ritual practice but also through a rich tradition of narrative representation. Texts, oral performances, regional literature, and contemporary media serve as vehicles through which her story is circulated, reinterpreted, and embedded into collective consciousness. These representations reinforce the ethical and ecological worldview that underlies Bonobibi worship, shaping how devotees imagine divine agency, moral order, and the relationship between humans and the forest.

3.4.1 Bonobibi Johuranama as Theological Narrative

The oldest surviving textual foundation of Bonobibi's tradition is Munshi's *Johuranama* is frequently referenced by devotees, even those who have never read it, through inherited oral memory. Its moral universe—where humility is protected, greed is punished, and ecological balance is upheld—forms the theological structure through which devotees interpret their own experiences.

During fieldwork, several participants recited portions of the narrative from memory or paraphrased key episodes, demonstrating how the *Johuranama* functions as living oral scripture. For example, references to Dukhe's innocence were used to explain why good intentions ensure protection, while Shah Jangali's greed was invoked to warn against unethical behavior in the forest. The text thus serves as a moral template, grounding contemporary ritual practices in a longstanding narrative framework.

3.4.2 Puthimala and Oral Performance

In many villages, *Johuranama* is performed through puthimala, a rhythmic oral recitation that blends melody, gesture, and storytelling. These performances often occur during Bonobibi Puja or community gatherings. A puthi reciter in Chadpai emphasized that her role was not simply to narrate but to "bring Bonobibi to life" through her voice and rhythm. The performative nature of puthimala transforms narrative into communal experience, reinforcing what Bell calls the "ritualization of narrative space" (93). Through performance, Bonobibi becomes present in the moment, bridging past and present.

3.4.3 Visual Representations and Shrine Imagery

Shrine imagery also plays a significant representational role. Clay idols often depict Bonobibi standing with one hand raised in blessing, accompanied by Dukhe, Shah Jangali, and Dakshin Rai. The iconography encodes theological meaning visually: Bonobibi's upright stance, Dukhe's childlike posture, and the subdued tiger near Dakshin Rai tell the entire moral narrative at a glance. These visual cues reinforce the stories told by elders, reciters, and families, sustaining the worldview across generations without requiring textual literacy.

3.4.3 Documentary and Digital Media

Visual media, including documentaries such as Mokammel's *Bonojatri*, further reinforce Bonobibi's presence by depicting rituals, forest journeys, and devotees' testimonies. These digital narratives not only document the tradition but shape how younger generations encounter Bonobibi's story—often before participating in rituals themselves. Through such media, Bonobibi becomes part of a modern narrative ecosystem that extends beyond the forest into broader cultural consciousness.

3.4.4 Narrative Continuity as Religious Continuity

Across textual and representational forms—oral recitations, shrine imagery, literary adaptations, and digital media—Bonobibi's story retains its core theological messages. Representation thus becomes a critical mechanism of religious continuity, ensuring that her presence remains active, adaptable, and relevant. Through narrative, devotees learn how to interpret ecological danger,

moral obligation, and divine protection, strengthening the theological framework that guides their daily engagement with the forest.

3.5 Synthesis

The ethnographic material presented in this chapter demonstrates that Bonobibi's worship is far more than a collection of local customs or symbolic narratives. Through ritual practice, shrine engagement, moral storytelling, dream experiences, and interfaith participation, devotees construct a religious worldview in which Bonobibi functions as an active, responsive, and morally authoritative divine figure. These lived expressions form a coherent theological system rooted in ecological vulnerability, ethical reciprocity, and interpersonal memory.

The rituals observed in forest-entry sites illustrate how devotees approach the forest with a sense of moral responsibility: humility and sincerity invite protection, while greed and dishonesty invite danger. This logic aligns with the ethical universe of the *Johuranama* and reflects a form of vernacular theodicy in which divine justice operates within the rhythms of the natural world. Case studies further reveal how devotees interpret dreams, warnings, miracles, and ecological events as manifestations of Bonobibi's presence. These testimonies transform unpredictable environmental conditions—tides, storms, salinity, tiger movements—into meaningful signs interpreted through a theological lens.

The interfaith dimensions of worship highlight Bonobibi's role as a unifying figure whose authority transcends doctrinal boundaries. Hindus and Muslims alike participate in rituals, offer mannat, and recite or paraphrase the *Johuranama*, demonstrating how shared ecological precarity fosters shared devotional identity. This reinforces the argument that Bonobibi devotion

represents a vernacular religious system, shaped not by formal theology but by lived experience, communal memory, and environmental interdependence.

