



The Challenges and Coping Strategies of 'Mowal' the Honey collectors of Sundarban, Bangladesh

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Abstract

Sundarban is the leading mangrove timberland in the world which is around one million hectares in total area. Sundarban is famous for its trees, deer and also for its world renowned Royal Bengal Tigers. The people who live nearby the Sundarban are engaged in honey collections, cutting woods and gollpata, fishing, catching crabs and shrimps and collecting snails for their consumption and livelihood. Among all these professionals, 'mowals' are the most vulnerable groups. This group of people needs to face many challenges from the beginning to the end of their journey towards honey collection. Need of money, security, honey market and many other obstacles they defeat with their excellent intelligence and indigenous techniques such as by taking loan from 'mohajon', staying in group to avoid attack of wild animals. By using observation and informal discussion along with secondary data, the researcher wants to know the challenges and coping strategies of 'mowals' throughout their honey collection process in Sundarban.

Keywords: Challenges, coping strategies, mowal, sundarban.

Introduction

About 2.47 million hectares of land covers the forest of Bangladesh¹. Of these, one million hectares covers the whole Sundarbans. Sundarban is sited in the southern coastal region of Bangladesh². Though the forest resources of Bangladesh are declining rapidly but still the forest 'Sundarban' is playing an important role in meeting the needs for water, food, shelter, medicine, fuel wood, and timber³. About one million people depend on Sundarban for their living and livelihoods⁴. Among them many indigenous communities like mowal, bawal and others fully depend on Sundarban for their livelihood and consumption. Not only economic value, Sundarban has a great contribution in saving ecology⁵.

However, the *Mowals* are one of the indigenous communities who depend on Sundarban fully for their livelihood and income. Their lives are full of poverty and uncertainty. As they do not have any formal education, they have minimum likelihood to use world technology. This lack of education makes their lives more vulnerable. So they use the indigenous technology to survive⁶. Sundarban is the only one destination where they can go for their subsistence. Throughout the year they go to the Sundarban to collect honey, catching fish and crabs, collect leaves and others. Among all other sources of income these people choose honey collection because it is more profitable than others, though this is the most challenging profession as well. Only around three months of the year this mowal groups keep themselves busy in honey collection and rest of the year they do other informal work.

Methodology

The researcher in this paper used both the primary and secondary methods to collect data. For the secondary information the researcher took the help of both the printed and electronic documents as well. However for the primary data the researchers used observation and informal discussion methods. To do that the she took help of a group of honey collectors of Sundarban areas and at the same time she talked with a security man of Sundarban to check the validity of mowals experience.

Results and Discussion

General challenges and coping strategies: In taking preparation to go for honey collection in Sundarban: As the mowal are economically poor, they need to think not only about themselves but also about their family before going to the forest. It shows their family responsibilities to their family members.

They need to take some other preparations before going to the jungle 'Sundarban'. As most of the times they cannot manage their expenses they need to go to the rich man, who is locally known as 'mohajon'. As, mowals need to stay 15 days to 1 month and sometimes more than that in the Sundarban, so they need to keep some money with their family so that they can run their family expenses⁷. Moreover as mowals also live a long time inside the jungle they need to purchase something to maintain their appetite.

Besides all these expenses, *mowals* need to pay taka 550 (per head of the group members) to the forest officer for the purpose

of getting a pass, which declares the permission from the government of Bangladesh and they need to pay taka 150 to have an insurance locally called *BIMA* from the same place⁸. Moreover a handful number of money they need to pay to the jungle terrorist, it is around taka 2000 per member of the group. If they fail to give this amount to the terrorist they are not allowed to collect honey from the jungle. As mowals do not have enough money to maintain all these expense they take loans from '*mohajon*' with a high rate of interest and with a promise that they will sell the maximum portion or the whole portion of their honey to that specific *mohajon* with a fix rate⁸. This process is locally known as '*dadon*'.

Honey collection is a group work⁹. Every group is made of 5 to 10 members. There should be minimum 5 members in each group. All groups have a group leader who is the most senior or most experts in this profession. This group leader usually guides all other members where to go or what to do but this does not mean that this group leader gets any special facilities because of his expertise. The distribution of honey among the group members is equal.

