

In quest of the golden treasure

The honey gatherers of the Sunderbans face a perilous task – one which can come with a deadly sting, discovers **Shiladitya Sarkar**

Photographs: **Subhrasish Sinha Ray**

THE RIVER BANK WEARS A BRUISED LOOK AFTER LAST night's furious storm. We struggle in the soggy mud and try to find our way towards the river. The mangrove forest at the opposite end is canopied in eerie darkness, its silence accentuated by an overcast sky.

It's very early in the morning and nearly 100 charcoal coloured boats are being readied by the *moulis* (honey gatherers) for their journey over the next 20 days when they will have to combat brutal odds: unpredictable weather, deadly northwesterly, choppy rivers infested with sharks and crocodiles, dacoits and... tigers.

Every April, when summer dresses the Sunderbans

- named for the Sunderi trees - in floral splendour, the *moulis*' boats dot the landscape. For it is the time of the year when the rock-bees - which migrate to this place from the Himalayan forests in the summer - gorge upon the wild blooms and fill up innumerable honeycombs in the lush forests spread over approximately 4264 kms, including 56 islands. Rivers big and small zigzag through vast tracts of mangrove forest most of which is submerged during high tide. Human settlement on the islands is often demarcated from the forest margins by only a river. Tidal creeks and channels have woven a complex network of waterways - with tides running in opposite directions in the same creeks. Reaping their harvest from the fangs of nature is no easy task for the *moulis*. Many have met a



The Shajnekhali forest office area: the starting point of the expedition

fatal end. It has happened before. It could happen this year too. Suren Mondal is here with a group of eight. We learn that each one of them has, at some point, lost a relative while braving the forest. That, however, does not deter them. "We just cannot stop coming to the forest," says Mondal. A standard reply of all *moulis*. Clearly, it's not the money for monetary returns of such a harvest



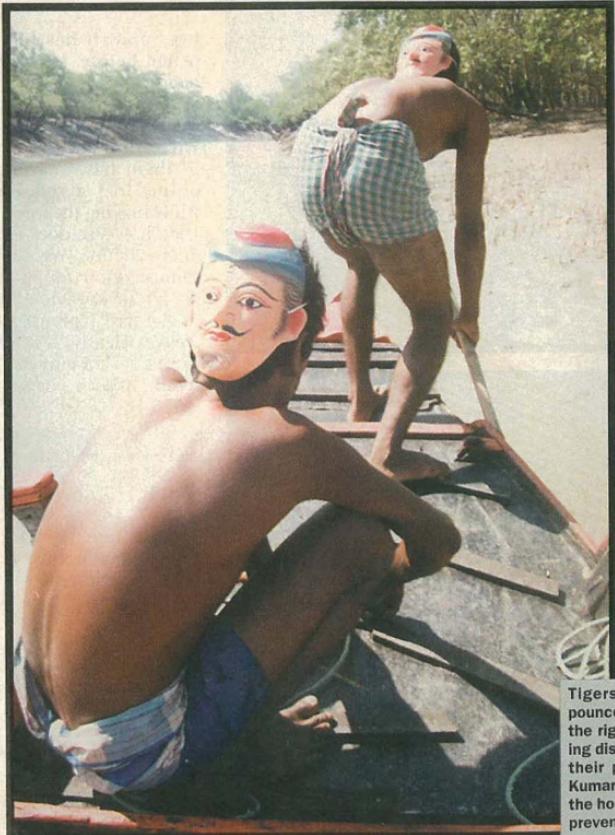
The *gunin* performing a puja before sailing off

are not much - each *mouli* gathers upto 50 kg of honey and sells it to the forest department for as little as Rs 37 per kg. But as Kartik Sardar puts it, "It is our *nasha* (addiction) as well as *pesha* (profession)".

