



প্রতিধ্বনি the Echo

A Journal of Humanities & Social Science

Published by: Dept. of Bengali

Karimganj College, Karimganj, Assam, India

Website: www.thecho.in

TRADITIONAL HONEY COLLECTING: EMERGING LIVELIHOOD PROBLEMS AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC UPLIFT OF MAWALLIS COMMUNITY IN SUNDARBAN

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Abstract

The mawallis are the professional honey collectors of the Sundarban Impact Zone. They use indigenous traditional knowledge and technique to collect honey from the forest for a long time. At present, few issues are affecting these lives and livelihoods. One of the key issues is the issue of governance. A large number of mawalli are presently left out of the purview of the forest departmental rule and regulation. I have identified some major problems faced by the mawallis during honey collection period. The main objectives of the study are to identify the causes of livelihood vulnerabilities of the mawallis and to find out possible ways to reduce their vulnerabilities. A total of 60 samples of the mawallis were studied and observed. From the observation came out major problems like tiger attack, snake and crocodile, forest robbers, corrupt forest officials, unkind BSF officials, money lender, lack of tools and lack of arms to protect themselves etc. They face other difficulties like political grouping, external social and environmental pressures, migration and the encroachment on this culture by modern lifestyles. All these problems have weakened their traditional knowledge and socio-economic background. For the same causes they are unable to hold on to their traditional heritage and are facing a challenge every day for their livelihood. In this circumstance they are on the verge of losing their socio-economic security. The study recommends some points for protection their livelihood.

KEYWORDS: Sundarban, Mawallis, Livelihood, Emerging problems,

Introduction: Sundarban is the largest single block of tidal halophytic mangrove forest in the world. Sundarban literally means “beautiful jungle” in the Bengali language (Sundar=beautiful, ban=jungle). The name Sundarban may also have been derived from the Sundari trees (*Heritiera fomes*) that are found in Sundarban in a large scale.¹ The

Sundarban delta is shaped at the confluence of the mighty trio of river Ganges, Meghna and Bramhaputra. Sundarban is a home of royal Bengal Tigers and many other species of birds, reptiles and salt-water crocodiles and various types of fauna and including 120 species of fish that inhabit the area. The Sundarbans constitute an area of 26,000 sq

km, of which 9,630 sq km is in Indian Territory and the rest in Bangladesh (Gupta 2001). The Indian component constitutes 106 islands, of which 54 are inhabited, located in 13 blocks in South 24 Parganas District and six blocks in North 24 Parganas District.² Local community lives in SIZ. The majority of the local people depend on the forest resources. The mawallis are the traditional honey collectors in the Sundarban reserve forest. They represent the poorest segment of the local community of Sundarban area. Their livelihood primarily depends on honey collection and fishing activities. They go to forest for resource collection every day. Recently they are facing different types of problems during the honey collection period as like concerns their livelihood. Tiger attack, snake and crocodile attack, forest robbers and other difficulties are common to them. Negligence of state government, and rules and regulation of forest departmental are largely responsible for this situation. Under the circumstances, they are leading a miserable life, the destination of which is utterly uncertain. Their only capital is their strength and they have to work hard for basic amenities of life like food, clothes and shelter. They neither possess any agricultural land nor do possess any other special skills.³ In this situation their socio-economic condition is despondent. They try to sustain their traditional livelihood but impediments always strike them down and restrict their hopes of sustenance and socio-economic uplift.

MATERIAL AND METHODS:

The research has been conducted based on the approach of active community participation and the part of entire research has been emphasized on the traditional knowledge holders' consent. A multi-method approach combining both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools has been applied. The questionnaire based survey, observation and case study methods were developed with respondent

opinion in the fieldwork. Gosaba and Hingalganj blocks of south and north 24 parganas were selected purposively for sample collection. The selection criteria were in the adjacent of forest area in Sundarban. Three panchayets of Gosaba block and two panchayets of Hingalganj block were selected randomly. Finally the samples consisted of five panchayets (Six Zone) of two blocks and two specific traditional occupational communities. A total number of 60 samples from among honey collectors were selected for the present study. The data were collected from the month of January, 2011 to November, 2012, which were analyzed and presented into suitable tables and graph to draw meaningful conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

