

## Folk deity Banabibi as the pioneer of Women social movement in the Sundarbans Society: A Mythological study.

Dr. Sujit Mandal

Assistant Professor in History & Head, Department of History, Kalna College  
Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal.

Received: May 22, 2018

Accepted: July 12, 2018

Sundarbans was spread across Jessore, Khulna, Barisal, Bakerganj and almost the entire part of 24 Parganas (about 25500 km) between Hughli and Meghna.<sup>1</sup> After the partition of India, the area of Sundarbans in India is 9630 sq km. This is a deltaic region. In the study of folk culture many folk goddesses are found in the Sundarbans. Folk goddess has occupied a special place in the society of this region. Here is my subject of research is: the local deity of Banabibi's influence on the society of the Sundarbans. How she moved the society of Sundarbans with her various type of functions.

Banabibi was one of the ancient folk goddesses of the Sundarbans. She was the chief of the popular seven Bibi. According to Bengali anthropology, a few types of social life are known; in one word it was a social based society. It was inevitable that the maternal power was in the society. Bonobibi was showing the way of balance and development of contemporary society and state. Banabibi's contribution to the Bengali society of Sundarbans was very outstanding.

We know Banabibi's identity from various sources. From Munshi Binyuddin's 'Banbibir Jahuranama', we know that her father was Abraham of Mecca, her mother was Shal-Jalil's daughter Gulalbibi.<sup>2</sup> After unavoidable circumstances, Abraham left his second pregnant wife Gulalbibi, in the Arab forest by the direction of his first wife. From Pir Sahitya sources, we know that Gulalbibi to gave birth twin's baby in that forest.<sup>3</sup> They are Banabibi and Sha-Jangoli. They have been spent seven years in that jungle with sorrow and suffering. Then, on the orders of God or Allah, Banabibi and his brother Sha-Jangoli had left for the 'Atharo Vatir Desh' from Arabian forest.<sup>4</sup>

The name of 'Banabibi' implies that she was the Goddess of the forest. The Hindu and Muslim peoples of this region worshiped her with devotion. "Banabibi" familiar with another name as Banchandi, Bandurga, Bishalaksmi and worshiped them by peoples.<sup>5</sup> "Bibi" is a Persian word its meaning women belonging to the forest. Dr. Dulal Chowdhury mentioned in his article "Bonobibir Pala O Lok Samaj", she has eleven sisters and one brother. There is a historical context for "Bibi" naming. In Bengal, the spread of Muslim power came through religion. The lower caste Hindus were forced to accept Islam. Mainly converted Hindu women used to the word 'Bibi.'

Peoples believed that Banabibi is a luxury Muslim woman and had great spiritual power. Although this is not true. Because she born and brought up in the forest and spent long time there so she had great idea about forest. She has known everything about forest and spent long time with creatures. So she knows the behavior of animals. From this point of view we can say her as an animal expert. In the absence of science consciousness of the contemporary society, they imagined divine power in Banabibi. She was once considered to be the goddess; the real thing was that her overall activity helped her to the goddess. The common people of the Sundarbans wanted a great power to protect themselves from various evil forces. In such a situation, Banabibi came to protect them by the order of Allah.

The 'Atharo Vatir Desh' is not a private property of anyone. It is Nature's donation. It has full of natural resources. The residents or the son of soil of this region have the right to enjoy only. Because, they are the creators of this region. But Dakshin Rai forcefully occupied this area's natural resources. He seems that this region is his father's property. Many people have been crushed by his rule, exploitation and oppression. In the eventful chapter of Dakshin Rai and Banabibi, Dakshin Rai is the symbol of exploiter of 'Atharo Vatir Desh' But 'Banabibi', In order to get the right of the people, she appeared as a maternal power and protector. She awakened the people of the Sundarbans by her message of consciousness.

