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Poetics of *Johuranama* as a Specific Genre of Literature

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ABSTRACT

Johuranama (also spelled *Johurnama*/*Jahurā-nāmā* in some sources) designates a cluster of vernacular verse narratives circulating in and around the Sundarbans delta (India–Bangladesh), most prominently the *Bonbibī Johuranama* tradition. Produced as chapbook literature and sustained through recitation and performance, *Johuranama* occupies a distinctive generic position at the intersection of *pir-sāhitya* (Bengali Muslim hagiographic-epic writing), local ecological imagination, and ritual-theatrical enactment. This article develops a philological and genre-poetic account of *Johuranama* by (1) defining its genre ecology (textual, performative, and material circuits), (2) modeling its poetics across narrative architecture, versification and diction, figurative systems, and pragmatic functions, and (3) proposing criteria that differentiate *Johuranama* from adjacent Bengali narrative forms (e.g., *mangal-kāvya*, *panchali*, and *kissa* more broadly). Methodologically, the study combines rhetorical genre theory with close reading and discourse-oriented philology, emphasizing how formal features (episodic plotting, formulaic invocations, hybrid lexical registers, and repetitive rhythmic units) organize cultural meaning. The results indicate that *Johuranama*’s poetics is best understood as an action-oriented “ritual epic” mode: a narrative form whose aesthetic devices are inseparable from its performative aim—producing protection, ethical restraint, and an intelligible human–nonhuman order within a hazardous mangrove environment. The discussion addresses intermediality (recitation, folk theatre, and modern adaptations) and argues

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that *Johuranama* exemplifies a genre of “situated poetics,” where environment, livelihood, and multilingual contact structure literary form.

Keywords: *Johuranama*; Bonbibibi; Sundarbans; Bengali *pir-sāhitya*; genre poetics; folk epic; panchali; performance; ritual narrative; hybridity of diction; ecological humanities; rhetorical genre.

I. INTRODUCTION

Genres are not merely classificatory containers; they are historically stabilized ways of making meaning in recurrent social situations. Rhetorical genre theory, in particular, frames genre as “social action,” linking textual form to the motives and exigencies that call it into being. Within such a framework, *Johuranama* can be approached not only as a “story about Bonbibibi,” but as a genre system: a set of textual and performative practices that mediate risk, ethics, and belonging in the tidal world of the Sundarbans.

Scholarly discussion of *Johuranama* most often appears in studies of the Bonbibibi cult and Sundarbans narrative culture, where the *Bonbibibi Johuranama* is treated as a key mythic text read aloud, recited, and adapted into folk theatre forms. Yet the genre itself—*Johuranama* as a form with its own poetics—requires more explicit philological and formal description. Ipshta Chanda’s influential article frames *Johuranama* as a “genre” produced and circulated as both literature and performance in the border-spanning mangrove region, arguing for interpretive methods attentive to plurality and local logic. Building on that premise, this article asks: what formal features make *Johuranama* recognizable as *Johuranama*? How does its poetics—meter, formulae, episode structure, lexical register, and performativity—encode a particular moral and ecological order? And how does *Johuranama* differentiate itself from neighboring narrative verse traditions?

The term *Johuranama* is frequently glossed through its components—*nama* (“book,” “account,” “chronicle”) and *johur/jahur* (explained in different ways in scholarship and commentary)—but its literary significance lies less in etymology than in function: it is a narrative form that authorizes, protects, and regulates action. Crucially,

the *Johuranama* storyworld is not a purely symbolic elsewhere; it is anchored in lived geography, labor, and hazard. Studies of Bonbibí emphasize that the narrative accompanies forest-going livelihoods and frames human–tiger relations, risk, and restraint.

The thesis of this paper is that *Johuranama* exhibits a “ritual-epic poetics”: a poetics of episodic narration and rhythmic repetition designed for recitation and re-performance, where aesthetic strategies (formulae, hybrid diction, patterned action sequences) are subordinated to pragmatic aims—protective invocation, ethical regulation, and community coordination under environmental pressure

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research situates *Johuranama* within a Sundarbans cultural sphere where chapbook texts, shrine practices, oral recitation, and theatrical enactments circulate together. The *Johuranama* narrative is repeatedly described as widely popular and frequently recited, with performances often focusing on the dramatic “Dukhey” episode. Annu Jalais’s widely cited short piece in *Indian Folklife* summarizes the Bonbibí narrative as a boundary-bridging story that structures interreligious and human–nonhuman relations in the delta. Sufia M. Uddin’s article in *Asian Ethnology* develops the argument that religion, place, and life in the Sundarbans are co-constitutive, and that Bonbibí-related narrative and practice articulate a lived environmental ethic.

