

The Hunting Festival – A Serious Threat to Biodiversity of Ajodhya Hills, Purulia

Subrata Raha¹³ & Santosh Pandey¹⁴

Abstract

Ajodhya Hill is located at the south west of Purulia district, the westernmost district of West Bengal. It is covered by dry deciduous type of forest and exhibits wide range of flora and fauna. But an animal hunting festival or 'Sendra', a socio-cultural and religious beliefs of Ecosystem people of the area, is observed every year by them during 'Buddha purnima' has created adverse impact on the environment and responsible for fading out of floral and faunal varieties of the Ajodhya forest range. Several other illegal anthropogenic activities are responsible for environmental degradation. Many important flora and fauna have already vanished and many are on the path of extinction, although the District administrations use to take temporary and permanent protective measures to save its glorious bio-resources.

Key words- Purulia, Forest, Flora, Fauna, Sendra, Ecosystem, Tribal community, Protection

Introduction:

Jaina Bhagavati-Sutra of 5th century AD mentions that Purulia was one of the sixteen mahajanapadas and was known as Vajra-bhumi in ancient times. Ajodhya Hills, located in the Purulia district of the state West Bengal, India. It is spread over 320 sq km and adjacent to the Dalma Hills of Jharkhand, which is an extended part of Eastern Ghats. It is extended from Jhalda on the west and Balarampur on the north-east. It lies approximately in between 23° 00' N to 23° 17' 50" N latitude and 86° 14' 20" E to 86° 58' 44" E longitude. The hill extends up to 32 miles in length and spreads up to 10 miles in width. This hill range is around 700 m high with many small hills namely Gorgaburu (highest peak with an altitude of 900 m), Mayuri etc. It is the homeland of different tribal communities like Bhumijis, Birhors, Kherias, Lodhas, Mundas, Oraons, Paharias, Santhals etc. Most of the people of these communities live below poverty level (Chanda and Mukherjee, 2012). Birhor is the most primitive one among these tribes. They are often known as 'Sikari' since hunting is their main occupation and till now they prefer to eat the flesh of monkey viz. *Macaca mulatta* and *Presbytes entellus*. It is said that during their period of exile, Sri Ramchandra and Sita had come to this place and stayed. Sita was thirsty

¹³ Head of the Dept., Botany, Raghunathpur College, Purulia, West Bengal.

¹⁴ Govt. approved Part time Teacher, Panchakot Mahavidyalaya, Sarbari, Purulia.

and Ram pierced an arrow through the earth's soil crust, water gushed out and Sita quenched her thirst. The place is known as Sita-kunda.

Ajodhya range of forest like other range of forest has originated and evolved during the tertiary period of Cenozoic era. In the past, this range of forest was very thick and dense with variety of flora and fauna, i.e. before and after human settlement in the plateau (approximately 3000-4000 yrs ago). As the time passed, the environment of the whole plateau changed. With the increase in human population, their caste and creed as well as advancement of living standard, industrialization and urbanization, the forest coverage started shrinking and its floral and faunal variety started fading. There are 8 territorial forest ranges (*viz.* Balarampur, Matha, Bagmundi, Ajodhya, Jhalda, Kotshila, Joypur and Arsha) under divisional headquarter at Purulia. The officers and staff of the forest department left no stone unturned to protect and to maintain the forest coverage of Ajodhya hills but unable to restore the lost glory.

The Animal hunting festival or 'Ajodhya Shikar':

The annual animal hunting festival of ecosystem people (mainly aboriginals and allied to aboriginals) generally take place in the day of Buddha Purnima (generally last week of April or first week of May). It is observed since their time of early settlement in the eastern-most portion of the Deccan plateau (Which includes whole Jharkhand state, Purulia and part of the district of Bankura and Midnapore of West Bengal, Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar and Sundargarh allied districts of Orissa and Surgurja and Bishrampur districts of Chhattisgarh). Similar type of hunting festival takes place in Dalma sanctuary is known as 'Bishu or Dishu Sendra' and in Mayurbhanj known as 'Akhanda Shikar'. All these three animal hunting festivals commonly known as "Shikar Parba" that signify the socio-cultural and religious beliefs of the ecosystem people. It is believed that every male of the society should at least participate once in the sendra. Even today in the plateau, the umbilical cord of a new born male baby in the society of ecosystem people, is cut by an arrow head instead by a sharp knife or blade. During this process the male child first hears sendra shen (towards sendra) when he is in his mother's lap. However, the baby girls are not accorded the same treatment as to their male counter parts as sendra is considered to be exclusively a male bastion.

