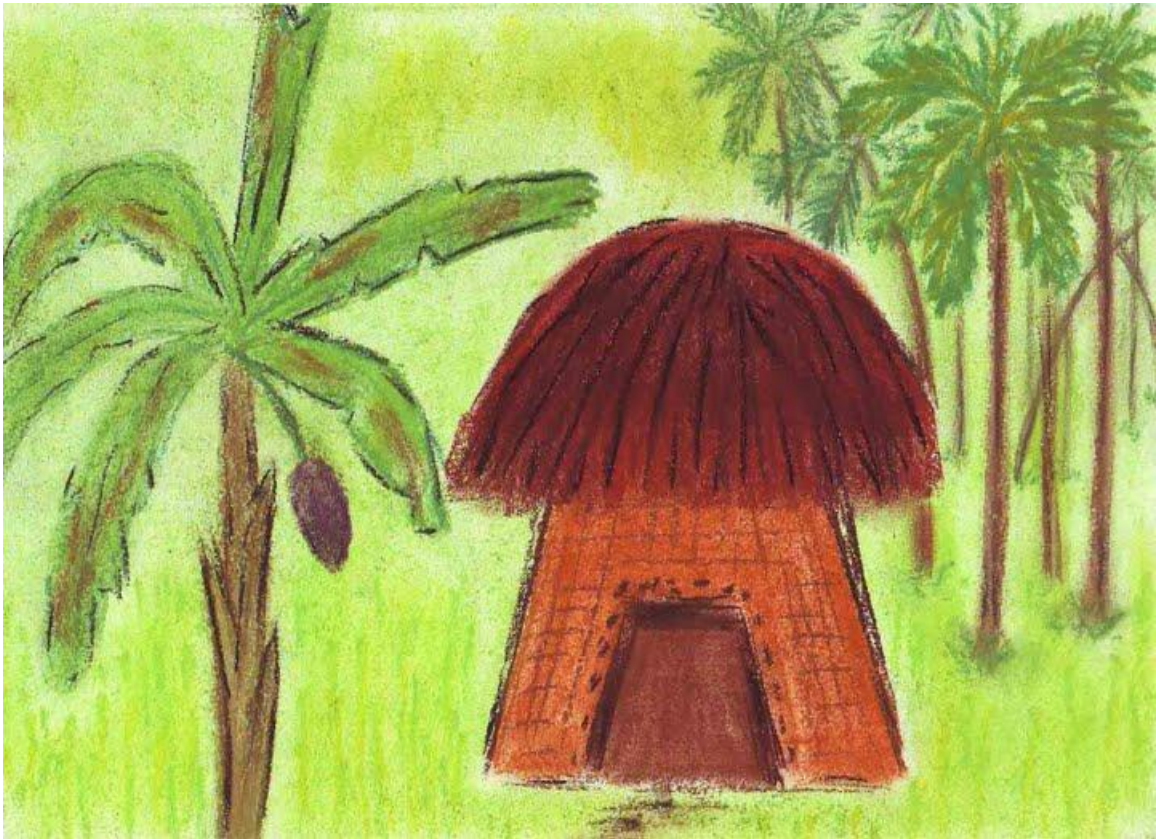


# The Honey Gatherers of Sunderbans

By

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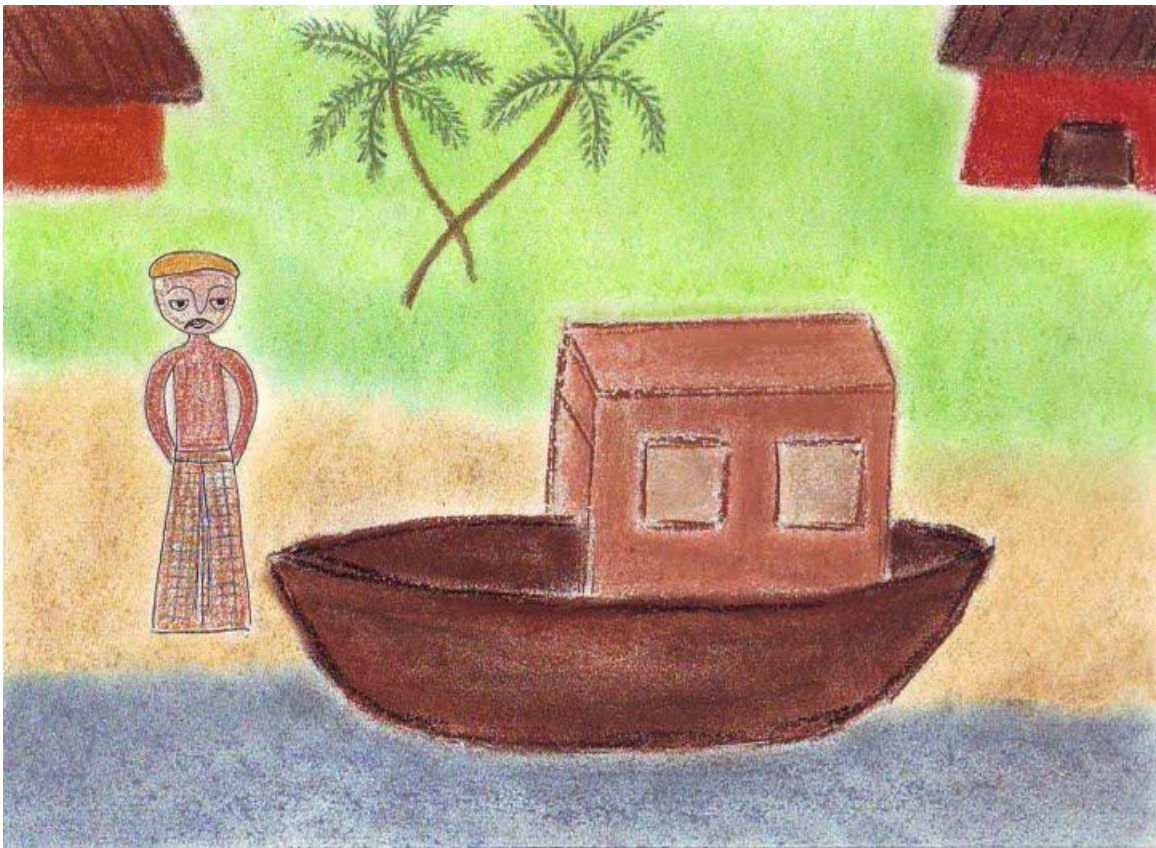


It was April in the evergreen mangrove forest of Sunderbans. Though the heat was relentless, the honey gatherers, the Mowalis, were running helter-skelter. Men were busy repairing and organizing their boats, lugging the kitchen appliances and arranging the provisions of rice, lentils, oil, spices, salt, drinking water... They were getting ready for a two months long expedition inside the impenetrable jungles of the Ganges Delta.

Before leaving, they all gathered at the shrine of Bonbibi, the goddess of the forest, to invoke her protection against the many dangers of the

jungle. The jungle was infested with the most ferocious man-eating tigers. Bonbibi was said to have special powers to control the fierce beast that could leap out of water to drag a careless man sitting on the prow of his boat. There were also countless poisonous snakes and hordes of frightening creatures.

The people of Sunderbans had always been extremely courageous and with the blessings of Bonbibi, they had befriended the inhospitable jungle. For their courage, they had been rewarded with uncountable bounties like honey, wood, medicinal plants...



Gaffar belonged to the community of Mowalis, the honey gatherers, settled at the edge of Sunderbans. Luck had always smiled on him. Every year, he came back from the honey hunting expedition with a record breaking harvest of honey. And more than that, he had never lost a single

man of his team to the tiger. Luck had made him confident. May be too confident!

Gaffar and his team of 6 people gathered on the banks of the river. The boat race that marked the beginning of the honey season was about to start.

A single gun shot rang into the air and Gaffar launched his boat with an expertise no other Mowali had. Soon his boat shot past everyone. He would be the first to reach the islands that promised a bountiful harvest of honey.

