

TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE OF MAWALI, BAWALI AND CHUNIRI COMMUNITIES IN SUNDARBAN

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ABSTRACT:

Traditional knowledge generally refers to the knowledge system practiced by the inhabitants of a particular region, aboriginal information is learned from ancestors and followed by local communities. Traditional knowledge may not always exhibit technological values, scientific thought or idea, but mostly based on regular observations and practices. As a result, it comprises a variety of information to address everyday issues, as well as practical tasks, daily activities, and lifestyle practices. The local inhabitants of Sundarban depend on their traditional knowledge for survival. The Mawali community (honey collector), Bawali community (wood cutter) and Chuniri community (crab and shell collector) has vast indigenous knowledge which helps in their collections. In this paper we have tried to elucidate the various practices of these communities which enhances their well-being.

KEY WORDS: *Traditional knowledge, Honey collection, Crab collection, Mawali, Bawali, Chuniri, Sundarban*

INTRODUCTION:

The Mawali, Chuniri and Bawali are the main bioresource collectors in Sundarban forest area. With the use of indigenous knowledge and traditional beliefs, they gather honey, crab and shell, and wood from one generation to the next. Generally, this knowledge is based on their experience, livelihood, the rules followed by their ancestors, idea of forest environment and belief of *Bonobibi* (the Goddess of the forest).

Mangrove roots, sea-rovers, wild animals are the main challenges of honey collection, crab collection and wood collection. Most of the time, traditional methods are used to help them overcome these challenges. Recently forest department have tried to save the communities from the dangerous wild animals by the distribution of face-mask. The face-mask has to be fitted with girder on the shoulder, just behind the heads of the mawali or the wood-cutters. In

all the reported incidents that had occurred, it was noticed that in most of the cases, the tiger has attacked the man from his backside by guardedly hiding itself. So, by placing the mask on back side, the collectors can force the tiger to comprehend the back side as the front side of himself and thus confusing the beast. So, the tiger realizes that while the man is watching, it is not safe to attack. And then that confused tiger instead of hiding, appears and alerts the man. However, few locals believe, by using masks, they may dishonor or disbelieve their Goddess - *Bonobibi*, devi of the forest. So, they are following traditional customs to overcome the threats.

THE STUDY AREA AND METHODS:

The naturalistic assets, fertile farmlands, fish & prawn barrage etc. in the Sundarban area, are full of biodiversity. These Sundarban areas are full of unique vegetation, the Mangrove and it is the free haunting ground to all kinds of colorful birds and varieties of animals. The Sundarban area, which is situated in the largest delta region of the Ganga-Brahmaputra valley, is one of the largest and famous Halophyte regions in the world. This Halophyte region in the Sundarban, is called as the Mangrove area or '*Badaban*'¹ by the local communities. The Sundarban spreads in an area of 25,500 km². The borders of this region is shared by the two countries viz. India and Bangladesh. Among 25,500 km² – 9,630 km² spreads within India and the rest 15870 km² is in Bangladesh. Sundarban is known as Sundarban Biosphere Reserve (SBR) has the deep forest area 4263 km² and the inhabitant area is 5367 km². This inhabited zone of SBR is outside the deep forest area and this zone is situated both in North and South 24 Parganas district in the State of West Bengal.

The study is based on fieldwork done between 2019 and 2020 in West Bengal's south 24 Parganas district's Kultali and Gosaba blocks. Due to the prominence of several folk populations, including Mawali, Jele, Bawali, and Munda, this research region is significant for studying traditional knowledge. The information was gathered from individuals of various castes and religions who actively participate in groups that collect honey, crabs, and wood. They were cross-checked on the data that was obtained from them. The ethnographical method of data gathering was used throughout the entire research project. Data was primarily gathered by interviewing residents of the area.

