

The Plight of the Honey Collectors in Sundarban: Challenges, Uncertainties Strategies and Survivals

Dr. Namrata Kothari

Assistant Professor Department of Political Science BHK Mahavidyalaya.

Sundarban is the world's largest continuous mangrove forest of which almost two-third belong to Bangladesh and one-third to India.¹ The Sundarban is ecologically a southern part of the Gangetic delta between the river Hoogly in India on the west and the river Meghna(course of Brahmaputra) in Bangladesh on the east and is bounded by the Ganga –Padma and the Padma- Meghna on the north and the Bay of Bengal on the south. The tract, thus defined covers about 435km in length and includes an area 72,727sq km, having parts from the districts of North and South 24 Parganas of West Bengal of India and from the districts of Khulana and Bakhergunj in Bangladesh. This tract known as Sundarban has been politically been divided into two constituent units of two sovereign countries on and from India's independence (Aug,1947). The larger part was included in Pakistan(now Bangladesh) and smaller part in India. The Indian part of Sundarban got bifurcated into two districts- 24 Parganas North and South. The larger part of Sundarban in India was included in the district of 24 Parganas South.²

The Sundarbans is known for its Royal Bengal Tiger, tidal waterways, mudflats and small islands of salt tolerant mangrove forests. It has numerous flora and fauna including species of birds, spotted deer, crocodiles and snakes and abundance of Sundari (*Heritiera fomes*), Gewa (*Excoecaria agallocha*), Goran (*Ceriops decandra*), and Keora (*Sonneratia apetala*). Additionally, the Sundarban serves a crucial function as a protective barrier for the millions of inhabitants in and around Khulna and Mongla against the floods that result from the cyclones.

The Sundarbans has also been enlisted among the finalists in the New 7 wonders of Nature. The Sundarbans provides a unique ecosystem and a rich wild habitat.

The Sundarbans plays an important role in the ecology of southwestern region of Bangladesh as well as in the national economy. It is the single largest source of forest produce in the country. The forest provides raw materials for wood based industries. In addition to it, large scale harvest of non- wood forest products such as thatching materials, honey, bees- wax, fish, crustacean and molluse resources of the forest takes place regularly.

The people who resides in Sundarban area are basically involved in the professions like honey collections, cutting woods and gollpata, fishing, catching crabs, shrimps and collecting snails.³ But among all these works the most difficult job with high risk is honey collection. The honey collectors (Mouli) are mostly living in Gosaba, Hingalgangue and Basanti Blocks of Sundarbans.

In this research paper, researcher is focusing particularly on the plight of honey collectors residing in Indian part. For this, secondary methods is used to collect the data like printed and electronic documents.

The plight of honey collectors is aptly mirrored in front of society through the striking example given by Amartya Sen⁴ –“Bordering on the Bay of Bengal.....there is the Sundarban..... which means “beautiful forest”. That is the natural habitat for the famous Royal Bengal Tiger, a magnificent animal.....The Sundarban is also famous for the honey it produces in large clusters of natural bee-hives. The people who live in the region, desperately poor as they are, go into the forests to collect the honey, which fetches quite a handsome price in the urban markets.....But the honey collectors also have escape the tigers,..... while the tigers are protected, nothing protects the miserable human beings who try to make a living by working in the woods.....”

Therefore this research paper discussed at length the plight of honey collectors known as Mouli or Moule and their unseen challenges, the uncertainties, the coping strategies and their struggle for survival in the forest before and after honey collections. They are one of the indigenous communities who are fully depend on the forest of Sundarban for their income and livelihood. As they belong to the lower rank of the society, because of their hard scrabble existences they live, they are often neglected and looked down by the other villages and government officials. It sometimes appears as if both the mankind and nature are conspiring against them.

The researcher has divided the process of honey collection by Mouli (honey collectors) into three stages so that one can get a clear picture of their hardship and struggle which they are confronted during their process of honey collection. They are-

- i. Before entering the forest;
- ii. After entering the forest;
- iii. Returning from forest;
- iv. Before entering the forest:

Before they starts their journey they have to take three important things with them.