And no other activity in the Sunderbans is as risky as that of the honey gatherers. While they are away in the jungle, their family mem-



The *moulis* playing Baghbandi, a game, while waiting for their permit



Tigers don't usually attack from the front. They pounce on their target from the back and normally on the right side of the neck. Also, they maintain a hunting distance...so as not to make their targets aware of their presence. Based on these observations Arun Kumar Ram has devised a certain kind of mask which the honey gatherers wear on the back of their heads to prevent a tiger attack

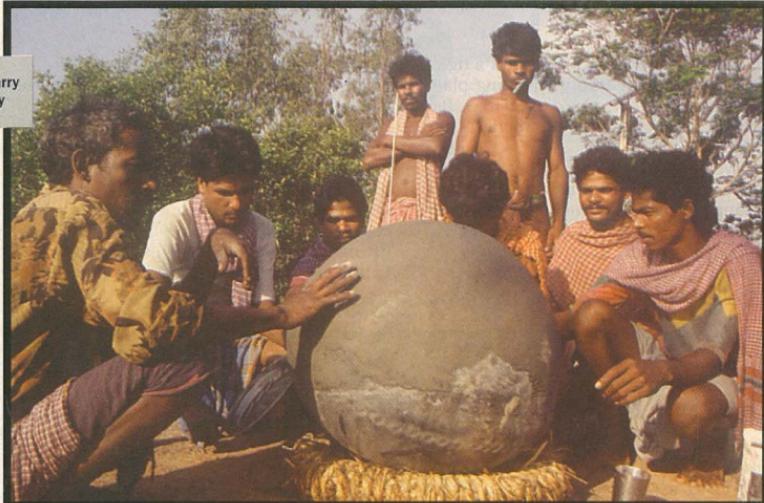
bers follow a lifestyle governed by a set of codes in the belief that such strictures act as antidotes against the perils of the Sunderbans. For a month or so every honey collector's wife lives the life of a widow. She wears white sarees, discards

her bangles, refrains from using *sin-door* and does not oil her hair. The rest of the kith and kin is required not to fight over any family matters, not to use soap or give any alms to beggars. Only when the honey gatherers return safely are these rules revoked. I ask Ananta, one of the *moulis*, if he had to face opposition while going into the forest. "Yes," he says gloomily, "particularly from my son." Says 20-year-old Basudeb Mondal, "We dare to go bare-bodied and unarmed in the jungle only because we have faith in Bonobibi - the forest goddess worshipped both by Hindus and Muslims. And Dekshin Rai who is incarnated in the form of a tiger."

The *puja* is already in progress at the Shajnekhali forest office, giving it a festive look with the sound of horns and smell of incense. In a small temple built by the forest department, the *gunins* - the magic men who accompany different groups of *moulis* - are performing the rites before setting off. A *gunin* accompanies the honey gatherers for it is believed that he alone possesses the powers to tame a tiger. At

A large mud pot to carry fresh water and honey

every island before they embark, the *gunin* supposedly binds that area by the power of his *mantra* making it free from a tiger's attack. Rashik Haldar is a *gunin* and a 15-day-old wound on his thigh - caused by a tiger's claw - is testimony



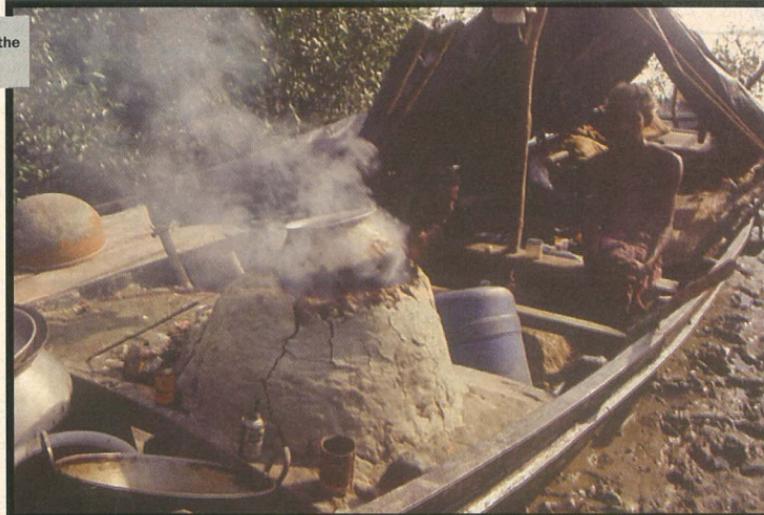
Preparing a meal on the boat

of the futility of his *mantras*. He laughs and says, "I was just unmindful."