Chanda’s article is the most direct literary intervention, treating *Johuranama* as a genre and warning against interpretive shortcuts that impose external categories while overlooking the texts’ internal logic and plural cultural address. Complementary work in performance and adaptation studies traces how the story moves across media, including folk theatre (*jatra/palagaan*) and contemporary reworkings (e.g., in the orbit of *Jungle Nama* discussions), highlighting the narrative’s multimodal life.

To theorize *Johuranama* as genre, this article draws on rhetorical genre theory, particularly the claim that genres are typified responses to recurrent situations and thus embody social motives. This perspective is compatible with Bakhtinian approaches to

speech genres that emphasize addressivity, social circulation, and the shaping force of relatively stable utterance types. A journal-published version of “The Problem of Speech Genres” is used here as a theoretical bridge between philological form and social function.

Existing scholarship richly documents *Bonbibī* belief, *Sundarbans* ecology, and syncretic practice, but it less often specifies *Johuranama*’s formal poetics in a systematic way (narrative architecture; formulaic devices; dictional stratification; performance pragmatics). This paper addresses that gap by offering an integrated poetics model grounded in textual and performance-aware description.

III. METHODS

This is a qualitative, philological genre study using a triangulated method:

1. **Genre-ecological mapping:** describing the circulation of *Johuranama* across print (chapbook/pamphlet), shrine recitation, and theatrical enactment; and treating these as one genre system rather than separate “text” and “context.”
2. **Close reading for poetics:** analyzing recurring formal features—episodic plot design, formulaic openings and invocations, rhythmic/metrical organization, lexical registers, and patterned speech acts (blessing, warning, vow, command).
3. **Rhetorical genre analysis:** interpreting formal features as responses to recurrent exigencies (dangerous forest labor, intercommunal negotiation, moral economy of extraction), consistent with genre-as-action frameworks.

Primary textual attention is given to scholarly descriptions and analyses of *Bonbibī Johuranama* and *Johuranama* as a genre family, including accounts that document its panchali-like recitational life and its adaptation into *palagaan/jatra* performance. When

the paper includes illustrative phrasing, it does so in short, non-extensive fragments, focusing on linguistic features rather than reproducing long passages.

IV. RESULTS. POETIC SYSTEM OF *JOHURANAMA*

The poetics of *Johuranama* can be described as a structured set of formal strategies that jointly enable memorability, recitability, and ritual efficacy. The following results synthesize these strategies into a genre-specific model.

(1) Episodic architecture with a protection-oriented teleology. Accounts of *Johuranama* commonly note a two-part macro-structure in the Bonbibī tradition: a cosmogonic/legitimizing episode (origin, mandate, establishment of authority in the tidal land) and a crisis-rescue episode centered on human vulnerability (often the Dukhey narrative). This architecture is not merely narrative convenience; it is teleological. The first part establishes jurisdiction—who rules the forest, by what mandate, and under what moral conditions. The second part demonstrates enforcement and mercy: protection is granted to the morally “right” subject (typically framed as innocent, non-greedy, properly invoking the protector), while transgressive extraction and betrayal trigger danger. In genre terms, the narrative resolves a recurrent exigency: how to enter a lethal environment and return, and what ethical discipline makes that return imaginable.

(2) Formulaic invocation as a core compositional device. *Johuranama* is repeatedly described as a recited text, read out in ritual contexts (before forest entry; during worship) and functioning as a performative utterance, not only as representation. This correlates with a poetics of formulae: recurring invocations, praise epithets, and oath-like sequences that can be inserted at critical narrative moments (danger, crossing, confrontation). Such formulaicity supports both memorization and the pragmatic sense that “saying the story” does something—summons protection, stabilizes fear, or reasserts boundaries.

(3) Hybrid diction: a stratified lexicon signaling authority, locality, and contact. Studies of *Johuranama* highlight its linguistic confluence—Bengali with strong Persian/Arabic (and related) lexical presence, often associated with “Musalmani Bangla”

and *pir-sāhitya* traditions. Poetic effects arise from this stratification: elevated, authority-marked lexical items cluster around divine mandate, judgment, and miraculous power, while local/deshi vocabulary anchors the mangrove environment, labor practices, and material life. The alternation creates a stylistic oscillation between cosmic legitimacy and local immediacy—a key signature of the genre.

(4) Character system as ethical topology. *Johuranama*'s dramatis personae function less as psychologically developing individuals than as ethical positions embedded in the delta's risk economy: protector figure(s), the forest's dangerous sovereign/antagonist (often tiger-associated), mediators, and human agents whose greed, fear, innocence, or betrayal determine outcomes. Scholarship consistently emphasizes the narrative's role in framing human–tiger relations and forest ethics. The poetics here is typological: characters are “portable” across performances and retellings because they are moral roles in a recurrent situation-type.

