

Inside the perilous world of SUNDARBANS HONEY COLLECTORS

A livelihood shaped by bees, tides and tiger-haunted forest

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A wooden boat rocks on dark tidal waters, its hull brushing mangrove roots as dawn thins over the Sundarbans. On the boat, men sit barefoot and alert, eyes fixed on the green shadows. Somewhere above them, wild bees cling to a hive heavy with honey.

As spring unfolds, khalsi, goran and keora trees burst into bloom, drawing millions of bees into work. Deep inside the forest, honey ripens inside massive hives clinging to branches.

Their method is disciplined. One person stays behind on the boat while the remaining five spread through the forest at calculated distances. They remember where hives existed in previous seasons. Sometimes, they locate one simply by listening the faint hum of bees that gives away its presence.

"I've known this forest since birth," Gazi says. "My father survived on it. I entered the forest with him when I was only five or six years old. Now my eldest son is 10, and he has already begun coming with me."

water. Walking becomes difficult, and sharp breathing roots pose a serious risk of injury. Yet, the very high tides bring a strange relief. "When the water rises up to our necks, tigers are less likely to attack," one moual says.

Khokon Mondol, a moual from Baliadanga village in Koyra, says illegal harvesting causes heavy losses. "A mature hive gives five to seven kilogrammes of honey. But when thieves cut it early, we get barely 500 grammes."

Cyclones like Sidr, Aila and Amphan have disrupted the forest's natural cycles, destroying habitats of both bees and mouals. Each year, honey hunters enter the forest not knowing whether they will return with enough to feed their families.

"We used to get three times more honey 20 years ago," he laments.

"Now we roam for days and return with half-empty buckets. The flowers don't bloom like they used to."

Honey hunting is regulated by the Forest Department. Mouals apply for passes to enter designated areas in groups. The system is meant to protect both forest and collectors, but it often becomes a source of exploitation. Passes are sometimes delayed or denied without clear reasons, while bribes are alleged to be common. Mouals must also sell a fixed percentage of their harvest to government cooperatives at set prices, often below the market rate.

"After all our risks, we sell honey for Tk 350-400 per kg to the department, but it sells for Tk 1,000-1,500 or more in the cities," says Khokon.

Many mouals are indebted to local moneylenders or traders who finance forest trips in exchange for a large share of the honey. Healthcare support is almost absent during expeditions, and injuries can go untreated for days. "If someone gets hurt badly, we carry him on the boat and sail for hours to reach a village with a pharmacy," says Khokon.

Among the honey collectors is a man known as Tarzan, not his real name, but one earned through reputation. His companions say he swims across wide channels without fear of crocodiles.

Accompanying Tarzan's six-member team from Kalabogi Forest Station, this reporter witnessed the search firsthand.

The team walked nearly five kilometres barefoot through dense forest, scanning treetops and listening for the telltale hum. After crossing a small river, they found a large hive yielding more than seven kilogrammes of honey, but only after enduring countless bee stings.

Three types of honeybees are commonly found in the Sundarbans. The largest yields come from a species, *Apis dorsata*, which builds massive hives on horizontal branches deep inside the forest, often several feet above high-tide water levels.

Bees feeding on khalsi flowers produce the highest-quality honey, prized for its flavour and medicinal value. Once a hive is located, mouals cover their faces with cloth and light bundles of hental leaves to produce smoke. They cut the hive carefully, ensuring that the queen bee and larvae remain unharmed.

A single mature hive can yield up to ten kilogrammes of honey if harvested properly. Wax is also collected. Yet both honey and wax are sold at meagre prices. In a good season, a team may collect up to 100 kilogrammes of honey. In a bad one, they return with barely a barrel.

Even if mouals survive wild animals, climate change presents another challenge. Rising sea levels and increasing salinity in rivers and soil affect the flora and fauna of the Sundarbans. As more areas become saline, flowering patterns change, directly affecting honey production.

Forest Department data show fluctuating honey production: 71,811 kilogrammes in 2015-16, generating Tk 1.48 million; 444,800 kilogrammes in 2019-20, with Tk 3.33 million in revenue; 318,038 kilos in 2023-24, generating a record Tk 5.08 million; and 207,150 kilos in 2024-25, with revenue falling to Tk 3.31 million. During the 2024-25 fiscal year, 2,858 mouals entered the Sundarbans under 437 permits across Khulna and Satkhira ranges.