From the various *Mangalkavya*, written information and conventional stories, it is known that Dakshin Rai was very angry at the arrival of Banabibi in the Atharo Bhati areas of the Sundarbans. So, for the purpose of obstructing her, a large army force was sent led by Narayan mother of Dakshin Rai, Narayan. There is a terrible war was occurring between Banabibi and Narayani. In this war, Narayan think that she

may be defeat by Banabibi, so she sent a proposal of peace treaty to Banabibi. Finally, Narayani confessed defeat to Banabibi.

One of the most conventional stories about Banabibi in the Sundarbans area is the story of '*Dhona, Mona and Dukhe*'. From this story it is known that with Dhona, Mona and their neighbouring nephew Dukhe, they went into the forest to collect honey without worship of Dakshin Rai. So Dakshin Rai was very angry and that night, Dakshin Rai, in their dreams and ordered to Dhona, Mona to apologize for their crime and to pay the fine as Human flesh. Frightened Mona, left the Dukhe as a fine, to that dense forest. They came into their village and declared that Dukhe had eaten by the tiger. In this situation, Dukhe is afraid not to see anyone. He is crying and calling to his mother. In this context, Folk Poet said that, Banbibi is the mother of all Atharo Vatr regions, calling her 'mother' does not have any danger.

Dhona Mona did not worship to Dakshin Rai entered into the forest. As a result Dakshin Rai was very angry. That night, Dakshin Rai, in their dreams and ordered to Dhona Mona to apologize for their crime and to pay the 'fine' as Human flesh. That is why they left the children in that dense forest. Actually, what is this worship? This is actually a type of 'tax' which can be called 'Entry Tax'. This types of Tax which Dakshin Rai imposed on the common people of the Sundarbans is a very unfair. If they did not pay this 'tax', maybe Dakshin Rai would have killed them by his artificial '*Baghsena*'. There is a protest in the story of Dhona, Mona which is against the tyranny of Dakshin Rai. Banabibi's motherhood is awakened to Dukhe. So she and his brother Sha-Jangoli fight against oppressive Dakshin Rai and protect Dukhe. When tiger attacked to Dukhe, Banabibi and his brother Sha-Jangoli rescued him from the tigers. After then, Dukhe was safely sent by Banabibi and her brother with lot of wealth and money to his village, Bharkunda.<sup>6</sup> There is a famous Temple or *thane* of Banabibi in the Bharkunda village. The people of this region believe that this Temple is an original Temple or holy place of Banabibi.

After attacking by Banbibi and his brother Sha-Jangoli, Dakshin Rai went to Barakhan Ghazi to save his life. The intervention of Barakhan Gazi, the conflict is over and Dakshin Rai was forced to accept the authority of Banabibi.<sup>7</sup> The people of the Sundarbans- the workers, the farmers, the laborers, the bauls, the moules, the hunters, the fishermen and other people, remember her and worship her for all the activities. In this way, Banobibi promoted to deity of the Sundarbans.

From all these facts and stories, it seems that she is a women, she does not possess any miraculous power. From all these facts and stories, it seems that she is a women, she does not possess any god-gifted power. For her various activities, she once won the hearts of Atharo Vatr's people. That's why she was promoted to the god. For the glory of her work influenced by the agricultural workers, farmers, boules, moules, hunters, boatsman etc. of the region. They all are remembering her always.

Banabibi's worship is being done by residents of the Sundarbans region. The elements of worship of Banabi is very simple, only the non-boiled rice, incense, vermilion, sweet, some fruits sugar, lollipop, patali, milk, etc. are gone. Sometimes cock or hen is sacrificed in the worship of Banabibi. From different places of the village, under the tree, Jangal Mahal worship of Banabibi. It is not essential requirement Brahmans or priests for this worship. Male or female can worship of Banabibi. Those who cut wood in the forests, collect honey or go fishing, they also worshiped Banabibi. In the forest the Sain (an experienced and old man of that group) or an old man of that group does worshiped. The Worship of Banabibi can be at any time during day and night. However, the practice of worshipping on the night of *Amavassya* or *Purnima* is common. The statue of Banabibi is made on the back of the tiger with a little boy on the lap of the statue. It is believed that the boy is Dukhe.<sup>8</sup> If the statue is not possible to make, instead of statue placing three small stupa of clay and then worshiped.