Taken together, the findings reveal a pattern: Bonobibi's worship operates as vernacular eco-theology, a form of religious thought and practice emerging from the daily interaction between humans and the ecological dangers of the Sundarbans. Divine agency, moral responsibility, ecological awareness, and ritual reciprocity are intertwined, forming a religious system that regulates behavior, interprets environmental signs, and offers emotional and spiritual assurance.

This synthesis of narrative, ritual, and ecological experience forms the conceptual bridge to the concluding chapter, which situates these lived practices within broader theoretical discussions of environment, theology, and vernacular religious expression.

Chapter 4: Bonobibi as Vernacular Eco-Theology: Analysis and Implications

Building on the fieldwork and narratives documented in the previous chapter, this section analyzes what those practices reveal about the nature of Bonobibi worship in the Sundarbans. The central argument is clear: Bonobibi devotion functions as a vernacular eco-theology, where theological meaning emerges directly through lived engagement with ecological danger, ritual action, and moral reciprocity—not through institutional doctrine. Here, we move beyond received categories like myth or folklore to demonstrate, through ethnographic evidence, how Bonobibi's presence operates as an active, adaptive system of religious meaning for her devotees. In what follows, the analysis traces this argument step by step, showing how field realities demand a new vocabulary for understanding the theological core of Bonobibi's living tradition.

4.1 Why "Myth" and "Folklore" Are Insufficient Categories

Academic studies of Bonobibi have routinely labeled her tradition as "myth," "folklore," or "syncretism," but these categories do not hold up against the realities observed in the field. Scholars such as Jalais, Uddin, and Huq have each, in different ways, situated Bonobibi within frameworks of cultural symbolism, environmental politics, or interfaith blending. Yet these terms ultimately flatten what is, in practice, a living theology.

The first problem is with the idea of "myth." In the Sundarbans, devotees do not treat Bonobibi as a distant symbol or archetype. Instead, they experience her as an immediate, responsive presence. When a fisherman describes how sweet water appeared in a brackish pond after prayer, or a young man recounts a dream in which Bonobibi warns him away from danger,

these are not stories told for tradition's sake—they are reported as direct evidence of divine intervention. For devotees, Bonobibi is not a figure of legend; she is the arbiter of survival, present and accessible.

Calling her worship "folklore" reduces ongoing, urgent practice to mere cultural heritage. This disconnect is revealed in the emotional responses of participants: when asked to describe Bonobibi, one devotee retorted sharply, "Do you know how YOUR God looks?" The anger is telling—what outsiders classify as folk custom is, for the believer, a matter of dignity and existential seriousness. These rituals are not performances for academic observation; they are strategies of protection, shaped by daily risk and moral commitment.

Finally, the label "syncretism" misses the pragmatic foundations of Bonobibi devotion. The fact that Hindus and Muslims pray at the same shrine is not the outcome of doctrinal compromise or philosophical blending. It is a practical theology forged by shared vulnerability to the forest. As one case study shows, Muslim and Hindu families prepare offerings side by side, not to harmonize dogma but to survive together under Bonobibi's protection. The category of syncretism, imposed from above, fails to grasp this logic of necessity and community.

Taken together, these examples from fieldwork make clear that scholarly categories like myth, folklore, and syncretism are fundamentally out of step with how devotees themselves understand and live Bonobibi's presence. The data demands a shift in vocabulary—one that takes seriously the theological claims embedded in everyday life.

4.2 Bonobibi as Vernacular Eco-Theology: Six Characteristics

What emerges from the practices and narratives documented in the previous chapter is a coherent religious system rooted in everyday experience, not in doctrine. Bonobibi's presence is not a theoretical abstraction; she is encountered and understood through a distinct set of practices, beliefs, and communal negotiations. These can be identified in six core characteristics, each revealing how theological meaning is produced and sustained in this context.

4.2.1 Divine Agency Experienced Through Ecology

For Bonobibi's devotees, the forest is alive with signs. Sweet water appearing after prayer, dreams warning of danger, or surviving a tiger encounter—these are not coincidences or folk stories but direct evidence of a living divine will. The forest itself is read as a communicative field: environmental changes are interpreted as Bonobibi's intervention, not random natural events. This is not belief in the abstract; it is theology made visible and actionable in daily survival.