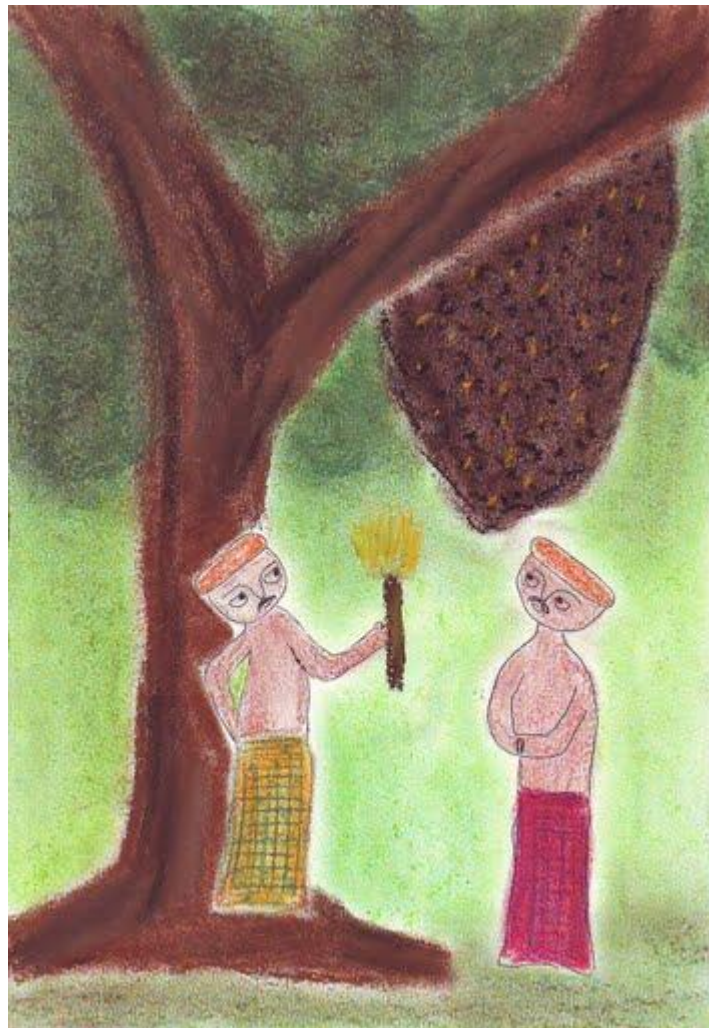


After several hours spent cruising through the maze of big rivers, estuaries, rivulets and creeks, Gaffar anchored his boat on the banks of the soggy forest. All men jumped down on the slippery ground, taking care to avoid the skin-tearing pointed roots that tripped those who set foot in

the mangrove swamps. Then the team proceeded towards the depth of the forest in search of bees.

To lure the wild giant honey bees, Gaffar sprinkled little honey mixed with water around the trees. The bees appeared and he followed their buzzing movements that would undeniably lead to a beehive hidden in the dark forest.

Gaffar and his men walked all through the afternoon. The going was painful and nerve-racking. Ignoring the sweat pouring from their bodies, they staggered and stumbled in the tangled mess of branches and roots, continuously alert to the unseen rustle behind bushes.



At last a distant overwhelming hum of bees drew their attention. They craned their neck to scan the forest canopy.

“Allah! Allah! I can see something over there,” Ghalib, Gaffar’s cousin, shouted excitedly, pointing to an immense dark mass dangling beneath the forked branch of a Sundari tree.

“Baa lo! Such a huge one! Nearly 2 metres long! And so full! It is going to give us no less than 30 kilos of golden nectar to sell in the market,” cried out Gaffar.

“We are going to be rich,” chorused the two Mowalis.

Immediately, without wasting a minute, Ghalib lit the smoke torch made out of the dried golpata leaves of the mangrove palm, wrapped his head in a gamcha (towel) to avoid bee stings and in a flash climbed the tree. Thanks to the thick smoke, the bees were blinded and driven away. With his bare hands, Ghalib dispersed the lazy ones and hurried to cut the gooey chunks of honey from the comb.

“Slice off the whole comb,” shouted Gaffar.

“I can’t do that,” retorted Ghalib. “How will the bees rebuild their colony? Moreover that will terribly displease Bonbibbi.”

“Do as I say,” screamed Gaffar mad with anger. “Slice off the whole chunk.”