According to the folklore still prevalent in the ecosystem peoples dominated areas, if a male person of the society has failed to attend the sendra he is still supposed to be in his mother's womb. This perhaps explains the participation of thousands of ecosystem people in the sendra festival. Before preceding for sendra the married woman send their husbands for the same in a similar fashion as wives send their husband to the battle field. The married women did not put on vermilion until their

husbands come back and the husbands in turn give permission to their wives to remarry if they failed to return from the hunt. Similarly, when the male members return home after the hunt they are welcomed as if they had returned victorious from the battle field. Young unmarried participants of sendra proceed for the same after taking blessings from their parents and elders for safe return after sendra. All the sendra participants are given warm well come at their homes after return to homes. Their feet are washed by cool water and a massage of mustard oil is given before entering the door step of the home.

Materials and Methods:

Information on hunting festival was collected from available literatures and by enquiring people of ecosystem living around the Ajodhya range. Information on flora and fauna of the sanctuary were recorded while field study in situ since 2008. Voucher specimens were preserved and identified with the help of standard literature (Haines, 1921; Baker, 1930; Saharia, 1985) and experts.

Observations:

Ajodhya hill range shows dry deciduous forest with a variety of flora and fauna. Certain rare lower group of plants like death cap fungi, bioluminescent fungi, spike moss, horn wart moss, adder's-tongue fern and silver fern occur inside the forest till today. Other dominant angiospermic trees are:

Acacia catechu (Khair), *Acacia chundra* (Lal babla), *Acacia farnesiana* (Guyababla), *Acacia nilotica* (Babla), *Acacia pennata* (Nengtakata), *Aegle mermelos* (Bel), *Alangium salvifolium* (Akar), *Alstonia scholaris* (Chhatim), *Annona reticulate* (Nona), *Anogeissus latifolia* (Dhaw), *Anthocephalus chinensis* (Kadam), *Azadirachta indica* (Nim), *Bambusa arundinacea* (Kanta bans), *Bauhinia malabarica* (Karmai), *Bauhinia racemosa* (Banraj), *Bombax malabarica* (Simul), *Buchanania lanzan* (Piyal), *Butea monosperma* (palash), *Cleistanthus collinus* (Parasi), *Cochlospermum religiosum* (Galgali), *Diospyros exsculpta* (Kend), *Diospyros malabarica* (Gab), *Diospyros sylvatica* (Gur kuchla), *Ehretia laevis*(Goali), *Erythrina variegata* (Chorpatta), *Ficus benghalensis*(Bot), *Ficus hispida* (Kakdumur), *Flacourtia indica* (Bainchi), *Ficus religiosa* (Aswatha), *Gardenia latifolia* (Jojangandhi), *Gmelina arborea* (Gamhar), *Grewa subinaequalis* (Phalsa), *Haldina cordifolia* (Keli kadam,) *Holarrhena pubescens* (Kurchi), *Holoptelea integrifolia* (Challa), *Lagerstroemia parviflora* (Sidha), *Lagerstroemia speciosa* (Jarul), *Ixora pavetta* (Lohajang), *Inga dulcis* (Jilabi phal), *Lannea coromandelica* (Doka), *Mimosa rubicaulis* (Chirchiri kanta), *Morinda pubescens* (Anch), *Oroxylum indicum* (Banhata), *Peltophorum pterocarpum* (Radhachura), *Polyalthia longifolia* (Debdaru), *Pongamia pinnata* (Karanj), *soymida febrifuga* (Rahra), *Schleichera oleosa* (Kusum), *Semicarpus anacardium* (Bhelai), *Strychnos nuxvomica* (Kuchila), *Terminalia arjuna* (Arjun), *Terminalia bellirica* (Bahera), *Terminalia chebula* (Haritaki), *Terminalia crenulata* (Asan), *Woodfordia fruticosa* (Dhatri), *Ziziphus oenoplia* (Shiakul) etc.