"Those who are cowardly but make a great show while coming to the forest are the ones who die. Sometimes, of course, it is just bad luck," an older member is quick to defend the *gunin*.

Ill fate, luck, or whatever, nobody agrees to take us with them. The few groups we approach turn us down politely. Meanwhile, those who have got their permits are sailing out with cries of "Jai Ma Bonobibi, please keep us away from danger."

We contemplate going back. But by a stroke of luck, one group agrees to the idea of us trailing them. Our reluctant boatman is persuaded by the promise of some honey from our first hive. The *moulis*' boat is tied at the back of our *bhotbhoti* - a mechanised country boat - and we set off into no man's land. Bees in infinite numbers begin circling above us. "If one falls on your body," Dukhiram warns us, "do not try to flick it



away, it will sting." Ten to 20 stings are apparently enough to kill a man. The collectors, with their instinctive knowledge of bees, inform us: "The ones that have a tired movement and are moving slowly are the ones with nectar, the ones that zigzag and move fast are the ones going out for a hunt." They can also figure out how far a hive is. We are expecting a hive not very deep in the core area. The bees prefer to build their hives in the deeper part of the jungle since the wind blows harder nearer the banks.

The fragrance of wet earth fills the air as we turn a bend in the forest. "Look," Prabhakar says suddenly. In

the clear light we see pug marks of a tiger on the wet bank. "That's their favourite hiding place," says Srimanta pointing to a grove of *hetal* trees. Its leaves are a blend of yellow and brown, a perfect camouflage for tigers.

"We have to find a good spot to do our *pujas*," the *gunin* announces. It's a signal to the collectors to start looking for hives. Four men look out in four different directions. Eyes concentrating on the zigzag movement of the bees, their expressions keep shifting between expectancy and dismay. Some of the bees that come floating to our boat buzz around lazily for some

time before flying off.

"Stop," orders Srimanta. He has just spotted a medium sized hive. We peer closely and only spot a thin black outline and steer towards the bank. The collectors jump into the river bare-bodied, regardless of the crocodiles and sharks it's known to be infested with.

Meanwhile the *gunin* readies himself to perform the *pujas*. Some 40 feet from the bank he selects a spot and lays down his paraphernalia: A framed picture of Bonobibi, an earthen plate containing *batasha* and a red and yellow paper garland. The rest of the group carries frankincense and green coconuts. The *gunin* says his



Creating smoke to drive away the bees

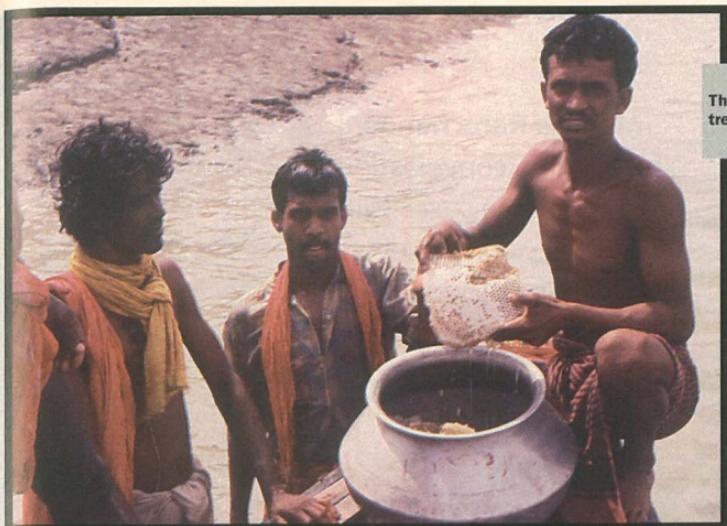


Rock bees feeding on a *khalsi* flower

prayers in silence while the rest stand with bowed heads. After his rites he stretches himself on the swampy bank, in front of the picture of Bonobibi and the others touch his feet and then do the same to each other, irrespective of age. The coconut water is then handed down to every one.

