

## Leaving the Traditional Livelihood: A Case Study on Mawallis of Sundarban

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### Abstract

The Mawallis are traditional occupational group in the local people of Sundarban. Wild honey collection is their main livelihood. They use most wonderful indigenous knowledge and technique to collect honey from the dense forest. It is their popular livelihood and income. Presently lots of issue affects their traditional livelihood. They try to hold on to their profession but poor socio-economical condition compels them to change their traditional way of earning. Some external and internal social, economical and environmental pressures are responsible for this change. At the same time new generation does not give any positive response in favour of this profession. So the tendency is very clear that it will change in near future. In this study, I try to find out the responsible socio-economical conditions of present scenario behind the changing patterns of traditional livelihood of mawallis community.

**Keywords:** Livelihood, socio-economic background, mawallis, sundarban

Today Sundarban is a world heritage site recognized by The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). It is the largest mangrove forest and active delta of the world. "Sundarban" literally means "beautiful jungle" or "beautiful forest" in the Bengali language (Sundar= beautiful, bans = forest / jungle). The name Sundarbans may also have been derived from the *Sundari* trees (*Heritiera fomes*) that are found in Sundarbans in large numbers. Other possible explanations can be a derivation from "Samudraban" (*Shomudrobôn* "Sea Forest") or "Chandra-bandhe" (name of a primitive tribe)<sup>1</sup>. The main attractions of the Sundarban are unlimited beauty of nature, the world famous Royal Bengal Tigers and Sundari trees, crocodiles, deer, birds and other flora and fauna. The Sundarban constituted of an area of 26,000 sq kms, of which 9,630 sq kms are in Indian territory and the rest are in Bangladesh. The Indian component constitutes 106 islands, of which 54 are inhabited, located in 13 blocks of South 24 Parganas district and six blocks of North 24 Parganas district<sup>2</sup>. It has a deep relationship with the livelihood and culture of Bengal and Bengali. Local people depend on the forest and waterways. Actually Mawallis (Local name of honey collector) are the indigenous livelihood holders who are living at the edge of the Sundarbans by collecting mainly honey<sup>3</sup>. Besides,

they also engage themselves in fishing as honey collecting is a seasonal occupation. The duration of the period depends on forest department. Generally forest department gives permission only for 15 days .They start their journey for honey collection from the month of April to May. During that period they keep themselves busy in collecting honey from the jungle<sup>4</sup>. After the termination of this period, they engage themselves in fishing such as catching fishes, crab, shrimps, etc. But today most of them are shifted in other occupation due to socio-economical and environmental pressure, lack of money, over harvesting, political grouping, insecurity of life etc. The objective of this paper is to observe their socio-economical background and to find out some notable points why they should leave their traditional livelihood.

### **Materials and methods**

The research has been conducted on the approach of active community participation as researchers and the part of entire research have been done on mawalli community's consent. The researcher in this paper used both the primary and secondary methods to collect data. For the primary data the researchers used observation, interview, questionnaire and case study methods. For the secondary information the researcher took the help of both the printed and electronic documents as well. A multi-method approach combining of both qualitative and quantitative data collection tools has been applied. Gosaba and Hingalganj blocks of south and north 24 parganas were selected purposively for sample collection. The selection criteria were in the adjacent 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 zones) of two blocks. The total number of samples was 60 and all of them were honey collectors who were expert in honey collection. They were selected for the present study. The information has been gathered from the local experienced honey collectors during field survey in different areas of both of the districts. The data were collected from the month of January, 2011 to November, 2012, which were analyzed and presented into suitable tables, graph to draw meaningful conclusions.