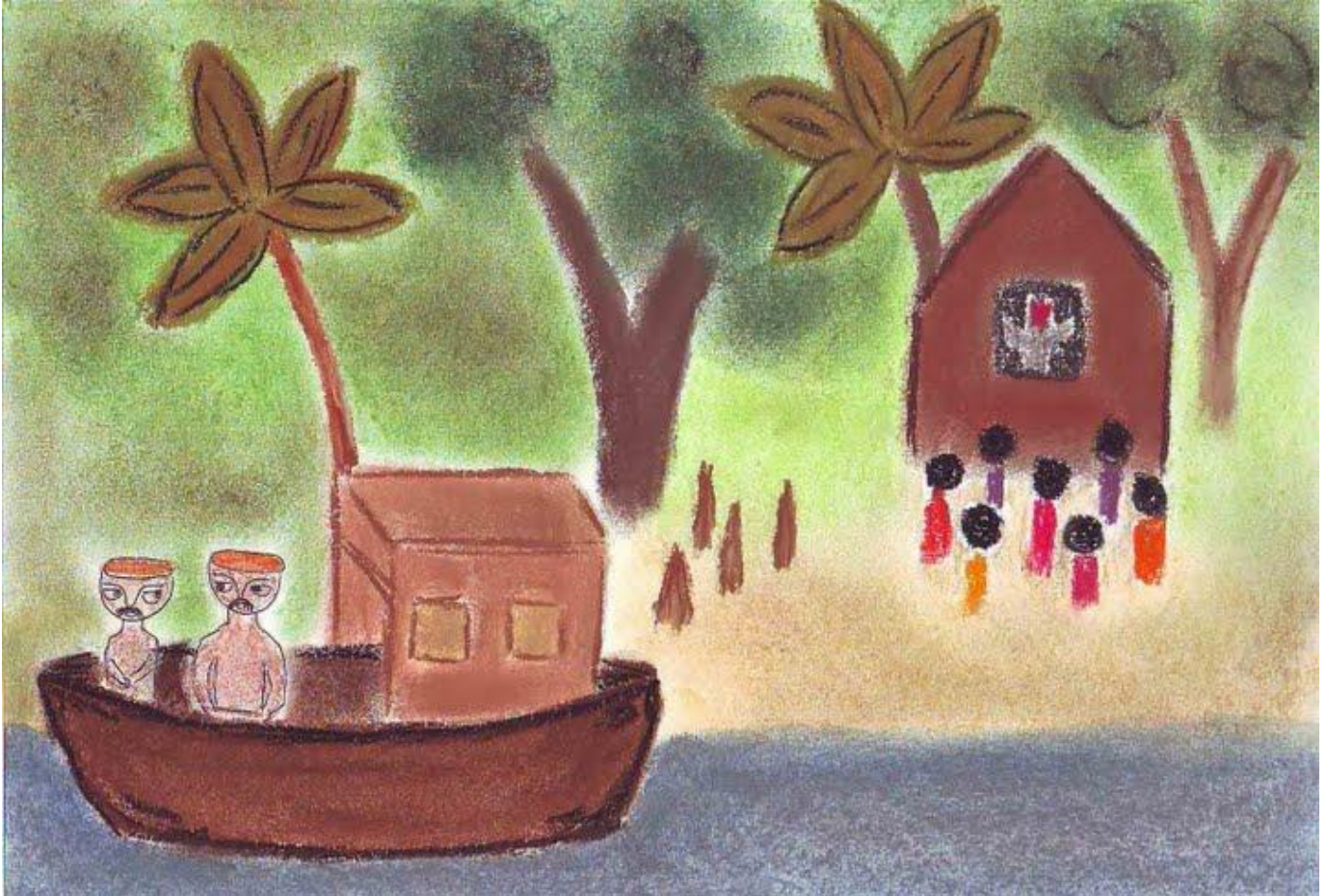
Soon the whole honey comb was painstakingly brought down and kept in the dhama, a container designed to store the dislodged hive.

“Let’s go away quickly,” shouted Gaffar.

At the boat, the honeycomb was squeezed to extract the glutinous honey in an earthen pot.

“Don’t mix sugar,” exclaimed Ghalib. “Bonbibi won’t forgive us.”

“Forget about Bonbibi,” Gaffar snapped.



The honey season was over. The honey gatherers were going back to their village. But before that the tradition wanted that they all stop at the shrine of Bonbibi to thank her for her protection and the good harvest.

Gaffar had no time. He was in a hurry to get back to the village to sell his bumper harvest at the best price.

“Let us stop to make an offering of honey to Bonbibi,” said Ghalib worriedly.

“Why should we leave something for her?” argued Gaffar. “We took the risks. We did the hard work.”

