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Forests, Wild Beasts and Supernatural Powers: A Folk Tale from Sunderbans

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This folk tale is based on a few eighteenth century accounts. It relates to how forest dwellers and wood-cutters, who also often worked as *malangis* (salt makers) allegedly protected themselves or at least believed to have secured them from tigers and alligators, who abounded the forest tracts of Sunderbans.

The insalubrious and dreary climate of the Sunderbans and the fact that it was infested by wild animals, particularly tigers and alligators, rendered it risky and dangerous for the inhabitants. Many of them were reportedly carried away or devoured by tigers and alligators. The tigers had caused terrible havoc among the cattle, the wood-cutters, the cultivators and their family. The depredations of a single fierce tiger had frequently compelled the cultivators and wood-cutters to abandon their lands even if at the cost of that land relapsing into a jungle. Thus the southern portion of the Sunderbans which comprised the jungle tract along the seashore was almost entirely uninhabited except for the occasional wanderings of the groups of wood-cutters and fishermen. These jungles were also infested by enormous alligators that were often found asleep or basking in the sun completely motionless, appearing like a log wood. The wood-cutters were often deceived by their appearance until the alligator was woken by a shot or vigorously scrambled into the waters or attacked the wood-cutters. Tigers too infested the margins of the forests but frequently swam towards the seashore and attacked the people in the anchored boat.

The forests – though infested by tigers and alligators – were the sole source of livelihood of the wood-

cutters. This fact made them intensely superstitious and prejudiced by their belief in forest spirits. They were confident that their safety depended entirely upon supernatural agency. None of the wood-cutters or the *malangis* ventured into the forests without a *puja* (worship) performed by a *Brahmin* (priest) or a *Fakir* or a *Pir* (saint). So strong was the conviction amongst the *malangis* about the performance of this *puja* that they even sought payment from the East India Company for the *Brahmins* or the *Fakirs* to conduct the *puja*. The Company was rarely convinced by this demand of the *malangis*, yet it was compelled to make the payment for that seemed to be the only way of motivating the *malangis* to manufacture salt in tiger-infested zones of the Sunderbans.


The *malangis* or the wood-cutters refused to go to the forests to cut wood unless accompanied by a *Fakir*, who had, as they believed, acquired supernatural powers from the presiding deity, whom he propitiated with offerings over the tigers and other wild animals. A large number of boats with the *malangis* proceeded together in a party, taking a *Fakir* with them. These *Fakirs* were generally Muslim devotees, who claimed to possess magic charms against the terror of wild animals. Living by the riverside, these *Fakirs* were greatly revered by the forest dwellers and wood-cutters, who offered them food and *cowries* to win their support and goodwill. Invariably, these *Fakirs* were also carried away by the animals but the longer they lived, the more they were venerated. It is believed that the Muslim wood-cutters had assigned particular portions of Sunderbans to their *Pirs*. In the huts of the *Fakirs*, they raised a small mound of earth, like a grave and prayed before it prior to the commencement of their operations. The Hindu wood-cutters too like their Muslim counterparts, had allocated parts in Sunderbans

to their various gods and goddesses. They also raised elevations three or four inches high, about three feet in square and placed balls of earth on them, which were painted red. Having painted these balls red, they performed *puja* with offerings of rice, flowers, fruits and Ganges water. Before the wood-cutters set out to work, each *Fakir* assembled his group of wood-cutters, cleared a space at the edge of the forests and erected a number of small tent-like huts, in which forest deities were kept for worship and offerings. The boatman (the one who carried the wood-cutters to the forests) then observed a fast and went off to sleep. The latter was most significant in the entire exercise of propitiation. It was in his dreams that the boatman was informed by gods and goddesses which forests may be cut without the dread of the tigers.

The *malangis* and the other wood-cutters believed that the invocation and worship of the forest deities rendered the allotted forests free of tigers. Each one of them, therefore, before commencing his work, made an offering to the forest spirits to gain a right to be protected by the deities. However, despite the elaborate offerings and worship, if anyone from the party was carried away by the tigers, the *Fakirs* decamped but the wood-cutters or the *malangis* placed flags at the prominent corners of the allotted forest area to warn the others. Nonetheless, so great was the belief in the efficacy of the protection afforded that no wood-cutter or *malangi* entered the forests without receiving the protection of the *Fakirs* or *Brahmins* or without propitiating the forest deities.

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