The statue of Banabibi found in this region there can be seen that her brother Sha-Jangoli and Dukhe are also worshiped together. The people of this region, fishermen, moules and wood cutters believe that if they can not satisfy to Banabibi, they will not to get wax, honey, fish or wood in the forest. So, before going to the forest, they worshiped for satisfy to Banabibi. However, remembering Banabibi's name; fishermen, moules, wood cutters goes to the forest for collection of wax, honey, fish, wood. If they satisfy to Banabibi by worshipping, they beliefs their '*Will*' may be successful and even Banabibi will protect them from any danger in the forest. Many such incidents and stories have been discussed in the contemporary Bengali folk literatures, rhymes, stories, verses, poems and songs etc.

Early in the morning, women from all communities irrespective of caste and creed come to worship to the holy temple or '*Than*' of Banbibi in the Shukla Panchami Tithi of Bengali Magh month. In this region why did Banabibi to spread her influenced on the women's society? In these context researchers Dr. Dulal Chowdhury said that, Muslim pirs, fakirs and gazis have a lot of space in Bengali prose, poetry drama and literature. Where it is widely described, the contribution of pirs, fakirs in the women society of Bengal. No one was found before the Banabibi as a Muslim nanny and midwife. Banabibi's story reveals the greatness of

Banabibi, an unfortunate mother who is deprived from contemporary society. In this context, every woman in Bengal thinks herself that she is the replica of Dukhe's mother. Jannahbi Kumar Chakraborty says in his book "*Mother*" that a group of mothers are found in the village, who are not biological mothers, but they are the abettors of emergency. Despite not being the biological mother, they cherished their devotion, fondness, love, affection and good wishes for everybody. These are '*Dharmomata*'. The women of the Sundarbans worship them.

In the Sunderbans society, 'Banabibi' was depicted as deprived mother. The people of this region pray to her for protection from various types of danger and diseases. They have belief that their desire will fulfill by goddess Banabibi. They have to get or not, there is no matter or not being criticized, but must give their honored of faith. The people of this region have been long time fighting against the oppressed class. Naturally, they want to get a great power that saved from the oppressed class. That power protects against violent tigers or against zotder, zamindars, and moneylenders of exploiting classes. While Banabibi is walking in the Atharo Vahir Desh of Sundarbans, she understood that people in this area are completely deprived from forest, crops, water resources, rights etc. In order to protect the existence of human society in such an endangered social anarchy and despair, the coming of great maternal power Banabibi.

People of the Sundarbans region make shelter, to their imaginary god and goddesses, fighting against various adversities by being strong in spiritual power. There is a time when there is a clash between land owners and landless peasants in agricultural dependent society. People have progressed through the collision of their social needs, to coordination path. Residents of this region believe that Banabibi will protect them from all evil danger. It seems that they have handed over all the responsibility of protecting their lives and property to Banabibi. In this context, the regional women think themselves as the model of the deprived mother of Dukhe. They stand against the many adverse forces in order to survive in the struggle for life in the spirit of spiritual power. This awakening was possible only for Banabibi. As a result of this women's power awakening, a social movement is seen. This social movement has been moving forward in the Sundarbans' society

### Referances

1. Shashanka Mandal, Sundarbans in the British Raj, Calcutta, 1995, page 1
2. Munshi Baiyuddin, Banabibir Jahuranama, Calcutta, 1284 BS, page 28
3. bdur Rahim, Banabibi jahuranama, 1393, Kolkata,, page-33
4. ibid page page 28
5. op cit. page p-79
6. Munshi Baiyuddin, Banabibir Jahuranama, Calcutta, 1877 page-43
7. Munshi Binyuddin - 'Banabi Jahuranama', 1284—page 35
8. Abdur Rahim - Bonebi Jahuramanam, Calcutta, 1393 BS, page 33