

## **Into the Forest Dark and Deep: Background Sundarbans**

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Sundarbans, the very name denotes aesthetic beauty of nature. The place is directly or indirectly known to all. As soon as the word Sundarban comes in mind, we perceive through our eyes, the biggest salty delta of 25,500 square kilometers situated in the estuary of Ganges and Brahmaputra of West Bengal in East India, and the growth of the vegetation, bushes, woods and the faunas or wild animals, broad rivers, streams, channels, inlets, which are spread in the area like arteries and sub-arteries, the co-existence of the immigrated people from different occupations, different religious beliefs and the picture of a combined culture. At the same time, the picture of these people is floated before our eyes who lead their lives fighting with the adversity of the environment with valour, their lives, their happiness and sorrow, their emotions, misgivings and success in life, their endeavour of sustenance in that situation. Due to the kind of population and their grave circumstances, their names of places, rivers, their tribal culture, language and folklores, their occupations, their handicrafts, different facets of their culture, dances, songs, Gods and Goddesses, religious beliefs, rural fairs, ceremonial rituals and customs are too very varied and of different kinds. The famous archeologist Herskovits wrote in his book 'Man and His Works' that "A culture is way of life of a people." There is a strong bondage between culture and society. Man has made the nature the source of their bread and relish the happiness of life and to survive. People of a particular geographical position practice a particular way of life. Their art, literature, rituals and behaviour follow the same path. Following this particular way, the people of that place becomes expertise in their kind of the way of life. It becomes their heritage to fight life's obstacles in their own way to fight their circumstances. They gain dexterity through practicing the art generation after generation. In South 24 Parganas, the population has their own folk festivals, folk culture, folk industry and folk beliefs. They bear their own hereditary culture for centuries.

In the present treatise, the discussion will be made regarding the rituals; the inhabitants of Sundarban follow before entering the jungle. Millions of people are entering the mangrove forest of Sundarbans every now and then. Amongst these visitors, fishermen, crab catchers, wood cutters are principal in number. The people of these occupations consider the jungle as their own and do not think twice, to enter the perilous jungle. Of course there are some regulations they are bound to follow. Not only they are to collect written permission from the forest department but also they seek the permission of the Goddesses of the jungle. Is it possible to enter such a forest with grave difficulties, where there are Royal Bengal Tigers and venomous serpents in the land and predators like crocodiles and other reptiles in water? To cope with the fatal environment of Sundarbans, the inhabitants of this area have to perform many religious rituals. It is not allowed by their community to enter the jungle without performing these rituals.

The wood cutters are not allowed to enter the jungle without written permission of the forest department of Sundarbans. After collecting the pass from the forest department, it is true that they get the legal permission for entering the jungle but the wood cutters are bound to get permission from their regional Goddesses like Vishalakshmi, Ganga Devi, Kastha Devi etc. if they want to survive from the dangerous tides of the rivers they have to cross to reach their destination. To get the religious permission, the wood cutters and their families need to carry out the rituals with great reverence. If they perform those with perfection, then only the god becomes satisfied and gives them permission to initiate the journey. The people of Sundarbans, who are completely dependent upon the water and the land of this area for their survival, nourish these creeds for generations together. The wood cutters have to observe the following regulations before entering the jungle area.

- a. The wood cutters offer worship in the place (Than) of Vishalakshmi and Ganga Devi before they enter the jungle. Most of the villages of the wood cutters have the place or 'than' of Vishalakshmi and Ganga Devi.
- b. The wood cutters never enter the forest without worshipping their boat. Before entering the jungle, the wood cutters slogan simultaneously taking the name of the Goddess Vishalakshmi. They regularly burn joysticks and keep sweets at the base of a particular tree of the jungle.
- c. The wood cutters are strictly prohibited to kill any animal unless the cause of self defense forces them to do so.
- d. The adult members of the group of wood cutters do not lie down prostrate in the boat during their stay in the jungle. This ritual is observed in some of the places in Sundarbans.
- e. The wood cutters are prohibited to cut their hair, nails and to shave during the period. They do not use soap or washing soda to wash their clothing even if those are dirty.

Woodcutter's main weapons for cutting wood are axe, cleaver and axe-stick. But to save themselves from tigers, they are more dependants upon their religious rituals which they carried in their blood. Before starting their work, they bind tiger's mouth with the help of ustads or guvnor of their community. They believe that when the ustads make a knot in a 'gamchha' or towel by pronouncing the holi incantation, both the jaws of the tigers get closed. Unless the knot is not untied, the tigers cannot open their mouth. But it is mandatory to open the knot after the purpose is over. The goddesses of the forest become angry if they did not untie the knot.

The honey seekers also need to collect pass from the forest department of Sundarban obey their regulations like the wood cutters. The Muslim honey seekers of Hyder Para of Kultuli thana (adjacent to the dam of Matla river) think that the rules and regulations of the land is not applicable in the jungle. All has to observe the particular rules of jungle irrespective of caste, creed and religion. The honey seekers do not address themselves by their own names in the jungle. They pronounce the sound "ku" to make others known about their existence. The honey seekers do not go much far into the jungle keeping their boat in the inlets. They can only go as far as the sound "ku" can be heard from the boat which remains fastened in the inlet. Farther advancement towards the jungle is strictly prohibited.