Mawallis face multi-type problems of honey collection and fishing from Sundarban. According to the mawallis who were approached the problems that they have to face recurrently include: fear of tiger attack or other ferocious animals, forest robber, unkind BSF officials, fanatical dominancy of money lender, lack of tools and lack of arms to protect themselves, corruption of forest officials, lack of capital to make own boat, natural disasters and others factors like non-motorized boat, core area restriction, lack of weather information, false court case, health hazards, etc. Most of the mawallis further opined that RBT is the main problem of their livelihood. In this investigation I found that from 76.66% to 70% of mawallis accuse snake, shark and crocodiles. These constitute primary problems as concerns their traditional livelihood. Out of 60 samples 60% mawallis complained that corruption of forest officials and forest robber is responsible for their livelihood hazards. Overall 85% of mawallis have no BLC, they borrow the BLC from other person. BLC landing, for them, is very costly. It varies from 20000.00 to 25000.00 per annum. These traditional resource

collectors are deprived for the lack of BLC. Other factors responsible for livelihood problems are fear of natural disaster, problems faced by motorized vessels, lack of weather information, health hazards, and unkind BSF officials. These factors are supported by the mawallis. The percentage of support for each factor is respectively as follows: 56.66%, 48.33%, 33.33%, 33.33%, and 36.66%. According to the targeted population, forest robber and forest officials have made their life miserable. They face other external problems like

political grouping, external social and environmental pressures, migration and the encroachment on this culture by the modern lifestyles. They are not secure in forest environment. Their lives are surrounded by extreme poverty and uncertainty. Neither can they tell about the destination of their vulnerable lives. The light of education has not yet reached them. They are totally deprived of the benefits of education. Uncertainty and instability of their livelihood have made their life style different from that of other professionals.⁴

Table-1
Study area of Sundarban and samples size

Community	Block	Panchayet	No. of respondents		
			M	F	Total
Mawallis	Gosaba	Satjeliya	10	0	10
		Rangabeliya	10	0	10
		Lahiripur	10	0	10
	Hingalganj	Kalitala (Shamsernagar)	10	0	10
		Kalitala	10	0	10
		Gogeshganj	10	0	10

Table-2
Problems of mawallis in five panchayets (six zone) in Hingalganj and Gosaba block, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas

Particulars	Kalitala (Samsher -nagar)	Gogesh ganj	Kalitala	Satjeliy a	Rangab eliya	Lahiripu r	Overa ll
Fear of Tiger attack	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
Fear of Snake bite	80	50	80	100	70	80	76.66
Fear of Crocodile & Shark	80.	80	80	60	60	60	70
Corruption of forest officials	60	50	70	50	90	40	60
Forest robber	60	80	80	50	60	30	60
Expensive BLC lending	70	90	90	100	80	80	85
Fear of natural disaster	60	40	80	40	80	40	56.66
Problems faced by motorized vessels	60	50	80	30	50	20	48.33
Lack of weather	60	10	60	20	30	20	33.33

information							
Health hazards	30	10	40	50	20	50	33.33
Unkind BSF officials	70	80	50	0	10	10	36.66

Table in parentheses are percentage values.

Given the condition at stake, majority of respondents believe that everybody cannot harvest honey in the forest. It needs long experience and courage. Nearly a preliminary training of 1 to 3 years is required to learn harvesting honey from forest. During the course of study, I have observed that there is a negative change in the biological resources. This was due to not to maintain rule of sustainability.

Mawallis have no appropriate level of access to basic needs like foods, sanitation, education, health service, drinking water, electric supply and communication service. People severely suffer from lack of drinking water. Water contains excess

level of salinity, iron and in some cases arsenic. Under this circumstance they continued to strive for their rights as citizens of a sovereign nation, demanding for some essential pre-requisites of healthy livelihood. These are life security, issuance of new BLC certificate, justified compensation if died in honey harvesting, right to education, improvement of health service, up-gradation of drinking water service, financial help from local and state government, electrification, core area permit for forest resource, well drainage system, secure shelter form natural disaster and concrete embankment.

