

**‘Maldhari’ and the Gir Protected Area –
A mutual interaction**

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Introduction:

The most important human component of the Gir ecosystem has been the population of resident ‘Maldhari’. They are devoutly religious pastoral community who has been an integral part of Gir forest for generations. They are living in about 54 small settlements called ‘Nesses’ in the forest area with a total human population of 2,540 and that of cattle about 9,820. They are physically robust, courageous and amiable persons. They live on purely vegetarian diet. Sale of dairy products has always been the mainstay of their economy. They earn their livelihood by selling milk and ghee (clarified butter) in the nearby towns and also supplement their income by selling dung manure. Their domestic livestock comprised mainly of buffaloes and cows, though they also possess camels which are mainly used for transport and as beasts of burden. Their animals are kept together during night in circular thorn fencing known as ‘Zok’ and are let loose into the surrounding forests for grazing throughout the day.

Dependence of Maldhari on Protected Area:

The following areas are identified in terms of dependence of maldhari on the protected area.

Livestock Feeding:

The livestock of maldhari are fully dependent on the protected area for green and dry fodder. The animals graze throughout the year. However, the availability of green grass is limited to only monsoon season and initial part of winter season. For rest of the year, the animals have to depend on dry grass. The availability of even dry grass becomes very limited during the summer which is stored for the use during summer. In addition to feeding of grasses to their animals, they also provide some concentrate feeds like cottonseed and cottonseed cakes to their animals.

Fuelwood Collection:

The maldhari of ness are totally dependent on the protected area for meeting their requirement of fuelwood.

Timber and Small Wood:

The maldhari use small wood and timber mainly for construction of their houses and fencing of their livestock enclosures. They use the trees of sag, garmalo, asundro, kher, gorad etc. for this purpose. The dwellings in the ness are made of wood, mud and dung. The wood is for making walls which is to be replaced periodically.

Thatching and Fencing Materials:

Grass is used as a thatching material for the roofs of the houses and animal sheds in the ness. The maldhari use branches of thorny trees like Ber and Babul for fencing around their houses to protect them and their animals from wild animals. All such materials used for thatching and fencing are collected from the protected area.

Collection of Non- Timber Forest Produce:

They also collect some minor forest produce like Amla, Timru, Bel, Karamda, Jamun and many other fruits, plants and roots to use as food and medicines for them and their livestock.

Dependence of Protected Area on Maldhari:

The protected area benefits from the maldhari in the following ways.

Source of Information:

The maldhari, provide information to the management authorities about incidences of fire, injured wild animals, illegal felling of trees and poaching in the forest. It helps the forest officials to take necessary steps quickly. When they graze their animals “they use to go around vast areas of forest and encounters such incidences usually. Sometimes, they themselves challenge the offenders and chase them otherwise guide the FD staff to identify them and to be arrested.

Availability of manpower:

The PA management authorities depend largely on maldhari for the human labour required for various activities like controlling forest

fires, cutting of grasses from the firelines, rescue of wild animals and various other operations.

Availability of Domestic Animals:

The wild animals like lions do depend to some extent on killing of domestic animals for their food.

Contribution to Soil fertility and Regeneration:

The dung of the cattle and buffaloes kept by maldhari is a source of organic manure to the forest land as the Maldhari keep their animals out for grazing for a long time about 10 hours during the day. They do not collect this dung scattered everywhere in the forest. Furthermore, the seeds of grass and plants eaten by the animal spread around the forest through the dung which helps regeneration of the forest vegetation.

Prevention of spreading Forest Fire:

Maldhari graze their livestock in all the direction in the forest according to availability of fodder. When the livestock passes everyday across the forest, it hardens the soil and creates the trails dividing the dry grasses in to different patches. Thus, when the forest catches fire it stops at the trails and can't spread easily to another side of the trail.

Hospitality to Forest Staff:

The maldhari of Gir PA are a source of tea, water, and other help to the forest officials in the interiors of the forest. During the patrolling in the odd hours, the forest department's staff sometimes rests at the nesses and the maldhari offer them milk, chhaash, tea etc. occasionally meals also as their renowned tradition of hospitality of guests.

Areas of Conflict:

Some of the main areas of conflict between the maldhari and the PA management authorities are as follows.

Killing of Domestic Animals:

The killings of maldhari's livestock by lions are frequent. The conflict is usually on the amount of compensation paid by the Forest Department and the delay in the process of paying the compensation. While there is a provision of compensation by the PA management Authorities in such cases, the people report delays and harassment in the

process of opening bank accounts, visiting the bank premises many times; and requirement of maintaining some minimum amount of money in the bank accounts. The compensation has to be paid by Account payee cheque only according to the procedure.

Unsustainable use of Forest Resources:

Uncontrolled grazing, excessive use of wood and felling of green trees are also some potential sources of conflict between the maldhari and the PA. The forest officials would like to minimise the use of wood by the maldhari and promote better managed grazing by the animals of the maldhari to reduce such pressures on the PA. Shankar Narayan argues” There is a widely held belief among government officials, academicians and environmentalists alike, that the environment in the arid and semi-arid areas of Gujarat is being degraded and turned into desert largely due to overgrazing, and that this overgrazing is due to common access to pastures, unwillingness on the part of the maldhari to limit their stock numbers and lack of constraints on pastoral mobility. This accusation against pastoral activity, of being responsible for environmental degradation, has gained the status of a fundamental truth, so much so that demanding evidence to prove it seems superfluous. There is, however, a need for examining this accusation with due sensitivity and rationale, giving as much importance to the democratic right to sustainable livelihood of those on the margins of the political process as to the environmental implications”.

Conclusion:

Conservation of wildlife habitat and biodiversity of Gir protected area can not be overlooked at any cost. The Gir ecosystem has many other threats also which are much more serious than the hullabaloo of the maldhari's living in Gir. Equally, the debate on existence of the maldhari as a part of Gir ecosystem or a perpetrator of ecological imbalances, still require intense and impartial studies by the interdisciplinary team of experienced researchers with the perspectives of sociology, social-anthropology, ecology and other allied sciences before reaching to any conclusion. The balance between conservation and development of the maldhari should be maintained and sustainability should be the real pursuit.

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