



**Harvesting Honey.
Facing Death.**



Honey collection in the of Shyamnagar mangroves, on the edge of the Sundarbans in Bangladesh, is a centuries-old livelihood carried out by traditional foragers called mouali. Each spring, they venture deep into the mangroves to harvest wild honey, braving tigers. Both a source of income and a cultural heritage, this practice is now guided by permits and conservation efforts to protect bees and the forest.



Each honey-gathering team typically comprises 5–10 individuals, each with assigned roles—such as the leader, harvester, pot keeper, smoke torch preparer, and boatman. This practice is deeply rooted and often a seasonal, supplementary livelihood for subsistence communities.



Collecting honey in the Sundarbans is extremely risky because honey hunters must enter tiger territory deep in the mangroves. Royal Bengal tigers often ambush silently, making them one of the greatest dangers to mouali during the season. Every year, attacks cause injuries and deaths, making this livelihood one of the most dangerous in the world.



Some honey collectors venture into the mangrove in very small groups, sometimes only two people. Without the support of armed forest rangers, they face the full dangers of the mangroves—tiger attacks, snakes, and getting lost in the very dense forest. These small teams take enormous risks to harvest wild honey, driven by the need to earn a small living despite the life-threatening conditions.



The Sundarbans are the world's largest mangrove forest, a unique ecosystem where land and sea meet. Mangroves here protect the coast from cyclones and erosion, while providing habitat for animals. It takes more than an hour to navigate the mangrove labyrinth to reach the honey sites, with no signs to guide the way. The collectors have visited these places many times to monitor the hives and now know the routes by heart.



The local collectors protect only their heads from bee stings, as they cannot afford proper professional protective clothing. Sometimes, they earn extra money by bringing officials or local tourists into the forest—who, unlike them, never forget to wear full protection.



Once the collectors spot the combs, they leave their boat and slowly move on foot through the mangroves. This is the most dangerous moment, as a tiger can leap out at any second from anywhere. The men remain tense and alert, fully aware of the risk. Annually, between 10 to 25 people may be killed by tigers in the Sundarbans



Smoke is used to pacify the bees, after which the comb is cut to retrieve the honey. Importantly, permits are required for legal honey collection. Training is provided to harvesters, and regulations strictly prohibit the use of flammable substances, or harmful chemicals to minimize environmental impact and ensure sustainability. Intensive harvesting and human disturbance in the mangroves stress the bees and disrupt their natural cycles.



Once smoke is placed beneath the comb, one man climbs the tree to cut it while another collects the honey in a bucket below. The air fills with incredible noise as thousands of bees swarm to defend their territory. The collectors are stung by bees, but they are used to it and hardly suffer. The whole process takes only a few seconds.



During the peak season, a collector may earn around 200 euros per month (honey-gathering season runs from March to June only), collecting approximately 10 kg of honey per trip, a fortune in this area. Many poor men risk entering the forest without proper permits or protection, facing tiger attacks as a constant hazard. When they die, their families lose their main breadwinner.



Sundarbans honey is rich and slightly salty, reflecting the unique mangrove flowers of the region. It has low moisture and high freshness, with strong antioxidant content from polyphenols and flavonoids. Packed with minerals, vitamin C, and natural sugars, it is valued for its nutritional and medicinal benefits as it is used in healing, immunity, and respiratory relief by local community.



The honey knowledge is passed down through generations, with sons often accompanying their fathers into the forest from a young age to learn the skills. In villages like Shyamnagar, honey gathering is not only a way to earn income but also a tradition that shapes identity and community ties. Families depend on the honey season to supplement their livelihood, and stories of past hunts, dangers, and survival are part of their cultural memory.



At the launch of the honey-collecting season, the community holds a big ceremony. On this special day, the front rows of seats are reserved for the "tiger widows," women who lost their husbands to tiger attacks. That year, there were 10 widows in Shyamnagar village. Widows often face social stigma. Some communities believe a woman brings bad luck if her husband was killed by a tiger...



সচেতন বনজীবি
নিরাপদ সুন্দরবন

This man wears a shirt that says foresters make the Sundarbans safer, a reference to tiger attacks. When he was 10, he was on a boat with his father collecting honey, when suddenly a tiger leapt aboard and dragged his father away. The body was never found. He keeps cruising through the forest, as he has no other choice to earn money, like many...



Climate change is hitting the Sundarbans hard. Rising sea levels steadily eat away at the mangrove banks, while stronger and more frequent cyclones uproot trees and destroy bee habitats. Increased salinity from seawater intrusion reduces the diversity of flowering plants, meaning bees have fewer sources of nectar. As the mangroves shrink and become less resilient, both honey production and the livelihoods of the mouali are under serious threat..

eric lafforgue
www.ericlafforgue.com
+33633053451
lafforgue@mac.com