4.2.2 Moral Reciprocity as Theological Principle

Protection from Bonobibi is understood to be conditional. Only those who approach with humility, sincerity, and a pure intention are believed to be eligible for her aid. When a fisherman ignores ritual requirements or acts out of greed, devotees see subsequent misfortune as a direct consequence—a vernacular form of divine justice. The rules are clear, enforced not by texts but by repeated communal memory: your conduct shapes your fate.

4.2.3 Ritual as Theological Enactment

Every ritual gesture—placing rice at a shrine, tying a protective cloth, reciting a vow before forest entry—is considered more than symbolic. These actions are seen as materially effective, a way to activate Bonobibi's guardianship. Devotees believe that survival depends on performing these rituals correctly, not because tradition demands it, but because the risks are immediate and tangible. Ritual here is theological action, with real-world consequences.

4.2.4 Interfaith Unity Through Shared Dependence

Bonobibi's authority is recognized across religious lines. In practice, Hindus and Muslims gather at the same shrines, participate in joint pujas, and refer to her as "our Ma." This is not a project of blending doctrines but a pragmatic cooperation forged by mutual need. The forest does not discriminate, and neither does Bonobibi's protection. What emerges is a lived theology that overrides institutional boundaries in favor of collective survival.

4.2.5 Narrative as Theological Memory

Stories of Bonobibi, Dukhe, and Shah Jangali circulate constantly—through oral recitation, puthi performances, and everyday conversation. These narratives are not just entertainment or heritage; they are tools for moral reasoning and theological reflection. Devotees use these stories to explain events, justify rituals, and instruct children. The Johuranama and other tales function as living scripture, sustaining communal memory and religious logic without need for institutional mediation.

Taken together, these six characteristics show that Bonobibi's worship is not a patchwork of myth and ritual, but a dynamic, internally coherent system of vernacular eco-theology. Authority is localized, adaptive, and directly tied to ecological risk and moral accountability. What appears from the outside as folklore or syncretism is, for the community, an active theology—responsive to environment, grounded in practice, and oriented toward survival.

4.3 Why This Matters: Implications and Contributions

To label Bonobibi worship as myth or syncretism is to miss what gives it power: its status as a theology lived in the details of survival, risk, and shared moral codes—a form of faith that grows not from texts, but from the rhythms and dangers of the Sundarbans itself.

The practices surrounding Bonobibi in the Sundarbans do more than provide comfort or reinforce tradition—they carve out a space where belief, ethics, and survival are joined in a living system that answers immediate needs. These rituals and stories are not relics of a fading past; they remain vital strategies for negotiating risk, forging cooperation, and making meaning in an environment that can turn hostile without warning.

For scholars of religion, this case invites a shift in focus. What happens in these communities challenges the old divisions between "real" theology and so-called folklore. The line between doctrine and daily action blurs: Bonobibi's authority is not handed down from texts or priests, but from the demands of the land and the shared vulnerability of those who depend on it. If we only look for religion in temples, scriptures, or official rituals, we overlook the forms of faith that matter most in places like the Sundarbans.

In the context of the environmental crisis, the lessons are equally stark. Here, restraint, humility, and responsibility toward others are not just ideals—they are practical habits born out of necessity. Bonobibi worship models an ethics grounded in the rhythms and dangers of the forest, where the divine is encountered in tides, animal tracks, and the shared labor of survival. This is not abstract theology; it is faith lived out in response to every turn of the river or change in the weather.

Of course, this portrait is not the full story. The research captures only a moment, and there are voices and shifts—especially around gender, youth, and changing climate—that remain to be traced. Still, what emerges is a picture of a faith that is both adaptive and deeply rooted, where the boundaries between myth and theology dissolve in the details of daily life.

Bonobibi's worship deserves to be recognized for what it is: not simply cultural color or a set of inherited tales, but a way of knowing, negotiating, and enduring—a theology assembled from experience, practice, and the fragile bargains people strike with their world.

Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer a question that grew from observation, fieldwork, and listening: What does Bonobibi mean to those who call her name before stepping into the forest? The answer that emerged from months in the Sundarbans is neither simple nor abstract. Bonobibi is not a relic of myth, nor a convenient symbol for mixed traditions. She is a theological presence—active, immediate, and woven into the daily fabric of survival for the communities who depend on her.

The research demonstrates that Bonobibi's worship operates as vernacular eco-theology: a locally generated religious system in which divine agency, moral reciprocity, and ecological responsibility are inseparable. Through rituals performed at shrine thresholds, through mannat vows made in desperation or gratitude, through puthimala recitations that bring her story to life, and through dream warnings interpreted as divine communication, devotees articulate a coherent understanding of how the sacred operates in their world. This is not theology abstracted from life, written in books, or mediated by priests. It is theology lived—embodied in gesture, encoded in narrative, and tested against the dangers of tides, tigers, and storms.