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS:

Traditional knowledge of honey collection: The traditional knowledge of honey collection is simple but in practical context too much risky. The Sundarban forest is dangerous for humans and collecting honey is one of the most dangerous occupations because we know the Sundarban mangrove forest is a home to Royal Bengal Tiger. Sometimes the Mawalis collect honey from the forest by fighting against tigers. The honey collection season includes the two Bengali

months of *Boishakh* and *Joistho* (April and May) for a period of fifteen days each. The team comprising of 7 to 8 persons is formed before collection and row to the forest from their village.

While reaching a particular island, all but one of the team disembarks. The two members of every team will climb the tree and they will have to be watched by following up the path of the bees. Thus, the two members again & again will follow up the path of the bees on climbing upon the tree. The whole day passes to complete this work. After getting there, the rest of the team will arrive to the beehive. Generally, the path of the bees may be accomplished just the opposite direction of the air. As the honey collectors usually say, 'finding honey in the trees is tantamount to finding a tiger', every step has to be taken cautiously. Before extracting the honey, the smoke is generated from handmade bolen². The bolen is made up of the dried and green Hetal (*Phoenix paludosa*) leaves. Green leaves used in outer side and dried leaves are used in the inner part of the bolen. The collectors cover their faces except their eyes by a cotton cloth known as *gamcha*. Then they cut the bee hive with a sharp knife after holding an aluminum pot where the honey will be collected. At the time of cutting of bee hive, the collector leaves behind a specific portion of the hive, so that the other bees make a bee hive within 15 days. Then as per rituals, they offer the first piece to *Bonobibi*. Later they carry all the honey to the boat as directed by the *Bhorel* (headman) and his *singhe* (assistant), after entire day of rigorous work of honey collection. As part of the traditional rituals, in the afternoon, they do not enter the forest, since it is believed to be the resting time of the animals and breaching this rule would enrage *Bonobibi*. They stay on the streams for the next fifteen days of the permitted collection season, sleeping in the boat at night.

After the wild honey collection, the most important work is temporary preservation. At first the Mawallis squeeze the honeycomb by their hand and separate unrefined wild honey from yellow wax. Then they put it in a plastic container known as barrel for fifteen days. After returning home, this wild honey is kept in mud pitcher. According to their observation the quality of honey, smell and taste remain intact and the honey remain protected for a long period. They don't mix anything with honey. They belief, this honey is the gift of the forest God and Goddess³.

Traditional knowledge of wood collection: The Pulpit of *Mobarak Gazi* has been founded in different parts of the Sundarban region. The woodcutters in these regions do not enter into the forest of Sundarban to collect wood without praying at the Dais of *Gazi*. They believe themselves to be the followers or accomplice of *Gazi*, a group of Fakir known as *Bauls* used to worship for protecting the woodcutters from attacking or seizing of the tigers. This is the ritual that the woodcutters who decide to cut wood in the region, take company of the *Bauls*, they

clean off the place by cutting the jungles and sketching line after enchanting. In the marked area, seven number of tiny cottages are built. After constructing these cottages of the Goddess, they shower there, and the woodcutters wear new clothes and then they apply *sindur* on their foreheads and arms and worship after entering the adoration yard. Just after this, the *Baul* measures a specific distance with the hand and if the measurement does not accord from the span of one finger of any hand, then it is forecasted that there is a tiger in the neighborhood. Then the *Baul* himself worships and bewitches the undermentioned, for protecting himself and the woodcutters also cry after him "*dhula,dhula, dhular gunra paruk toder chokshe hey baagh-baghini*."4

Evidences are there that only with the help of the worshipping, the woodcutters and even the *Bauls* are unable to protect themselves or their lives from the attacking tigers. Yet this is to be told that at the time of wood cutting, the neighboring woodcutters always depend upon the *Bauls*. The religious Hindu and the Muslim woodcutters bend down their heads with devotion in the name of *Gazi Pirsahab* or his brother *Kalu Gazi*.