(5) Chronotope of the tidal frontier: space-time patterned by crossing and extraction. The Sundarbans setting is not passive scenery; it dictates narrative pacing and event structure: departure, river-crossing, entry into forest jurisdiction, confrontation, and return. This produces a chronotope of threshold movement (home/forest; village/mahal; safe/danger). The genre's recurrent scene grammar mirrors livelihood routines documented in ethnographic and cultural studies of Bonbibi practice. Aesthetic repetition—returns to the motifs of tide, boundary, and jurisdiction—creates the sense of an environment that continually remakes limits.

(6) Intermedial poetics: text designed for re-performance. *Johuranama* is repeatedly linked to performance traditions (e.g., *jatra/palagaan*) and to multimodal life beyond the page. This produces a poetics of dramatic segmentation: scenes of confrontation and rescue are especially “stage-ready,” while formulaic passages work like performative anchors (openings, blessings, climactic invocations). Even when printed, the text's dominant orientation remains oral/performative.

Taken together, these features define *Johuranama* as a genre whose poetics is inseparable from function: it is a narrative technology for sustaining ethical extraction, social coordination, and existential meaning under conditions of environmental precarity.

V. DISCUSSION

From a genre-as-action perspective, *Johuranama* is distinguishable because it is a stabilized response to a particular recurrent situation: the necessity of entering a dangerous forest to secure livelihood and returning alive with moral legitimacy. The genre's formal features—episodic legitimating + rescue structure, formulaic invocations, hybrid diction, and performance orientation—are not decorative; they are functional solutions to that situation.

This helps explain why *Johuranama* persists across textual and performative channels. Where purely literary epics often emphasize heroic individuality, *Johuranama* emphasizes correct relational positioning: humans must recognize forest jurisdiction, restrain greed, and invoke protection appropriately. Jalais's "bridging worlds" framing underscores how the narrative mediates boundaries—religious and ecological—by offering a shared grammar of conduct. Uddin similarly shows that place-based religious narrative and practice articulate a lived ethics in the Sundarbans, aligning story with survival.

Descriptions of *Johuranama* frequently place it in *pir-sāhitya* and *panchali/kissa* continuums, and some scholarship (including modern literary commentary around related adaptations) calls it a kind of "folk epic." The "epic" label captures scale and conflict (cosmic legitimacy, battles, sovereignty), but *Johuranama* differs from classical epic expectations in two important ways:

1. **Pragmatic anchoring:** its narrative authority is repeatedly activated in ritual and livelihood contexts (recitation before forest entry; shrine reading).

2. **Ethical didaxis over heroic individuation:** the central drama is not the hero's conquest but the community's ongoing negotiation with a nonhuman-dominated environment.

The genre is thus best described as **ritual epic** or **situated epic**: epic-like narrative energies embedded in a specific life-world and activated through performative repetition.

Recent scholarship on adaptations and multimodal iterations shows that the *Johuranama* storyworld can be re-authored across media while retaining its core genre logic: episodic structure, dramatic rescue, and moral ecology. The genre's portability derives from its typified scene grammar (crossing, confrontation, invocation, rescue) and its formulaic-linguistic anchors.

At the same time, modern recirculation risks flattening the genre into a "syncretic myth" or a purely allegorical environmental fable. Chanda's warning remains methodological: reading *Johuranama* primarily through external frames can obscure the texts' own literary and cultural intent. A poetics-centered approach resists this flattening by showing how specific formal devices generate meaning and efficacy.

The hybrid register documented in commentary and scholarship is not only evidence of contact; it is a poetic resource that marks shifts in authority, ritual intensity, and locality. From a philological standpoint, *Johuranama* invites analysis akin to speech-genre studies: how stabilized utterance types (invocations, vows, commands, blessings) circulate, and how their formal regularities sustain communal action.

VI. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that *Johuranama*—exemplified by the Bonbibi narrative complex of the Sundarbans—constitutes a specific genre with a recognizable poetics. Its distinctiveness lies in a ritual-epic mode that fuses episodic legitimating narrative with crisis-rescue demonstration, organized through formulaic invocation, hybrid diction,

typological character roles, and a chronotope of tidal crossing and forest jurisdiction. These formal features function as a genre-specific solution to recurrent Sundarbans exigencies: hazardous livelihood, ethical extraction, and the need for a shared grammar of protection across plural communities. Future research can extend this model through (a) manuscript/chapbook textual comparison across named *Johuranama* variants, (b) metrical and prosodic analysis of recitational performance, and (c) ethnographic poetics documenting how contemporary readers and performers treat the text's language as efficacious action.

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