

BAHELIYAS-

A hidden vulnerability of Bundelkhand region

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Introduction:

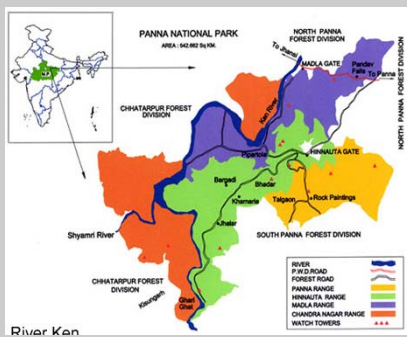
Panna Tiger Reserve:

Panna is the twenty-second Tiger Reserve of India and fifth in Madhya Pradesh. The Reserve is situated in the Vindhyan Ranges and spreads over Panna and Chattarpur districts in the north of the state. Panna National Park was created in 1981. Government of India declared it a Project Tiger Reserve in 1994. The National Park consists of areas from the former Gangau Wildlife Sanctuary created in 1975. This sanctuary comprised of territorial forests of the present North and South Panna Forest Division to which a portion

of the adjoining Chhatarpur forest division was added later. The location of the National Park is also important because it is s. This area is also the northern most tip of the natural teak forests and the eastern most tip of the natural Kardhai (Anogeissus- pendula) forests. The Ken river, which flows through the Reserve from south to north, is home for Gharial and Mugger, and other aquatic fauna and is one of the

least polluted rivers and a tributary of Yamuna. It is one of the sixteen perennial rivers of Madhya Pradesh and is truly the life-line of the Reserve.

Main Species : Mammals like Tiger, Jungle Cat, Leopard, Hyena, Wild Dog, Wolf, Sloth Bear, Sambhar, Chital, Nilgai, Chinkara, Chausinga, Porcupine, Jungle Cat, Rusty Spotted Cat, Hare, Ratel and Tree Shrew and Reptiles such as Long snouted crocodile (Gharial) and Marsh Crocodile (mugger) are found in the Ken river.



***Baheliya* community:**

Amongst broadly scattered forests in tiger reserve area of Panna district, there is a



hidden community generally known as *Bahelias* which is well defamed as destructor the wild lives and biodiversity of the region due to their involvement in poaching (hunting). Apart from this, fishing in Ken River, hunting of other animals and illicit removal of firewood, timber (mostly teak),

NTFP (Mahua flowers, Beedi leaves, Medicinal Plants etc.) by this community is a continuous menace and puts regular pressure on Reserve resources. Commonly civil society, forest department, and administration identify this community as criminals and offenders due to their involvement in some unlawful acts.

Location and population of *Baheliya* community:

There are three main sites in Panna tiger reserve area where this *Baheliya* community resides: 1. **Ajaygarh**; 2. **Gandhigram**; 3. **Shahnagar** in Panna district

Sl	Location	Sub-location	Families	Population
1.	Ajaygarh	Patha, Batasha	15	95
2.	Gandhigram	Gandhigram	10	60
3.	Shahnagar	Mahuakhera	150	650

Thus, about 175 families along with about 800 *Bahelias* live in and around tiger reserve area. By observing their families, it appears that each family of this community has on an average 6 to 8 members. This community has been living around this area of national park for last 30 to 40 years. These people are extraterrestrial for rest of the society because of their living in impenetrable forests in an isolated way and involvement in hunting. Having a discussion with thirty five families in three different locations, they stated, *“Poaching is our ancestral occupation but now it has been compulsion for us and we can’t do anything else.”*

Habitat and life style:

Bahelias do not make their permanent residence in some specific location. They are generally in itinerant condition in search of animals for hunting and wherever they think fit, they construct their temporary habitats with thatches, bamboo reeds, mud, and polythene and sometimes they stay in open spaces under the open sky.



Generally, *Baheliya* community hides in some secret places inside the dense forests in order to commit poaching and to avoid action of forest guards. The *Baheliya* community does not collect household belongings as they do not have any land entitlement and they have to leave their place suddenly any time. They have no other business except wandering and hunting in forests especially at night. During daytime, they drink alcohol and sleep throughout the day. Some of their women and children go to nearby villages begging for flour and rice. In case they kill any animal, they cook its meat as their meal and sale fur, nails and other organs to Mafias in turn of which they get some money.

