

Who is the hunter and who is the hunted ?

Sunday, May 3, 1998.

The picturesque Similipal Hills in Mayurbhanj reverberate with hunter's cries during the Baisakh period from April to May. Tribals armed with bows, arrows, tangis (hunting axes), spears and knives sneak into the Similipal National Park and Tiger Reserve to observe their ritualistic " mass hunting excursion", better known as the akhand shikar. Hunting is, in fact, one of earliest of Santal rituals and one in which all the men in the community participate.

The hunting ritual begins on the last day of Chaitra (mid-April) or Pana - Sankranti as it is called in Oriya – and continues till the end of May. Tribals, in group of 50 to 500, enter the Park through untrodden paths and establish shikar camps in areas known to be populated by animals. They then set fire to the dry leaves that litter the forest floor. The animals are thus trapped within a ring of fire. It is then that the animal killing spree begins. The hunters kill all the animals they come across indiscriminately, except for the tiger and elephant.

Before they set out, the participants go through a series of rituals conducted by the dehuris or tribal priests. It's an age -old tradition, with its date being fixed by the Parganas or the heads of all the clans. The date is then publicised by means of a knotted string called the gira - ganthi. A special messenger then carries the gira-ganthi from village to village to publicise the date. Other details, like the areas of the forest to be covered, and so on, are also fixed by the Parganas.

The dehuri offers puja to the presiding deity of the hills, and the ceremony, includes the offering of vermilion and red fowls to the gods, together with sun-dried rice and incense. As the fowls are sacrificed, its blood is poured on the sun-dried rice and offered to the other gods of the locality with incantations.

The formalities over , news of the hunt is conveyed by blowing the horn made from the horn of the Indian bison. The hunting carries on as musical instruments, which include drums bell and cymbals, are played by a band constituted for the purpose. After the day's hunt, the tribals assemble to a fixed area for a night of festivals. The Parganas also decide disputes that may arise over the sharing of the hunted game, which is heaped under the shade of a tree.

Incidentally, women never accompany the men in these excursions. In fact they don't comb their hair, wash their clothes or apply cow dung on the floors of their homesteads until the men return because they believe that this would endanger the lives of the hunters. One of the special rules followed is that the men who hunt sleep separately from their wives and do not have sexual intercourse on the night before the hunt. The end of a hunt is an occasion for joy. The women wash the feet of the hunters and rub oil into their tired legs.

But while these akhand shikars could interest the anthropologist, environmentalists have expressed concern on the irretrievable damage they cause to the tapestry of life in the forest since at least a thousand tribals go on a rampage liquidating hundreds of wild animals and spoiling vast tracts of vegetation by setting it on fire. During the current shikar season, there has been 14 encounters between the field staff of the Similipal Tiger Reserve and the tribals so far. On April 19, two people were arrested at the Kalikaprasad check gate for carrying some sambar meat and two bison horns. Yet another healthy bison was killed by another group near Tiktali. The bison meat was burned by the Project Tiger staff, and two persons were arrested in this connection.

In another incident, during a camp shikar near Patharghera, hunters killed one barking deer and roasted its meat for a tribal feast. The jaws of the animal was the only evidence of their presence that they left behind. Of the 14 encounters, the authorities claim to have successfully aborted the hunt in 11 instances and their anti-poaching staff claim to have chased away large groups of hunters.

“Anti-poaching surveillance has been stepped up and 29 anti-poaching camps have been established to combat the menace,” says S.S. Srivastava, field director of the Similipal Tiger Reserve. The camps were so designed as to blend in with their environs and anti-poaching staff even hid on tree-tops under adverse conditions.

According to Srivastava, the annual akhand shikar seriously disturbs the prey base of the tiger, besides causing irreparable damage to Similipal's bio-diversity. The park he says, is a unique repository of endangered species from both the animal and plant kingdoms. “Many of the plants and animals here may be pushed to the brink of extinction if the practice continues, year after year,” he says. The park has an estimated 1076 plant species which includes 87 species of orchids. There are 29 species of reptiles here as also 281 species of birds. He would like the core area of the park to be made inviolate and free from human presence, so that the tiger and its faunal associates can exist in perfect harmony with each other, breed and prosper.

While his arguments may please the conservationist, it is difficult to ignore the human dimension of this problem. Gurva Soren, secretary of the Society for Research and Development of Tribal Culture, sympathises with the tribal cause. “This hunt has been part and parcel of Santal tradition and cultural practices,” he argues. He however hopes to educate the tribals on the need to conserve wildlife.

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At the Sarbanaghati Mankadia colony, G. Hebrom, a headman of the Birhor tribal community, points out that the tribals in the area are so poor that they are compelled to fell trees and kill animals. “A colony built for tribals about 10km west

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of Udala is devoid of even the basic facilities, including drinking water, schools and health facilities for children,” Hebrom points out. Tribals don’t have any employment opportunities and thus have no option but to carry on with the ways of their forefathers.

Hebrom points to the unhappy lot of the Birhor tribal . “ To this day they eke out a living bymaking ropes from the Siali creepers that grow locally. When they were in the forest , they had access to plenty of Siali fibre, but the moment they were resettled at the Sarbanaghathi Mankadia colony, they were deprived of their only means to a livelihood. Now they have to trek at least 100 km from their present homes to collect the creeper,” says Hebrom.

Swagat Bose a member of the Society for Advancement of Forestry and Environment also states that life has become extremely difficult for the tribals in this region. “ The special needs of the tribals must first be addressed sympathetically, if you want to solve the problem of rampant poaching. Give them the means to a decent existence and they will no longer hunt down animals and cut wood,” says Bose. It is a point that Sonali Murmu, another social activist of the area, couldn’t agree with more: “ Conservation cannot be tackled without first dealing with the human dimension of the problem.”

Source : Indian Express Newspapers (Bombay) Ltd.



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ORISSA

May 4, 1998.

Mass Hunt in Similipal Hills Every year in Baisakh (April- May) groups of 50-500 Santhal tribals enter the Similipal Tiger Reserve (Mayurbhanj district) and participate in an Akhand Shikar (a mass hunting ritual). While this event is an important part of Santhal tribal culture and of interest to anthropologist, several environmentalists have expressed concern about the damage they cause to the forests and wildlife.

The Field Director of the Tiger Reserve , S.S. Srivastava, believes that this annual rituals causes irreparable damage to the biodiversity and many species may be pushed to the brink of extinction if the practice continued year after year. He suggests that the core area be made inviolate and free from human presence.

Sonali Murmu, a social activist believes that “ conservation cannot be tackled without first dealing with the human dimension of the problem.”

Source : Amarendra Bose, Indian Express Newspapers (Bombay) Ltd.

Akhand Shikar in Simlipal

Date : 03/04/99

Three people were arrested in connection with the killing of a sambar and a giant squirrel during akhand shikar at Sarua in the Barhakamura range in the core area of the Similipal National Park.

The incident happened in the first week of April.

Reportedly 200 tribals armed with traditional weapons entered the park, set up camp and even feasted on sambar meat after cooking it there.

Another attempt of akhand shikar was foiled in the Bhanjabasa range of the core area of the park when the tribals were chased away by police and forest personnel.

Source : ‘Tribals massacre wild animals during mass hunt’. The Times of India.