The mowals used to take a boat either a small or a big one depending on their capacity to manage. If they don't have their own boat, they need to hire it. Sometimes different NGO provides them boats to go for honey. Some NGO provides boat in free and some provides with monthly installment payment system.

Besides a boat they need to bring a big knife, an axe, '*dhama*' a big container and pitches to reserve the honey. Moreover, they need to take pillow, *kantha*, mosquito net, rice, pulse, vegetables, oil, salt, medicines and drinking water for their daily use⁹.

After entering in the jungle Sundarban: Every step of mowals in Sundarban is the symbol of challenges. Challenges against forest officer, terrorists and wild animals make their journey more vulnerable⁷.

When they start to enter the jungle they need to take the permission of the forest officer which is a story of economical and mental harassment. They need to pay money to have an official legal declaration of honey collection but the mowals also need to give promise that they will give an amount of honey during returning home from jungle. After giving all these things they are allowed to enter the jungle for honey collection.

Bee hive is not available in front point of the jungle. So to get honey they need to go to the depth of the forest through big rivers with the boat. There they face a group or more than a group of robbers or forest terrorists. These terrorists have heavy modern gun which makes the mowals compulsory to pay a big amount of money. If they fail to pay the demanded amount of money, the terrorists hijack one or two members of the mowals. If they cannot pay this money the hijacked person faces

intolerable physical torture from the terrorist and sometimes they face death also. However, to save the group member from the robbers they again come back to the '*mohajon*' to take financial help. After giving the rest of the money they can get back their group members and continue their honey collection.

The mowals have a strong complain against the security administration that, though they are paying the government but the government cannot confirm their security inside the jungle. Moreover they are well informed about the presence of the terrorist but they are not taking any legal steps against them. This is because of their internal connection with the terrorists.

Lastly the real challenge comes when they reach to the deep forest and stop their boats. Both the land and water is dangerous for them. In water, there are crocodiles and poisonous snakes'. On the hand, there tigers, bees, and other wild animals and insects in land. The sharp roots of the trees are another challenge for the mowals to walk through the forests. Moreover there are some kinds of grasses which are so sharp like knives that they get deep injury to the mowals body.

After reaching in a certain place, all the group members except one or two get down in the land and look for the bee hives. It is not so easy to walk miles after miles on the roots with plastic shoes. Moreover as they look for bees their attention always goes upward, so suddenly they may attack by a tiger¹⁰. The person who stay in the boat usually wait in that fix place so that the other members can come back easily and he can cook or can take care of the boat.

In cutting a bee hive: Honey collection from Sundarban is the most challenging profession than other professions in Sundarban. As the bee hives are natural here, the bee hives are not organized like a bee farm. So the bee hives are not available everywhere in Sundarban and all bee hives are not perfect for cutting. As a result, to get a good bee hive is a matter of experience and expertise.

The *mowals* do not follow any scientific technique to collect honey. However, their honey collection process is totally dependent on indigenous techniques^{7,9,11}. First they try to follow a bee to find a bee hive. There are two types of bee, one is empty bee and the other one is full bee. The mowals aim is to follow the full bee. Only one flying full bee can convey the mowals to their expected end.

Before cutting the bee hives the mowals usually wear a special kind of cover on their body. The cover is usually made of jute which is very thick and the bee cannot enter inside this cover. Moreover they cover their full body including their face except their eyes. After that the mowals make a kind fire and smoke in a long stick and join it with the "*bullen*" (special tool to smash the bee hive)¹². Most of the bees except the lazy bees start to fly as the smoke reaches at the bee hive. Then with a special technique the expert member of the group cut the 'honey reach'

part of the hive. They use special technique so that the remaining part of the hive can remain perfect and can able to make honey again. They try to avoid any damage to small bees and its eggs. Moreover they cut the bee hive in a special technique so that they can use and sell the wax "*mome*" in the market with a good price.

The members of the group go different point of the jungle for bee hive and make a special sound to keep contact with each other. They always talk with each other so that the wild animals think they are in group and with this talk they can remain confident. Usually in deep forest near the '*Helati*' trees the bee hive is available. Moreover with their own indigenous experience the Mowals know that the honey of "*khulshi*" flower, "*goran*" flower, "*kakra*" flower, "*kewra*" and "*bayir*" flower is better than other flowers. So, their group members look for all these trees so that they can collect good quality of honey. When they locate a bee hive, they make a sound so that the other members can understand and come near the bee hive.