Apart from the trees major medicinal herbs and climbers found in the forest areas are:

Abrus precatorius (Kunch), *Abutilon indicum* (Petari), *Acalypha indica* (Muktajhuri), *Achyranthes aspera* (Apang), *Aganosma dichotoma* (Malati lata), *Andrographis paniculata* (Kalmegh), *Anisochilus carnosus*, *Anisomeles indica* (Gopali), *Aristolochia indica* (Iswarmul), *Artemisia vulgaris* (Nagdonga), *Asparagus recemosus* (satamuli), *Bryophyllum pinnatum* (Patharkuchi), *Buettneria herbacea* (Kamraj), *Calotropis gigantea* (Swet akanda / Akanda), *Capparis zeylanica* (Rohini), *Cardiospermum helicacabum* (Shibjhul), *Cassia alata* (Dadmari), *Cissus quadrangularis* (Harjora), *Coccinia indica* (Ban kundri), *Combretum decandrum* (Atang), *Costus speciosus* (Kemuk), *Crotalaria juncea* (Atasi), *Curculigo orchoides* (Talmuli), *Curcuma aromatic* (Bon halud), *Datura metel* (Dhutra), *Dioscorea alata* (Khamalu), *Ecbolium viride* (Nilkantha), *Eclipta alba* (Kesut), *Elephantopus scaber* (Go jiwva), *Enhydra fluctuans* (Hinche), *Eulophia vitida* (Paglaguri), *Flemingia strobilifera* (Ghoa chabuk), *Gloriosa superba* (Ulatchandal), *Gymnema sylvestre* (Gurmar), *Hemidesmus indicus* (Anantamul), *Holostemma annularis* (Arka puspa), *Ipomoea quamoclit* (Tarulata), *Justicia adhatoda* (Basak), *Leonurus sibiricus* (Raktadron), *Leucas plukenetii* (Dron puspa), *Momordica dioica* (Ghi karala), *Ocimum canum* (Bon tulsi), *Ocimum tenuiflorum* (Krishna tulsi), *Phyllanthus fraternus* (Bhui amla), *Physalis minima* (Bon tepari), *Plumbago zeylanica* (Chita), *Pueraria tuberosa* (Kanda palas), *Rauwolfia serpentina* (Sarpagandha), *Scindapsus officinalis* (Gaja pipul), *Scoparia dulcis* (Bon dhane), *Smilax ovalifolia* (Kumarika), *Solanum indicum* (Brihati), *Solanum nigrum* (Kakmachi), *Tinospora cordifolia* (Gulancha), *Tylophora indica* (Antamul), *Urena lobata* (Bon okra), *Ventilago denticulata* (Raktapita), *Vernonia cinerea* (Sahadebi), *Zingiber cassumunar* (Bon ada), *Vanda roxburghii* (Rasna).

The terrestrial fauna (Vertebrates) that are fighting for their survival in the Ajodhya forest and in vanishing stage are listed below:

Amphibians found in this region are *Rhacophorus maculatus* (Gecho bang), *Kaloula pulchra* (Banded bull frog), *Uperodon globulosus* (Gortobasi bang), *Rana cyanophlyctis* (Khude bang), *Rana temporaria* (Chit bang), *Rana tigrina* (Sona bang) and *Duttaphrynus melanostictus* (Kuno bang).

The important reptiles are *Lissemys punctata* (Sadharan kachim), *Kachuga tectum* (Terapin kachim), *Calotes versicolor* (Girgiti), *Chameleon calcaratus* (Chameleon), *Varanus monitor* (Gosap), *Mabuya carinata* (Feu), *Hemidactylus flaviviridis* (Tiktiki), *Hemidactylus leschenaultii* (Dhusar tiktiki), *Vipera russelli* (Chandrabora), *Naja kaouthia* (Keute), *Naja naja* (gokhura), *Naja hannah* (Sankhachur), *Bungarus caeruleus* (chiti), *Bungarus fasciatus* (Sankhachiti, sakhmuti), *Dryophis nasutus* (Laudoga), *Ptyas mucosus* (Darash), *Python molurus* (Moyal), *Eryx conicus* (Bali boa), *Eryx johnii* (Du-matha sap), *Chrysopelea ornata* (Urukku sap), *Oligodon arnensis* (udaykal), *Xenochrophis piscator* (Dhora), *Natrix stolata* (Hele), *Enhydris enhydris* (Metuli), *Typhlops braminus* (Telenga).

The birds which occur frequently as well as rare are *Corvus macrorhynchos* (Dar kak), *Dendrocitta vagabunda* (Harichacha), *Passer domesticus* (Charai), *Ploceus philippinus* (Babui),