Firstly, the written summon of their death i.e., a mental preparation of no guarantee of returning home after their harvest.

Secondly, financial loan from the Mohajan (Financer) and Thirdly, the written permission from the forest department.

Mouli, the honey collectors not only have to think for themselves but also for their families, as they are economically unsound. Certain important preparation which they have to take before entering the forest of 'Sundarban' for honey collection. It involves some expenses so they take loan from money-lenders locally known as 'Mohajan'⁵. Their stay in jungle vary from 15 days to 1 month and some time even more, so they keep some money with their family to bear family expenses in their absence. And also for themselves, because they need big knife, axe, boat, reserver for honey, pillow, katha, mosquito net, rice, pulse, vegetables, oil, salt, medicines, drinking water for their safety and survival in the jungle.⁶

Moreover, they have to pay a fixed amount of money per member of the group to the jungle terrorist without which they are not allowed to collect honey from the forest. For meeting all these expenses they take loan from 'Mohajan' (financer) with a high rate of interest and promise to sell the maximum portion of honey to them at a fixed rate. Locally, this process is known as 'dadon'⁷ The plight of honey collectors was beautifully sketched out in the verses of Bengali folk poets:

"Tiger kills at shore Crocodile swallows in the water Pirate snatches everything abroad Sailing on the river"

The collection of honey is a team work. Each group is made up of 5 to 10 members. And group leader is either senior most or most experienced in this profession. This trip of honey collection is popularly known as Mahal. But the honey is distributed equally among the members. The best quality of honey is from khalsi and singur trees.

Further, before entering the forest, the prayers are done at the shrines to their deity, dotted among the palm trees and thatched houses of the quiet villages.⁷ In addition, they ask her to protect them against Dakhin Rai, the demon king and the arch rival of Bonbibi. It is a belief of villagers that demon attack them in the form of a tiger.

In absence of husband, the wives of honey collectors perform certain rituals for their safe return. Traditionally, they dress in the mourning clothes, eat vegetarian foods only, do not comb their hairs, and do not shut their doors. If their husband killed by the tiger then they turns to be Widow colony to extend areas of the widow colony of Sunderban. And their sons have to repay the loans of the financer by collecting honey from the forests and this tradition continued unabatedly till now.

Moreover, the episode of economical and mental harassment begins with the need to take permission of the forest officer. They have to pay for official legal declaration of honey collection and also a promise to give a certain quantity of honey in their way back from jungle. And the period of honey collection is also fixed like the period from October and February each year particularly after 8a.m. in the morning but before 4p.m in the evening.

Entering In The Forest

Mouli are confronting with challenges at every step in the jungle. The honey collectors have to follow some statutory instructions for their safe return from forest while getting permission from the forest department. They are advised to enter the forest carefully and in a body, keeping a stick on their right shoulder and wearing a rubber mask of the dummy face on their rear head. Besides, the forest department also uses the electrified human effigy to scare away the tigers which helps the mouli to protect themselves from the menace of the man-eater. But they do not prefer to use the rubber mask on their rear head as it will be a breach of trust with their goddess Banbibi, because it may enrage her. They glorify the power of Banbibi by the message of her saying.⁸

"Amid the dense forest I am Mother of all Devotees endangered will be saved, If I am recalled, Don't envy my devotees who has faith on me"

Mouli used their own indigenously designed club made of the trimmed trunk of 'Garjan' plant to resist the tiger. Now the dreadly journey of Mouli starts in search of bee-hives. For getting the bee hive they have to enter deep into the jungle through big rivers boarding on the boat. There they confronted with the robbers to

whom they have to pay a big amount of money, otherwise they will hijack one or two members of the mouli and tortured them till death.

Moreover, they have strong grievances against the security administration, because they failed to give them proper security even after taking money from them. They are acquainted with the real problems when they reached deep into the forest and the boats stop sailing. And they are encircled with dangers both from land and water. In water, there are crocodiles and poisonous snakes and in land, tigers, bees, wild animals and insects and the grasses which are as sharp as knives and injury their feet and body while walking in the jungle.⁹

Except one or two all the group members get down in land in search of beehives. And other person generally wait in that fix place so that the members can come back easily and he can prepare food and look after the boat.