Usually the group leader climbs up the tree to cut the bee hive. One person holds the long stick to make smoke. The other person helps to hold the pot where they keep the honey. The rest one/two members help them if they need anything and more significantly they keep eyes on wild animal for their security. The person that stays in boat use a whistle locally called "*singga*" so that other members can understand where the boat is waiting for them¹².

The mowals cut the bee hive so carefully that the bees can refill the remaining part and can extend the new part within 14 to 15 days¹². So within two weeks the beehives can turn into a mature bee hive. A mature bee hive contains 1 to 10 kilograms of honey. The amount of honey depends on the worker bees and how the worker bees can deposit honey from the flowers and fills the top. The quality of honey depends on from which flower the bees are depositing honey^{12, 13}.

Before honey collection the mowals make smoke because the bees cannot see in the smoke and due to heat bees fly away. The wings of bees locally known as "*hull*" are so sharp and noxious that if so many bees bite a person at a time, death is sure for him. So to avoid any risk they use smoke, even though sometimes they get attack by the bees. To reduce pain the mowals use hot water in that injured place and after that they use 'honey' or other kinds of anti-septic¹².

Difficulties do not leave the mowals¹³. After collecting honey from Sundarban, mowals return home before the expiration of their permission. Not only that, during the time of returning home they need to take permission again so that they can sell the honey in local market. Without this permission they will treat illegal seller and for this police harassment may occur.

In collecting honey and to preserve it: During honey collection the mowals use a pot named *dhama* which is made of

*beti*¹². They use this pot because it has a wide mouth with whom it is easy to collect honey. Moreover this pot is less expensive than others and this pot does not make any sound. So it is friendly to use.

Preservation of honey is another one challenge for them. After collecting honey, they separate the honey from the wax. Then they keep the honey in a plastic container. They do not waste the wax. The melted wax in heat and gives various shapes with *mome*. This *mome* is a good source of earning for the mowals^{8, 12}.

The mowals try to stay honest in their honey collection profession. Though they face so many obstacles but they don't want to cheat with the people. They do not mix any sugar or water or any other chemicals with honey but *mohajon* does cheat with the customer. The mowals warn the people that if there is sugar with honey, the sugar part will be ice in the refrigerator. Additionally if any one adds water with honey, confirm the honey will be useless with bad smell. Pure honey is thick. Moreover monkey spoiled the bee hives and honey became unable to use.

Result Analysis: Some other social factors related with the challenges and coping strategies for the mowals in Sundarban

Honey market: Without the permission of forest officer the mowals cannot sell the honey in the local market however; it is a matter of lament that there is no true honey market in Bangladesh. Though thousands of mowals and their families are dependent on honey collection from Sundarban but the authority is not concern about their sufferings. That is why the mowals face numerous challenges during and after the honey collection for their subsistence but they can sell it in a commercial way where they can manage some more profit from it. Government of Bangladesh does not pay any attention to save this indigenous community.

As mowals take loans from *mohajon* before their journey, so they are bound to sell the collected honey to the specific *mohajon* with less profit and with a fix rate which is determined by the *mohajon*. Moreover a high rate of interest prevents them to earn a good amount of profit. The mowals of Sundarban think if government sanctions loans with low interest rate, then that will be a great help for them. Moreover they expect from the government and the investors to come forward to save this indigenous subsistence activity.

Family tradition: The geographical location of Sundarban is different from other parts of Bangladesh. This unique geography of this place affects in selecting their livelihoods. Their work opportunity is very limited and most of them are extracting natural resources. To change their livelihood and to bring resiliency in their life they choose migration. However, if they do not go for migration, their livelihood is mostly dependent on Sundarban. They and their family members hardly ever can

change their profession. Their illiteracy makes them more bound to stay in same profession. For example, although honey collection is a challenging profession but their illiteracy doesn't allow them to know other skills to leave it. So, like their father or grandfather they choose honey collection as their profession. Moreover, as this job is their family tradition, in most cases they love this profession to show honor to their previous generations.