Table-3
Demands of mawallis in five panchayets (six zones) in Hingaljanj and Gosaba Block, North 24 Parganas and South 24 Parganas

Particulars	Kalitala (Samsheer-nagar)	Gogeshganj	Kalitala	Satjeliya	Rangabeliya	Lahiripur	Overall
Life security	90	100	100	100	100	100	98.33
New BLC certificate issuing	60	100	100	100	100	70	88.33
Justified compensation if died in honey harvesting	50	10	20	20	40	40	30
Right to education	50	80	30	20	30	20	38.33
Improvement of health service	70	90	60	60	10	70	60
Up gradation of Drinking water service	40	50	30	20	30	10	30
Financial help from local and state government	100	70	100	50	50	90	76.66
Innocent forest officials	70	10	60	100	100	50	65
Electrification	100	80	80	100	80	90	88.33
Core area permit for forest resource	60	90	90	90	30	70	71.66

Well drainage system	40	20	60	0	30	30	30
Secure shelter for save form natural digester	60	100	60	80	40	50	65
Concrete embankment	70	60	70	100	60	80	73.33

Table in parentheses are percentage values.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The study recommends some points for livelihood protection of mawallis in Sundarban. These are:

- 1) To ensure right to use forest resources, provide Identity card or new BLC to actual traditional resource collectors.
- 2) Forest Department should rearrange a resource use area (Buffer zone and core area) with local traditional resource collectors' consent.
- 3) To ensure right to education, free health service, necessary drinking water and life security.
- 4) To introduce alternative livelihood or job for off season.
- 5) State Government should provide interest free credit card to the poor forest resource collectors for saving themselves from mahajan's grip.
- 6) Mawallis face major challenge from forest robbers. To deal with this challenge strong administration and special law enforcing forces like RAF (Rapid Action Forces) combining with Indian Army, Coast Guard, Police, Forest Official and local Community representation should be formed.⁵

CONCLUSION: It is clear from the study that the life and future of the mawallis are extremely uncertain. They are deprived of almost all kinds of basic needs like foods, health, drinking water and secure shelter. On the other hand forest officials forcefully collect both honey and money from the mawallis by means of false cases. Mawallis complained that all the natural resources are being

washed-out in large numbers because of illegal deforestation of other parties. The best quality khalisha (*Aegiceras Corniculatum*) honey is also under threat because the number of khalisha tree is decreasing at an alarming rate. Mawallis do not get the actual market price for their honey because they do not have the right to sell their honey by themselves. Most of the time, mahajan sells it. Besides, honey collection is a seasonal work (only 15 days). They do not have any work for most of the remaining period of the year for lack of agricultural land to cultivate. At the same time, mawallis have to face the most pathetic and unfortunate situation when the earning member of the family die or are being attacked by the ferocious tiger or poisonous snakes or they fall prey to natural calamities, cruel robbers etc. In spite of that, the people of that community do not hesitate to go to the forest to collect honey and for other purposes. On their way of survival they fight against a lot of adverse situations or circumstances like sorrow, hunger, diseases, natural calamity, extreme poverty etc. The steps taken by the Government for the welfare of these vulnerable people of the mawallis community are not enough. Considering all these, the Govt. should be more attentive to the welfare of the mawallis.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS: The research was conducted on the local community of mawallis (honey collectors) in Sundarban Impact Zone. This research work would not have been possible without the support of local Peoples of Gosaba and Hingalganj blocks of West Bengal. Special thanks to ICSSR for two years financial support of

my research works. I acknowledge their support for conducting this research.

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Acronyms & Glossary:

RBT	: Royal Bengal Tiger
SIZ	: Sundarban Impact Zone
Mawallis	: Traditional honey collectors
BLC	: Boat Loading Certificate
BSF	: Border Security Force
Mahajan	: Money Lender