Honey seekers call the bees "poka" or insect while staying in the jungle. The person who is expert in searching the bees are called 'Poka Chalok' or drivers of the insects. If the honey seekers get honey combs, they do not call it by its name. As soon as that get it, they shouts "Allah Allah" and by this way they make the others known about it. Sammad Sheikh of Haldar Para is a believer of his own fate. He thinks that if one is destined to die, no one can avoid or by pass it. These honey seekers believe that if they have Allah's consent, no harm can affect them. If Allah does not give his consent, the honey seekers get a signal before the accident takes place. If someone ignores this signal, harm is inevitably would fall upon him. Usually, they get Allah's signal through their dreams. The nightmares showing tigers approaching with wide mouth etc. are the signals of the forthcoming accidents. Ignoring such like things is obvious to surrender to death possibilities. Many wretched honey seekers start crying to grab Allah's permission because their critical economical condition does not support to wait for even a small period of time. Allah sometimes becomes piteous to these people and gives his consent. Now they are free to go into the forest without fear of any harm.

The honey seekers believe that the disciples of Banbibi or the mystic Bauls can make the tigers inactive by their incantations. They call the jungle 'Mayer Khamar' or mother's farm. The incantation of the Bauls is as follows:

*"Ay tal korchi bandhbo kuran*

*Vitore baire apni chhoban  
Amar kata moule dhore roilo Mahammad  
Kamore roilo Ali – Ali Ali- Ali,  
Kulbala tani, chher chher chher dukul kete  
Kori chouchir, Dohar Ali, dohai Ali.”*

*Or*

*“Sundarbone anek sap, jale kumir dangay bagh  
Aro bandhan gnarar sap, saper char ti bhai  
Path chhere deo ruche jai, age chhilo ghughunath pichhe  
Chhilo chhelor sapbhut prêt danob dotti kugyan brombho dottir  
Kanthé je koribe gha, peer Chholeman khodar ajo jale jabe goes.  
Dohai Ali-Dohai Ali-Dohai Ali”.*

The hunters of police station Pathar Partima of Adibasi Para and Adibasi Pally of West Dwarikapur do not enter the jungle without the permission of their god. After entering the jungle, first of all, they worship their god. They cast three mud tablets as the symbol of three gods at the base of a tree. These three gods are Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwar. The worship of these gods necessitates a lot of ingredients like vermilion, *Alta* or liquid red colour, garlands made up of wood, *ghunsi*, mirror, comb, small buckets, *shnakha* or bangles made up of conch, iron bangle, floral garlands, soaked gram, perched rice, *batasa*, sweets etc. It also needs a cock. The hunters perform the worship by their own. The cock is given the *Prasad* after the worship is accomplished. The hunters do not enter the jungle if the cock does not eat the *Prasad*. They believe that the cock is not eating the *Prasad* indicates that the gods are not permitting them to enter the jungle. In that case they start crying and try to realize the permission from gods and continuously notice whether the cock eats the *Prasad* or not. If the cock eats it, they understand that the gods have become satisfied and given them the permission to enter the jungle. Then only they enter the jungle and start catching crabs and collect honey.

As the wood cutters and honey seekers have their own custom and creed, the fishermen and crab catchers too have their own. But as the crab catchers are usually associated with many professions, their custom has been assimilation with all the others. The inhabitants of Sundarbans are the believers of their fate.<sup>7</sup> They have a lot of risk in their profession. So it is noticeable that most of them have an inclination towards the observation of the customs of their own. They obey these customs to satisfy the gods. Mention can be made of some of the sacraments of the fisher men and crab catchers.<sup>8</sup>

- a) Before starting their journey into the jungle, the fisher men and crab catchers worship Banbibí and the boat.
- b) They consider the boat and the instruments of catching fish and crab sacred. So they avoid the activities which make these instruments and the boat unsanctified.
- c) They do not kill the birds and animals of the jungle.
- d) The women of the family abstain from combing their hair, using vermilion and *Alta*, discarding ash from the oven and washing clothes using soda or soap when their men stay at the jungle. It is prohibited to entertain any guest or to give loan to anybody during this period.

The honey seekers, bauls, boatmen have an everlasting relationship with the jungle and water bodies of it. Many rural cultures have been kept alive by them for generation. We can listen to many Vatali or folk songs from the mouth of the boatmen. These songs make our soul awake and give delight to our minds. These are the overview of our indigenous culture. The honey seekers, bauls, boatmen also sing the Dehatatwa and spiritual songs. Nowadays they are singing the songs of work too. It is quite natural for these industrious people to sing the songs of work!<sup>9</sup>

The sky and the wind become garrulous with the songs of the boatmen:

*“Aka baka nadi nala nona jale bhara*

*Tari majhe gramkhani mor sobuj sonay mora,  
Sei mach dhoribo, gram goribo sabe  
Gramer maje sukhe dukhe grambasira rabe.”*

Poverty, decay, loss, danger are the companion of these honey seekers. Although these valiant honey seekers cross the mountain of sorrow and floats in the river with the tune of vatiali songs.<sup>10</sup>

*‘O nodi re, ekta katha shudhai shudhu tomare  
Balo kothay tomar desh  
Tomar nei I challar shes ?...’*

In their lives, they reveal their philosophy of life through their work culture. This is the benchmark of the culture of Sundarbans.

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