Seasonal profession: Honey collection is a seasonal profession which creates an obstruction for the mowals. Three months of the year (Bangla 18th Chaitra to 18th Jaistha) is suitable for honey collection. The rest of the year the mowals remain busy in crab collection, cutting leaves and fishing in Sundarban. If anyone collects honey before or after the specific time, it is not in permissible way. Moreover, with the collaboration of the police department someone can enter the Sundarban except that permitted season to collect honey. The quality of honey is good in permitted period and in other time the honey is too light and not in good quality. It should be mentioned here that the professional and committed mowals do not collect honey except the permitted season. This seasonality really creates difficulty for these people and they try to overcome these difficulties by engaging them in other informal works.

Gender: Gender is an important social factor in honey collection process. In sociological point of view a kind of discrimination and at the same time cooperative relationship is visible in this honey collection activity. According to the honey collectors' opinion, honey collection is a tough job which is beyond female's capacity. Moreover they need to stay a long time in the jungle, so the security (both wild animals and terrorists) is not enough for female members. From that point of view they never think to bring female member with them.

Though there are no female in Mowal groups but their contributions in honey collection is not ignorable. They help the mowals in taking preparations before leaving for honey collection and also after returning home. They help the mowals which things they should take with them. After returning home the females of the house help them in preserving the honey in the container and make separate the wax from the honey. Moreover they try to process the wax to sell in the market and to help the family.

Natural disaster: Natural disaster is very common in Sundarban areas. Various kinds of natural disaster like cyclones, flood, and salinity are very common and they attack them almost every year. As a result, those people (like Mowals) who are totally dependent on Sundarban suffer a lot. Due to disaster a lot of trees destroyed and uprooted and many animals and insect become food and shelter less. All these facts keep an effect on honey collection profession of the Mowals. For example, in 2007 cyclone 'Sidr' made many Mowals jobless as this was one of the severe cyclones in their lifetime. This cyclone uprooted many trees and created difficulties for the eco system diversity. Though as Sundarban is the largest Mangrove

forest in the world, very soon it copes with nature and helps the Mowals as before but for the time being these groups of mowals suffered a lot.

Tourism: Sundarban is the largest and beautiful mangrove forest in the world. World famous 'royal Bengal tigers' and beautiful deer with *Sundari* trees make Sundarban versatile and tourist attracted place in the world. So tourists and the intelligence have a great attraction to come and know the secret of Sundarbans beauty. Taking under commercial purpose Bangladesh government also interested to include it under world tourism. This is definitely good for national economy but Mowals are scared that it will destroy their indigenous professions. This indigenous people don't have any other skills except utilizing Sundarban, so if government takes them for other jobs they think they cannot adjust with that new environment. As a consequence they will be jobless which has great social impacts on society and illegal entrance and crime work will increase as they need to meet their subsistence. Moreover Sundarban will lose its natural beauty.

What does the police security thinks about the difficulties of the honey collectors in Sundarban: The robbers do not use the permitted way so they cannot catch them. The robbers usually enter the forest silently in the dark night. They stay in a big group of 60/70 people but the police are only 5 to 10 in a camp. Sometimes the robbers hide their identity and go inside with the honey collectors. For their own sake, Mowals do not complain always, so they do not go for help. The robbers have heavier and more modern guns than the forest camp police. Moreover the police do not have permission to shoot the robbers, so to take risk against them will be dangerous for their job. Again, if they go to rescue the hijacked mowal, the robbers may kill them. So, though they know the terrorism of forest robbers they remain silent.

They do not ensure any security from wild animals but if any one dies with the attack of wild animals they help the victims' family to find the dead body.

The police security thought, government will create new work opportunity for the Mowals if the government brings *Sundarban* under world tourism. Moreover world tourism will reduce forest terrorism also as the security will be increased.

Conclusion

Honey collection is a challenge for the Mowals. The whole process is full of great uncertainty. To get some more money they accept these challenges where they hear the whistle of death all the times. To save this indigenous group government should imply some policies. Such as: i. By helping them financially with low interest rate. ii. By train them some scientific techniques of honey collection. iii. By ensuring their all kinds of security. iv. By ensuring the legal price and market systems.

If government can assure all these policies honey collection can be a profitable sector for Bangladesh national economy and honey of Sundarban can be world famous honey in the world. Moreover we can save an indigenous community of Bangladesh.

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