Nectarinia asiatica (Moutusi), *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos* (Phulchusi), *Orthotomus sutorius* (Tuntuni), *Acridotheres tristis* (Shalik), *Sturnus contra* (Gangshalik), *Turdoides striatus* (Chatare), *Dicrurus adsimilis* (Finge), *Oriolus xanthornus* (Benebou), *Pycnonotus jocosus* (Siphahi bulbul), *Copsychus saularis* (Doyel), *Grucula religiosa* (Hill myna), *Saxicoloides fulicata* (Kali shyama), *Apus affinis* (Talchonch), *Columba livia* (Kabutor), *Streptopelia chinensis* (Chit ghughu), *Streptopelia tranquebarica* (Kanthi ghughu), *Eudynamys scolopacea* (Kokil), *Centropus sinensis* (Kuko), *Aegithina tiphia* (Fatik jal), *Chloropsis cochinchinensis ferdoni* (Harbola), *Milvus migrans* (Pariachil), *Haliastur indus* (Brahmanichil), *Gyps bengalensis* (Shakun), *Gallus sonneratii* (Bonmurgi), *Pavo cristatus* (Mayur), *Psittacula krameri* (Tiya), *Upupa epops* (Mohonchura), *Dinopium benghalense* (Katthokra), *Copsychus malabaricus* (Shyama), *Motacilla maderaspatensis* (Khanjan), *Coracias benghalensis* (Nilkhantha), *Merops orientalis* (Baspati), *Turdoides caudatus* (Methochatare), *Treron phoenicoptera* (Harial), *Eremopterix grisea* (Dhulochata), *Gymnoris xanthocollis* (Janglicharui), *Caprimulgus asiaticus* (Ratchara), *Athene brama* (Khurle pecha), *Bubo bubo* (Hutum pecha), *Bubo zeylanicus* (Mecho pecha), *Pseudogyps bengalensis* (sada sakun), *Gyps indicus* (sakun).

The birds of wetlands are *Phalacrocorax niger* (Pankouri), *Anhinga rufa* (Gayar), *Podiceps ruficollis* (Pandubi), *Dendrocygna javanica* (Saral), *Nettapus coromandelianus* (Balihans), *Amaurornis phoenicurus* (Dahuk), *Metopidius indicus* (Jal pipi), *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* (Jal mayur), *Tringa hypoleucos* (Batang), *Vanellus indicus* (Tittiv), *Egretta garzetta* (Sada bak), *Bubulcus ibis* (Go-bak), *Ardeola grayii* (Konch bak), *Mycteria leucocephala* (Dombak), *Anastomus oscitans* (Shamuk Khor), *Leptoptilos dubius* (Hargila), *Pseudibis papillosa* (Kalo kastechora), *Alcedo atthis* (Phatka machranga), *Halcyon smyrnensis* (Nil machranga), *Choriotes nigriceps* (Indian bustard) etc.

The mammals reported earlier (Nath, 1950) to occur in this area are *Macaca mulatta* (Morkot), *Presbytis entellus* (Hanuman), *Elephas maximus* (Hati), *Panthera pardus* (Chita Bagh), *Felis bengalensis* (Chita biral), *Felis chaus* (Bon biral), *Felis viverrina* (Fishing cat), *Viverra zibetha* (Khatas), *Viverricula indica* (Gondho Gokul), *Paradoxurus hermaphrodites* (Bham), *Herpestes edwardsi* (Neul), *Hyaena hyaena* (Hyana), *Canis lupus* (Nekre), *Canis aureus* (Siyal), *Vulpes bengalensis* (Khek siyal), *Melursus ursinus* (Bhaluk), *Mellivora capensis* (Bazar), *Suncus murinus* (Chucho), *Pteropus giganteus* (Badur), *Rhinolophus mitratus* (Mitréd leaf bat), *Cynopterus sphinx* (Kala badur), *Pipistrellus mimus* (Chamchika), *Bandicota bengalensis* (Metho indur), *Rattus rattus* (Dhere indur), *Mus musculus* (Nengti indur), *Hystrix indica* (Sajaru), *Lepus nigricollis* (Khorgosh), *Manis crassicaudata* (Bonrui), *Sus scrofa* (Bon suor), *Tragulus meminna* (Hog deer), *Axis axis* (Chital harin), *Rusa unicolor* (Sambhar), *Tetracerus quadricornis* (Chousinga), *Antelope bezoarticus* (Indian antelope / Harin), *Muntiacus muntjak* (Kakar harin), etc. It is reported that *Anathana ellioti* (Madras Tree shrew) only found in this hilly area of West Bengal.