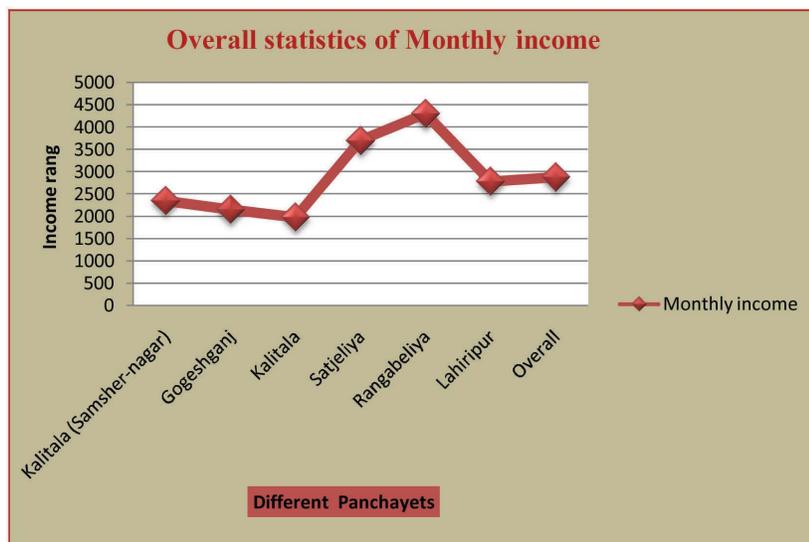
### **Results and discussion**

The Mawallis at Kalitala, Jogeshganj, Satjeliya, Rangabeliya and Lahiripur panchayets were observed to be very poor. They have no life security. When they go to forest for honey collection, they do not hope that they will come back home again. Generally they go to forest for honey collection only for one fortnight in a year and for the remaining days they search for other job like fishing, agriculture etc. The general information regarding the socio-economic profile is presented in a table.

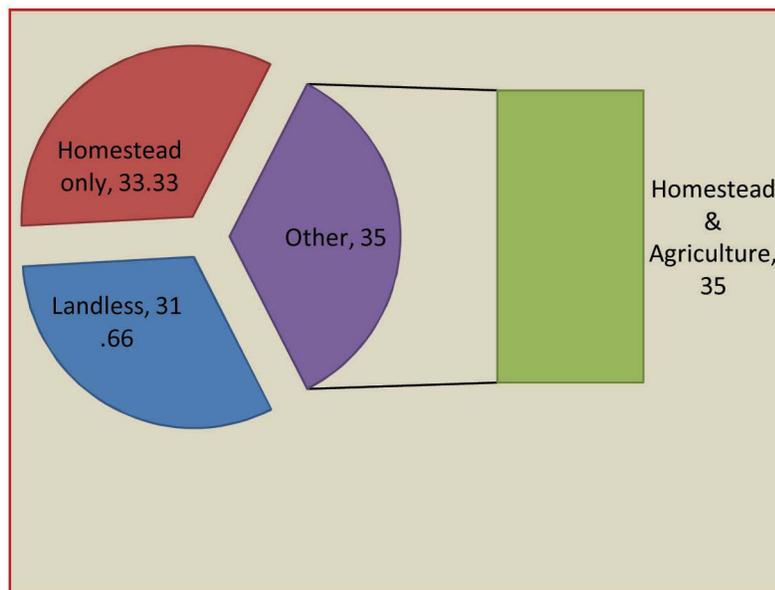
**Table 1:** Socio-economic characteristic of mawallis at five Panchayets(Six zones)

| Particulars                  | Kalitola (Samsher-nagar) | Gogeshganj | Kalitola | Satjeliya | Rangabeliya | Lahiripur | Overall Average |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|------------|----------|-----------|-------------|-----------|-----------------|
| No. of mawallis              | 10                       | 10         | 10       | 10        | 10          | 10        | 60              |
| Average Size of family (no.) | 6                        | 5          | 5.1      | 4.3       | 5.4         | 5         | 5.13            |
| Property (no)                |                          |            |          |           |             |           |                 |
| Landless                     | 30                       | 10         | 40       | 40        | 70          | 0         | 31.66           |
| Homestead only               | 10                       | 30         | 60       | 50        | 10          | 40        | 33.33           |
| Homestead & Agriculture      | 60                       | 60         | 0        | 10        | 20          | 60        | 35              |
| No. of earning members       | 1.4                      | 1.2        | 1.1      | 1.2       | 1.5         | 1.3       | 1.28            |
| Monthly income               | 2350                     | 2150       | 1980     | 3700      | 4300        | 2780      | 2876.66         |
| Yearly credit                | 7600                     | 5000       | 8900     | 4400      | 3300        | 5500      | 5783.33         |
| BLC holder (No.)             | 10                       | 10         | 20       | 0         | 30          | 20        | 15              |
| Non BLC holder (No.)         | 90                       | 90         | 80       | 100       | 70          | 80        | 85              |
| BPL card holder (No.)        | 70                       | 50         | 40       | 90        | 70          | 60        | 63.33           |
| Job card holder (No.)        | 100                      | 100        | 90       | 100       | 100         | 100       | 98.33           |
| Job Experience (No.)         | 25.6                     | 20.5       | 27.7     | 36.7      | 30.5        | 24.8      | 27.63           |
| Job Satisfaction (No.)       | 50                       | 30         | 40       | 60        | 70          | 40        | 48.33           |
| Desire for other job (No.)   | 50                       | 70         | 60       | 40        | 30          | 60        | 51.66           |

Table in parentheses are percentage values.