Livelihood means:

The main source of livelihood for *Baheliya* community is illicit hunting of wild animals. They consider it as their ancestral occupation. In case of poaching, they are not only restricted to Panna tiger reserve but also they set out to other states' forests within India with the help of concerned Smugglers and Mafias. Commonly, they live in groups and commit poaching collectively. After that, they put the killed animal's fur and other organs to sale in turn of small amount from mediators or brokers. However, with the continuous reduction in number of *fauna-flora* and strict intervention made by national park authorities, the condition of these families has turned to the worst. They are now suspected of engaging in some criminal activities also like theft, robbery, criminal mischief etc. and their women, and children have started begging which is an alarming situation for the society.

Health problems:

Baheliya community does not avail any health service from anywhere. However, *Bahelias* use witchcraft practices and some medicinal herbs of forests to treat them, which results in premature death of these people. As, this community struggles for making their both ends' meet, no question of availing outside medical treatment and other medical services arise here. As per *Bahelias*, "A number of infants in our community die of different unknown diseases every year." The sanitation and hygiene practices among this community are nil, as they do not even take bath for fifteen to twenty days. They use contaminated water from ponds and pits of forests for drinking.

Other socio-economic troubles with Bahelias:



Bahelias do not have any concern with the outer world and society, because their being isolated since the time of their ancestors. In the eyes of government and civil society, they are considered criminals and offenders they don't have acceptance of civil society, *viz. common society did not even allow them to take drinking water from public water resources in the crucial drought in Bundelkhand region.*

They are fully deprived of *food, land, water, education, habitat, regular livelihood means etc.* In addition, whenever any crime takes place in the region, police firstly trap Bahelias and cause them unlawful detention, in turn they have to tolerate atrocities, and cruelty by police. Thus, having no immediate and sustainable solution of their problems they continue with committing crimes (i.e. poaching, deal of prohibited narcotics and animals; organs etc.) prohibited under various Acts and laws.

Adverse impacts in different ways:

- The continuous cutting of Jungle wood and killing wild lives by this community has been a serious threat to the wild life, biodiversity, environment, and natural resources
- Increased feeling of social insecurity among Bahelias and rest of the society
- Active participation of Baheliya community in just increasing the population and social problems but not in development process of society or nation

Key findings and suggested solutions:

Subsequent to the personal interviews and Group Discussions with Baheliya community in three different locations during three days' site visits by the team of "Samvaad" following findings were concluded:

Since, this community resides in dense forests of national park from a number of years and having no other livelihood option the poaching has become a compulsion for it. Consequently, they need to be mobilized at government and civic society level including rehabilitated with rest of the society. This will necessarily provide them social acceptance and recognition.

It is expected that once a small part of this community is shifted from forests and rehabilitated to some other residential areas with some optional livelihood means, they will be organized and will adopt a common life style giving-up their involvement in hunting or poaching.

In today's perspective, the number of rarest wild species in forests is decreasing and Tiger Reserve officials are taking exclusive actions to stop poaching, as a result Bahelias do not have any other way to bring up their families except conducting some other unlawful acts. Now they have become very divergent and aggressive to the government people and others because in some instances their women were exploited not having been paid for their labor in road construction work. *(As per quoted by Plat Singh and Gilat Singh of Baheliya community)*

Therefore, it is an imperative need to organize them and give them some optional

livelihood means, which is symmetric to the common population as well as their own common interest. They also need to build up their skill in entrepreneurship development as their optional livelihood resources.

Suggested rehabilitation of Baheliya community:

Since this community is used to get direct benefits in terms of money and other basic amenities, therefore rehabilitation of this community is the first and prime need in current situation. The strongly recommended rehabilitation process involves the following phases:

- ❖ Community mobilization with institutional development
- ❖ Skill building as per their strength and common interest
- ❖ Enterprise establishment based on above to facilitate them instant income
- ❖ Income generation and market linkage
- ❖ Advocacy for ensuring their fundamental rights and all basic amenities