The Bangladesh portion of the Sundarbans spans 6,017 square kilometres, nearly 31 percent of which is water. Around 450 rivers and canals support 210 fish species and 24 shrimp varieties, along with dolphins, turtles, crocodiles, and monitor lizards, while the forest is also home to the Royal Bengal Tiger and Chital deer. Each year, approximately 12,000 permits are issued for resource extraction, many for crab collection.

Conservationists remain divided. Some argue that honey collection should continue, as it deepens human connection with the forest. Others support moving mouals towards domesticated beekeeping for safer, sustainable income.

For over 15 years, the non-government organisation BEDS has worked on Sundarbans' honey. Md Maksudur Rahman, chief executive of BEDS, believes the honey has global potential. "If harvested, processed, and marketed following international standards, Sundarbans' honey could become a global brand," he says. "Properly done, it could sell for Tk 60,000-70,000 per kg."

Sundarbans West Divisional Forest Officer AZM Hasanur Rahman says permits for honey collection date back to 1886. "We are training mouals to ensure sustainable harvesting while protecting the ecosystem," he says.

Despite the growing challenges, the honey collectors of the Sundarbans return each year, guided by ancestral knowledge, hope and the rhythm of nature. Their journey is not just about harvesting honey. It is about resilience, tradition and survival in one of the world's most unique and vulnerable ecosystems.



PHOTO: HABIBUR RAHMAN

Honey hunting in the Sundarbans is not for the faint-hearted. Unlike fishermen, mouals (honey collectors) travel deep inside the forest for weeks, carrying minimal supplies and sleeping in small boats or makeshift tents on muddy banks. With smoke pots, ropes and machetes, they rely more on inherited instincts than modern equipment, while always remaining alert as a tiger could emerge at any moment.

"We don't fear bees; we fear tigers," says Azgar Ali, a 52-year-old moual from Shyamnagar, who has been collecting honey since he was a teenager. "I've lost two friends in the forest. One of them was taken by a tiger. We only found his bloodied bag."

Between 2000 and 2020, dozens of mouals were killed in tiger attacks. Forest officials now issue warning leaflets and require each group to carry trained guards with loud noise-making gear, but fear remains.

Between April and June every year, when fishing is restricted in the rivers crisscrossing the Sundarbans, mouals enter the forest with official permits. Yet, before the Forest Department opens the season on April 1, illegal collectors, disguised as fishermen, slip into the forest and cut honeycombs prematurely, threatening the season's harvest.

For communities along the forest fringe, the Sundarbans is both provider and peril. It feeds them, shields them from cyclones and sustains their livelihoods. It is also a place of tigers, crocodiles, snakes and treacherous tides.

Abdullah Gazi has been harvesting honey from the Sundarbans for nearly three decades. His home is in Sutarkhali village of Dacope upazila, on the forest's edge. Every season, he forms a team of six or seven with family members and relatives, obtains permits and heads into the forest.

"Sometimes we stay for a week, sometimes for fifteen days at a stretch," he says. "If we don't get enough honey, we can't afford to come back early. The travel costs are high. If we return empty-handed, our families go hungry."

In recent years, robbers have deepened their fear. "Last year, we had to pay Tk 20,000 in advance just to enter certain areas," Gazi recalls. "Without paying them, it's impossible to work."

To him, honey collection is inheritance and survival. "We face snakes, tigers, crocodiles. But we have no other work. If the forest survives, we survive." In his village alone, over 500 people depend on honey collection.

Parimal Sardar, nearly 50, from Kalabogi, has spent his life collecting honey. He remembers a time when people burned trees and damaged hives to drive bees away. "Now that has changed," he says.

Today's mouals carry equipment from their villages, including dry leaves to build a smoke and ward off bees. They avoid damaging trees and refuse to collect honey from immature hives. "If the bark of a tree is damaged, bees won't return the next year," Sardar says. "We protect the forest because destroying it means destroying our livelihood."

The Sundarbans' landscape is constantly reshaped by tides. During high tides, many islands go under saline