To earn their livelihood the Bawalis, at first contact the contractor who auctions the areas laying out from 20 to 100 acres for collecting timber. This contractor engages those bawalis to collect sundari, garan, gewa, keora and other trees from the vast Sundarban region. The cutting of trees is mainly done in the rainy season. At first, generally in the month of Asadh, they identify the trees which is to be cut. Then at the scheduled time, the bawalis start to cut the trees in a group of 6-8 or 10-12 under the leadership of a *Sardar* (groupleader). Usually, the time of cutting the trees starts on and from September to February. During this time the bawalis build their homes, which are called '*tongs*', about 6 feet above from the ground to save their lives from the ferocious man-eaters, the tiger. According to the rules and regulations, they live in the tongs where they can cook in a separate place, use sweet water for drinking and cooking but saline water is used only for washing. Again, in the jungle area they encounter the pirates. To save themselves from the pirates, bawalis live in groups on a large boat by making roofs and mats with *Nypa fruticans* (Nipa plam) which is called golpata.

Traditional knowledge of crab collection: The crab collectors (Chuniri) use their traditional knowledge during the process of collecting the crabs in the narrowest creeks of the forest. According to crab collectors, the crabs are collected in between September to March though, the best time is from November to March. They follow the definite Lunar cycle; the new moon and the full moon is commonly known as *Suklapaksha* and *Krishnapaksha* respectively. *Purnima* is the local name of the day of full moon and the day of new moon known as *Amabasya*. The collectors collect a number of crabs during the period of 5 days, starting from *Suklapaksha* and *Krishnapaksha* and this time the tides are the strongest. In this period the

ditch of the river is also flooded. Most of the crab collectors are very eager to collect the crabs at this time. After the period, the tides are less. Thus, the crab collection starts again at times of full moon or new moon. Generally, most of the collectors begin their crab collection before 5 days of *Amabasya* or *Purnima*. This period, that is before full moon or new moon is called as 'Gon'. The collectors never start their first collection of crabs on Tuesday or Saturdays or on the full moon or new moon. To preserve the crabs, they also have to carry 800-1000 kg of ice and placed in wooden cold storage containers. They spent the entire period in the boats. For this the crab collectors have to carry with them rice, grocery items, drinking water and vegetables.

The traditional method involves the use of an iron rod (*sheek*), having curved ends popularly called *Ankar/Anksi* are used by the crab collectors to dig the holes where the crabs are found. Sometimes they use their hands for collecting the crab to avoid the breaking of any leg of crab. An experienced crab collector usually knows the holes where big crabs reside. Larger crabs have greater market value.

The Chuniri community (crab and shell collector) of the Sundarban utilizes another process to catch the crabs. They themselves made out this device. They make out a chain with fine iron-rod and prepare a net to catch the crabs. There are two types of chain known as *Beri*. The first type of chain is prepared with net. In the middle portion of this net, pieces of fishes are placed as the food-item of the crab and they are placed in the sea-water in times of light tide, by the fishermen. Thus, the fishermen lay out about one- hundred chains one by one. A strong rope is tied with a tall tree and the rope then has been tied with these chains. Then before sunset, the fishermen draw the rope with chain and collect a number of crabs which are enclosed in the net. Another type of chain (*beri*) is made with three iron-rings and net. In this type of net, the crabs may enter from both the sides. In times of high tide these nets are placed in the sea-water and they are picked off the next day- in times of low tide. The crabs after entering the rings and net are unable to escape. So, by this process in a short period of time a huge number of crabs can be captured.

Conclusions: The importance of traditional knowledge is essential for wild honey collection, wood collection and crab collection from Sundarban. The methodologies followed by the local communities help to protect the mangrove vegetation. This knowledge is applied for sustainable use of bio-diversity. Honey collection, wood collection and crab collection are the main livelihoods of these communities in Sundarban and are deeply connected with their daily life.



Photograph:1 Samir Halder, a member of Mawalli community discussed wild honey collection strategy



Photograph 2: A woman from Chuniri community showing three ringed and single ringed *beri* with net



Photograph 3: Minati Maity, A woman from Chuniri community showing meen separation

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