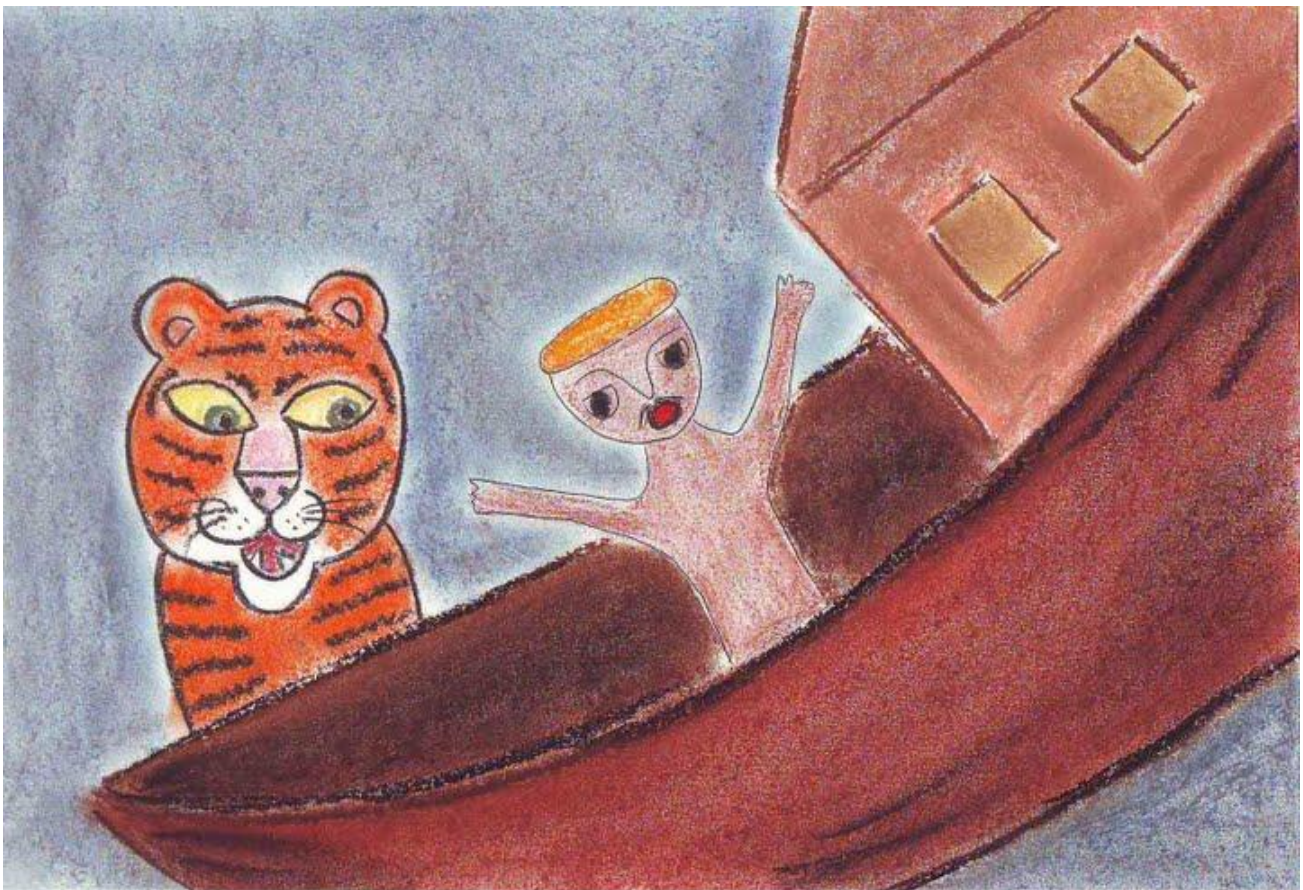
“Yes, I know,” said Ghalib hesitantly, “but Bonbibi should be thanked. She is our deity. She controls the tiger and keeps it away from us. She blesses us with bountiful harvests. She deserves our gratitude. ”

“Nonsense,” shouted Gaffar. “You, superstitious idiot, have you ever met or talked to Bonbibi in person?”

“Yes....euh....No,”

“Then why thank somebody you have never met,” Gaffar said with growing arrogance.

“I guess you are right,” replied Ghalib meekly.



Gaffar's boat was reaching the village when unexpectedly, out of the water, propelled by an immense strength and a terrible ferocity, a tiger jumped.

"Help! Help!" screamed Gaffar.

But of course, nothing could be done against the most ferocious of the predators.

Had Bonbibi decided to teach Gaffar a lesson? Nobody will ever know!! But ever since then, the Mowalis never forget to thank Bonbibi for her protection and her generosity in providing them with the warm golden nectar fit for the gods.