**Chart 1:** Overall income of *mawalli* communities (60 samples)



**Chart 2:** Overall property of *mawalli* communities (60 samples)

The above table indicates that the people have poor economic condition. It represents that 63.33% of mawallis are of BPL category and 51.66 % are totally unsatisfied in their traditional job. I found 98.33% of mawallis have job card but all do not have any other job in offseason. In this investigation I found that overall

31.66% mawallis are completely landless and 33.33% mawallis have only homestead and remaining 35% have agricultural land and homestead. The number of overall average family member in samples household is 5.13, whereas the average numbers of earning members are only 1.28. Overall household's income of 60 samples is 2876.66 per month. I found the variations in income in different panchayets like Kalitala-Samshernagar (2350.00), Jogeshganj (2150.00), Kalitala (1980.00), Satjeliya (3700.00), Rangabeliya (4300.00) and Lahiripur (2780.00). The variation in income depends upon various factors like core area or buffer area, BLC card holders or non BLC card holders, boat owner or not, earning members of the family. Generally buffer area is minimal resource area rather than core area. BLC card (Boat License Certificate) is a registry card of forest resource collectors. Most of the mawallis have not their own boat, fishing net and also BLC card. Some mawallis work as wage labourers<sup>5</sup>. In this study I found that only 15% mawallis have their own BLC card. They borrow these things from others. They lease BLC for one year by paying Rs.18000.00 to 22000.00. So financially they depend on the mahajans (Money Lender). They hire boat from the mahajan with payment of Rs.2000-2500 per fortnight. For the loan of money from the mahajans pay they are to 6% interest per month along with the share part of collected honey. Extreme hunger of mahajans increases the vulnerability of their life. Most of the mawallis work as bonded labour of mahajan. Other hand forest department gives permission only for 15 days (one trip). If someone overstays then they charge 500 rupees as penalty. Some time forest officials collect ransom money. According to rules of forest department all the collecting honey must be kept in forest office. Forest department paid only some fixed rupees as per quantity of honey. So it is clear that, the total amount of their income from honey collection is not enough. The amount of expenditure of the Mawallis is higher than their total of income. They are to buy their daily necessary household goods with this little amount of income. Moreover they are to spend money for the treatment of the various unexpected diseases. Some time they face natural calamities like *ila*. They also spend some money for repairing some other essential instruments such as boats, nets etc<sup>6</sup>. In this situation they can not able holding their traditional livelihood and it is changed gradually.

From the overall observation of the statistics it is visible that they have very narrow scope to earn sufficient money from honey collection or related activities. They are the poorest segment of the local community. They are now leading a very miserable life. They live from hand to mouth, and often cannot give food and clothes to their wives and children<sup>7</sup>. In this circumstance they do not wait and depend only on traditional honey collection and fishing, besides they want to engage in small business, farm labour, company job in different sectors. But all these job areas are outside the Sundarban. Today they are going to other states. I investigate some of the key points behind the livelihood transformation; these are:

### **Cause of traditional livelihood transformation**

1. Lack of life security (from tiger, snake, crocodile and natural disaster)
2. Increased resource collectors but decreased harvesting area
3. Extreme poverty
4. Rate of honey is still in long time but rate of other accessories increased in day to day market
5. They do not like it because it is high risk and hard job.
6. They are being exploited by the local mahajan in various ways.
7. Lack of future benefits
8. New generation does not entertain because it is less income sector rather than other job like small business, security job, sealer, job of Construction Company, driving etc.
9. Negligence of forest department and state government
10. Lack of co-operative society who support them

Honey collection is a challenge for the Mawallis. The whole process is full of great uncertainty<sup>8</sup>.

So the tendency is very clear. There are the reasons for which they are slowly shifting to other occupations.

### **Conclusion**

In this discussion it is clear that the life and future of the Mawallis are extremely uncertain. Poor socio-economical profile is the main reason for change of livelihood. New generation does not feel any interest for holding on to their traditional livelihood; because they can not raise their family income only by this occupation. Today comparatively it is lower sector of income than other occupations. So usually they want to work in high income sector rather than honey collection or fishing. They always desire to work in less life risk field because honey collection is a major risky occupation. They fail to fulfill their basic needs and demands with the income of honey collecting. They can not send their children for schooling because most of the children help their family from infantile stage. As they get large amount of money by other job like small business, building construction from other state, security guard, and company job they can fulfill other demands. In this investigation it is proved that the majority number of mawallis do not continue this traditional job. The above statistics indicates that 48.33% of mawallis support this job but they struggle all the times. Even the new generation is not interested in the traditional way of earning of honey collection because they are not enough competent to do the job. So I can conclude that the shifting pattern of traditional livelihood has started off already. If their attitude remains same the traditional way of collecting honey

will soon be extinct. So to sustain the traditional way of collecting honey a positive step from the Government of West Bengal should be initiated without losing any more time.

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