The ethnographic evidence presented across three chapters reveals six core characteristics of this system: divine agency experienced through ecology, moral reciprocity as a guiding principle, ritual as theological enactment, ecological vulnerability as spiritual framework, interfaith unity grounded in shared dependence, and narrative as theological memory. Together, these elements form not a fragmented tradition but a dynamic, internally consistent religious worldview. Devotees do not approach Bonobibi as folklore. They approach her as a force who responds, who protects, who corrects, and whose authority shapes both conscience and conduct.

Academic categories such as "myth," "folklore," and "syncretism" have been applied to Bonobibi for decades, but these labels obscure more than they reveal. They flatten a living faith into cultural artifact, reduce urgent ritual into performance, and misread interfaith cooperation as doctrinal compromise. The field data consistently challenges these classifications. When a fisherman insists that "if your intention is pure, she will protect you," he is articulating a theological claim about divine justice. When a devotee angrily defends Bonobibi's dignity by asking, "Do you know how YOUR God looks?"—he is asserting the reality of a relationship that

scholars have too often dismissed as metaphor. When Hindus and Muslims stand together at a shrine, preparing offerings without sectarian distinction, they are not performing syncretism; they are enacting a shared theology born from the forest's indifference to human divisions.

Postcolonial anthropology and lived religion studies provide the corrective lens needed to interpret these practices on their own terms. Talal Asad's critique of how "religion" has been constructed through Western Christian categories, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's insistence on recognizing local epistemologies, together reveal why Bonobibi has been so persistently misread. Her worship does not conform to the institutional, textual, doctrinal model that has historically defined what counts as "theology." But that failure of fit does not make her worship less theological—it makes the category itself inadequate.

The findings also speak to broader questions in environmental humanities and religious studies. Bonobibi devotion offers a model of how communities develop ethical frameworks for navigating ecological crisis without recourse to abstract environmentalism or institutional religion. The moral universe articulated through her worship—rooted in humility, restraint, reciprocity, and respect for the forest's limits—is not an ancient curiosity but a living response to precarity that remains urgent today. In a time of accelerating climate change, rising sea levels, and intensified human-environment conflict, the Sundarbans shows us that theology can be ecological, that ethics can be pragmatic, and that faith can be a strategy of endurance as much as a mode of transcendence.

This thesis does not claim that Bonobibi worship is theology in the same sense as systematic Christian doctrine or Islamic jurisprudence. What it argues is simpler and more

significant: that theological meaning—coherent understandings of the divine, of moral order, of human responsibility—can emerge from lived experience, embodied ritual, oral memory, and environmental engagement. To recognize this is to expand what we mean by "theology" itself, making space for traditions that have been marginalized, ruralized, or dismissed as pre-modern precisely because they do not look like the religion scholars were trained to see.

The interfaith dimensions of Bonobibi worship also challenge rigid assumptions about religious boundaries. This is not syncretism as blending; it is cooperation as survival. The forest does not ask about creed before it threatens, and Bonobibi does not distinguish between Hindu and Muslim when she offers protection. What emerges is a vernacular theology of coexistence—pragmatic, adaptive, and sustained not by institutional negotiation but by shared vulnerability and mutual need.

Future research will need to attend to dimensions this study could not fully explore: the gendered roles in ritual transmission, especially the centrality of women in maintaining shrine practices and teaching younger generations; the impact of climate change and migration on evolving forms of devotion; and the ways digital media—YouTube videos, social media retellings, literary adaptations like Amitav Ghosh's Jungle Nama—are reshaping how Bonobibi is remembered and reimagined beyond the Sundarbans. Longitudinal studies will be essential to understanding how this living tradition adapts to new pressures while preserving its theological core.

Ultimately, this thesis argues for a recognition that has been too long delayed: Bonobibi is not just a mythological deity but a theological one. Her worship demonstrates that theology

can be produced and sustained outside formal institutions, emerging instead through the rhythms of daily life, the negotiations of danger, the discipline of moral conduct, and the intergenerational transmission of story and ritual. To honor the voices of her devotees is to acknowledge that their faith is not primitive or quaint—it is coherent, responsive, and real.