Discussion:

The loss of biodiversity from this region is not clearly documented earlier except some related reports (Sahi, 1977; Swarup, 2004). During sendra the commonly killed

animals are Wild boar (*Sus cristatus*), Spotted deer (*Axis axis*), Sambhar (*Rusa Uniolor*), Harin (*Antelope bezoartica*), chowsinga (*Tetracerus quadricornis*) Barking deer (*Muntiacus muntjak*), Hare (*Lepus ruficaudatus*) cotton tail or Ballihans (*Nettapus coromandelianus*), Rock pigeon (*Columba livia*), Grey jungle fowls (*Gallus sonneratii*), Red spur fowl (*Galloperdix spadicea*) Pea cock or hen (*Pavo cristatus*), Green pigeon (*Treron phoenicoptera*), Spotted Dove (*Streptopelia chinensis*), Marsh Harrier (*Circus aeruginosus*) and other animals which come on their way while sendra hunting. Musk deer is now vanished from the Ajodhya forest range.

The traditional weapons like Bow and arrow, axes (varied types), Spears, Swords, Large knives, Bamboo stick (lathi) and devices like nets (Mahajal) having a length 200m, width 2-3m and mesh size 6'' – 12'' are used to trap the hunts. Many trees are cut down (Palas, Sal, Lata-Kanchan, Debdaru etc.) for the preparation of temporary huts and for clearing the path during sendra.

Other causative Factors for Fading of Wildlife in the Ajodhya range of Forest Coverage are:

1. Smuggling of forest resources and killing of wild animals often and frequently.
2. Constructions of Dam(s), canals and 900 M.W. capacity Pumped Storage Hydroelectric Power Plant in the forest area has also spoiled natural habitats of the wild life.
3. Reckless leasing out of forest land for the purpose like running brick kilns and excavation of gravel.
4. Over exploitation of wildlife and medicinal plants for trade.
5. Fire wood collection on regular basis.
6. Forest fires (in February – March) in the entire forest range.
7. Expansion of urban area and unplanned urbanization.
8. Over grazing by domestic animals and traditional methods of farming.
9. Introductions of exotic tree species (*Eucalyptus*, *Simarouba*, *Acacia* etc.) in deforested land.
10. Depletion of food and water resources for animals inside the forest.

Thus truth is truth, however unpalatable it may be. We have acts and Rules which exist on paper, written in Government offices and printed in notifications and gazettes without fruitful result.

A few suggested measures for the protection of Wild life in the Ajodhya forest area are:

1. Before the 'Sendra Festival' the district administrations and forest officials may arrange meetings with staff concerned and post armed forces as precautionary measure to prevent killing of wild animals and felling of trees.

They may also organize meetings with the group leader of the sendra participants one month before the day of the Sendra to convince them not to enter and destroy the forest resources as it will create environment hazards.

2. To save the wildlife in the sanctuary by the authorities should provide different slogans on the boards and on the road side of the forest area.
3. Building of residential colony in the forest land area and also in the adjacent foot hill area should not be allowed for safer environment of all living beings.
4. Immediate alternative arrangement for firewood should be done for the ecosystem people.
5. Restriction is necessary in leasing out of forest land and private land near the foot hill.
6. Minimization of public interference and construction of roads, dams, canals etc. inside the forest area should be done without further delay.
7. Provision for more water conservation year round for the use of wild animals should be made at quickest possible time.
8. Awareness campaigning at regular intervals is desirable.

Conclusion:

At present days forest coverage has been reduced, thickness of the floral composition has been diminished and the quantity and variety of animal species has been faded. The rules regulations can't alone protect our day to day deteriorating environment in every dimension. Better environment can be achieved by changing our mental attitude, i.e. "Think for all and not for self only". May all living beings prosper and flourish in near future and thus earth can be saved from being lifeless.

Acknowledgement:

The authors are grateful to Dr. Sanjib Chattopadhyay, Principal, Panchakot Mahavidyalaya for his constant help and inspiration. It is a pleasure to thank Sayanti Majee, Poulomi Majee and Sucheta Raha for assisting me in typing the manuscript.

References:

1. Haines, H.H. 1921; Botany of Bihar and Orissa, Vol. 1-3. Botanical Survey of India, 1-1372.
2. Nath, Bhala. 1950; On collection of mammals from Chotanagpur (Bihar). Rec. Indian Mus., 48 (1), 29-44.
3. Sahi, S.P. 1977; Backs to the wall: Saga of wild life in Bihar – India. Affiliated East- West press pvt. Ltd. 160.
4. Swarup, C. 2004; Endangered and extinct mammalian fauna of singbhum plateau with reference to recent past and present status. Protected Habitats and Biodiversity, Natware Conservators Pub., 8: 187-196.
5. Stuart, Baker. 1930; Fauna of British India. Vol. I & II E.C.
6. Saharia, V.B. 1985; Wild life of India. Natraj Publishers, Dehradun.