It is decided that a group of five will venture out while the rest will stay on the

boat. Those on land are to communicate only in whispers. When the hive is just 50 feet away, a leaf torch will be lit and we will rush back to join the rest of the collectors at the creek. Those in the jungle will join us after cutting down the hive. It's time to land and



The honey gatherers with their treasure

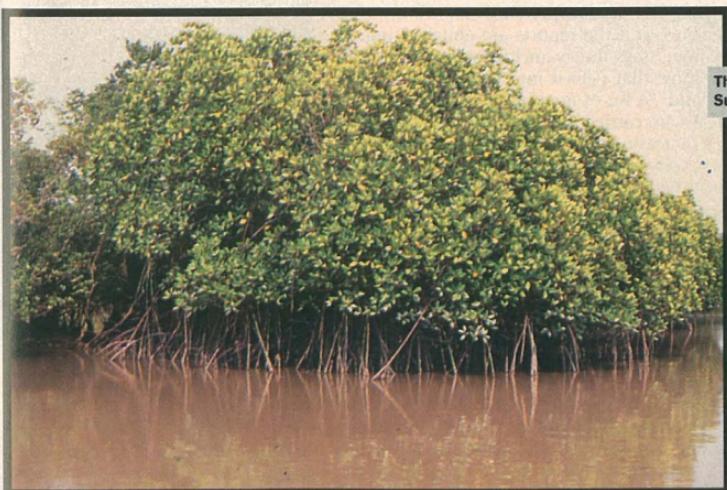
our spines stiffen in nervous anticipation. The chanting of "Oh Ma Bonobibi" does little for our courage. We linger while the collectors head for a hive. They cross a small muddy creek. "Come," the *moulis* call us, somewhat bemused at our dilly-dallying. We take the plunge, struggling through waist deep mud to reach them. One of the collectors plucks green leaves of *gol pata*. He deftly makes a torch and fills it with dry leaves. When the fire is lit the smoke billows out and the bees fly away. Someone touches my shoulder and indicates I should crawl. A little later, we come to a little clearing. The hive is now in partial view. The hum-ming is more distinct. The whole surface area of the hive is alive - with bees. It is on a medium sized tree so

the honey gatherer will have to scale it. At this point we are asked to return to our boat to avoid getting stung by the swarming bees. On the way we look back: the smoke is now reaching the top of the trees.

After half an hour we see our *moulis* emerging from the forest with large aluminium pots on their heads. But before anyone is allowed to see or touch the honey, the *gunin* puts a part of the hive in an

earthen pot. The process is repeated every time a hive is cut. The hives are dripping with rich, raw, yellow honey, alive and half-dead bees still clinging to the white sepias and yellow textured waxy lumps. One of the *moulis* takes out a part of it for us to see its immaculate hexagonal shapes - innumerable and yet all woven in perfect precision, spread out evenly all over the surface area. Prabhash squeezes a part of the hive in a small bowl, "Drink but do not take a big gulp, it will choke you." We take half a mouthful and the raw natural *khalsi* honey delights our tastebuds. They offer us a bottleful. But having seen the hardships undergone in harvesting it, we are reluctant to accept. They insist.

"There," the *gunin* stands up, his fingers mapping the path of another swarm of bees. It's time to



The mangrove forest of the Sundarbans

go through the same process on another island. Everybody is restless, eager to trail the bees right away. For the next 20 days, within the heart of darkness, this will be their routine. They will rest during the night on their small boat anchored in a small *khari* (creek).

We see the honey gatherers for the last time as we row back, the trees closing on them till they merge with the landscape. ■