Cutting good bee-hive is a fact of experience and expertise because bee-hives are natural so not organised like bee farm. Mouli used indigenous technique for honey collection for which they are dependent on bee which are of two types:

- i. Empty bee
- ii. Full bee. And the latter one is important for them.

So the mouli usually wear a special cover made of jute which is very thick and bee cannot enter into it. Then they with the help of a long stick make a kind of fire and smoke and join it with a special kind of tool to smash the bee hive known as “bullen”. Further, they cut the hive in such a way so that they can sell the wax “mome” in the market at a good price. After getting the hive the honey is squeezed, stained by ‘nyakra’ (a piece of cloth) and kept in earthen ‘Khuti’ or ‘Mejla’. These honey is of rare quality known as “Honey of Sundarban” which is of great demand in the international market.¹⁰ A folk poet has rightly compared it with sweet cakes which runs as follows:-

“ Ekhan theke fellam chhuri Bet katlam arai- kuri Neter naam guta guta, Amar bari challish kotha, Tahar upare boshe aache Gur-khaoa ek beta”

Returning From Forest

The mouli cut the bee-hive in such a way that the rest of its parts can again matured as a full bee-hive within 14 – 15 days. A mature bee- hive contains 1- 10 kgs of honey depending on worker bee. But the struggles of mouli does not ends here. They have to return back before the expiration of their permission and seek further permission for selling the honey in local market without which it will be treated as illegal seller and for this police harassment may takes place.¹¹

Another challenging task for mouli is preservation of honey because their lack of knowledge they use poor harvesting techniques like transferring from earthen pot to glass jar, drying in sun or by keeping black pepper or ginger 50 – 100 gm per 10kg of honey. After returning home, the females plays a crucial role in preserving honey in a container and separate the wax from honey. Further, they process the wax to make them saleable in the market and thus help their family.¹²

Finally, honey marketing is another challenging work for them. As mouli take loans from ‘mohajon’ so after returning back they have to sell the honey to them at a fixed rate and at a low profit.¹³ In spite of all these obstacles, the mouli try to keep their honesty and don’t make any adulteration in honey but mohajans does cheat the customer. Moreover, monkey spoiled the bee hives and honey became unable to use.

Last, but not the least their problems are aggravated for their illiteracy which makes them bound to stay in same profession, use of premature indigenous technology, lack of financial support fear of robbers and wild animals and police harassment.

Increasingly, the Indian Government are trying to enforce certain regulations in order to protect the tiger reserves from encroachment. In this direction, permits for honey collectors and fisherman are strictly regulated and anyone without it will faces stiff fines. But government will pay compensation to permit holders killed by the tiger. Steadily, people are also aware of it and therefore the promotion of the region’s honey by NGOs and cooperatives that raise the marketing potential of honey.

Now, here certain pertinent questions arise how we can save these ill-fated honey collectors in the fringe areas of Sundarbans whose life is full of uncertainties and challenges. The answer to this question lies in the governmental policies, initiative, safety measures to be taken to save this indigenous community. Therefore, in this direction government must adopt these measures. They are as follows :-

- i) Govt. must equipped them with protective arms, clothings and communicative aids like walky talky and radio which should be provided free of cost.
- ii) Trained them with some scientific methods of honey collection.
- iii) Government should also develop support system like micro credit, insurance coverage, buyback facility and loan at low interest to save them and their future generation from the hands of money lenders.
- iv) Ensuring them with the right price and market system.
- v) Formation of self help group.

- vi) And also equipped them with other skills so that they will absorbed in other kind of jobs and their fear about losing their profession which is their sole means of livelihood and in turn is one of the major hinderances for promotion of Sunderban tourism. If the government will able to implement these policies and safety measure then we can save their life and reduce their hardship to a greater extent and honey collection can proved to be a profitable sector for Indian national economy.

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