For the women preparing offerings before dawn, for the boatmen crossing tidal rivers with her name on their lips, for the elders recounting her interventions, and for the children learning to recognize her authority, Bonobibi is not a metaphor. She is a presence. She is a protector.. She is the logic through which an uncertain world becomes navigable. And in that presence, woven into the ecology of the Sundarbans and the lives of those who depend on it, theology endures—not in scripture, but in practice; not in institutions, but in experience; not in abstraction, but in survival itself.

Appendix A: Interview Questionnaire

Instruction:

Please answer the following questions as honestly and thoroughly as you can.

This interview takes approximately 10–15 minutes to complete.

Section 1: Basic Information

I identify as:

_____ Male

_____ Female

_____ Other (please specify): _____

My age is: _____

My occupation is:

_____ Honey collector

_____ Fisher / Crab collector

_____ Woodcutter

_____ Boatman

_____ Farmer

_____ Homemaker

_____ Other (please specify): _____

I live in: _____ Village

Upazila: _____

District: _____

Section 2: Belief About Bonobibi

Have you heard of Bonobibi?

_____ Yes

_____ No

How would you describe Bonobibi to someone who has never heard of her?

How do you think of Bonobibi? (Choose ALL that apply)

_____ As a goddess

_____ As a guardian/protector

_____ As a spiritual mother

_____ As a figure from stories/folklore

_____ As a real divine being

_____ Other (please explain): _____

Section 3: Ritual Practice

Before entering the forest, I usually: (Choose ALL that apply)

_____ Take Bonobibi's name

_____ Offer a prayer or mantra

_____ Visit a temple/shrine

_____ Do nothing specific

_____ Other (please explain): _____

What rituals or offerings do you perform for Bonobibi?

Section 4: Experience of Protection

Have you ever felt Bonobibi's protection personally?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Have you heard stories of others being protected by Bonobibi?

_____ Yes

_____ No

If YES to any of the above, please describe one event you believe was due to Bonobibi's protection:

Section 5: Social and Interfaith Practices

In your village, people who worship Bonobibi are:

_____ Mostly Hindu

_____ Mostly Muslim

_____ Both Hindu and Muslim

_____ Other (please specify): _____

Do Hindus and Muslims worship Bonobibi together?

_____ Yes

_____ No

_____ Sometimes

If YES or SOMETIMES, how do you see this shared worship?

Section 6: Ethics, Work, and Survival

Do you believe Bonobibi decides who will be safe in the forest?

_____ Yes

_____ No

_____ Maybe

If someone enters the forest without invoking Bonobibi, what do you think happens?

_____ Nothing

_____ Danger increases

_____ A tiger or crocodile may attack

_____ Other (please explain): _____

Do you believe Bonobibi guides what is allowed or forbidden inside the forest?

_____ Yes

_____ No

_____ Not sure

Section 7: Transmission and Future Belief

How did you first learn about Bonobibi?

_____ Grandparents

_____ Parents

_____ Neighbours/community

_____ Through Pooja/rituals

_____ Other (please explain): _____

How do you teach your children about Bonobibi?

Do you believe future generations will continue Bonobibi worship?

_____ Yes

_____ No

_____ Not sure

Section 8: Additional Comments

Please share anything else you would like to add about Bonobibi, your beliefs, or your experiences:

_____

Appendix B: Informed Consent Statement

Participant Consent Statement:

I. I understand that I am being asked to take part in a study about the beliefs, narratives, and lived religious practices related to Bonobibi in the Sundarbans. I have been informed that:

II. My participation is voluntary.

III. I may choose not to answer any question.

IV. I may withdraw at any time without consequence.

V. My name and details will not be disclosed in the thesis.

VI. My words may be quoted, paraphrased, or summarized in the researcher's academic writing.

VII. The purpose of the research is academic, and the information I share may appear in the thesis and in future related publications.

VIII. By giving verbal consent, I acknowledge that I understand the purpose of the research and agree that my stories, opinions, and experiences may be included in the researcher's work.

Participants' Verbal Consent were taken since they did not have enough education or knowledge to read a consent form and sign it.

Date of Interview: September 2025

Location: Sundarbans, Dhengmari Village.

Appendix C: Fieldwork Photos



Figure 1 illustrates the author taking interview of a Worshipper of Bonobibi reciting the Puthi (Bonobibi Johuranama)



Figure 2 illustrates the author taking interview of a Honey collector



Figure 3 illustrates the author taking interview of a Boatman



Figure 4 illustrates the author talking to the women who are worshipping at the shrine.



Figure 5 illustrates the author paying respect to Sundarbans's people's ritual of worshipping Bonobibi

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