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An Alternative Lifestyle – The Pardhis Of Panna

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Bhavna Menon shares nuggets of traditional wisdom narrated to her by members of the *Pardhi* community in central India.

The *Pardhis*, who claim descent from the Rajputs, are nomadic tribes, known to inhabit the forests of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and some parts of Karnataka. Since their traditional occupation was hunting, the *Pardhis* were often hired as aides, whether it was for sport for the British or for the *rasoi ghars* (kitchens) of the *zameendars*.

While conventionally they would hunt only small game such as wild boars and rabbits, the demand for big cat skin and other body parts, coupled with a lack of livelihood opportunities compelled the *Pardhis* to hunt tigers and leopards as well.

However, over the years the Panna Tiger Reserve management along with WWF India and Education Department (*Sarva Siksha Abhiyaan*) took directed efforts to introduce the *Pardhis* to an alternative lifestyle. Together, these organisations built a hostel for the children of the *Pardhis* to ensure access to their basic right to education. Since then, a lot has changed for the children of the community.

However, it is the adults of the community at Panna, who after giving up hunting of the big cats, struggled to practice an alternative source of livelihood... until they decided to go back to the basics of their knowledge of nature. Only this time, they used this inherent knowledge for the better. Some of the current professions practiced by this incredible community living in Panna are—

The occupations and product uses listed in the article, are as mentioned and narrated by the Pardhi community members themselves and are not a result of any research done by the Last Wilderness Foundation team, or bear opinion of the organisation.

Current occupations of the Pardhis

Herbs and products for health and well being

Pardhis use their traditional knowledge of the forest by procuring herbs to cure almost anything from dog/scorpion bite to blood purification to migraines. Some of the herbs used and sold by the *Pardhis* are –



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya

Venkatesh

Aandhi – A type of herb which is said to be instrumental in relieving migraines and blinding headaches.



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya Venkatesh

White Kasturi – *Kasturi* is said to be very effective for relieving pneumonia, fever cough and cold, especially in young children. A strong fragrance, it is said to attract dogs and people using it are warned of canid interaction.

Lahsan or garlic oil – *Lahsan ka 'tel'* or garlic oil is said to be particularly cooling and helps relieve tension, stress and even calm a bad-tempered person. A particularly pungent odour it is said to clear up symptoms of

stress.

Gulisar or kalesur – *Gulisar* or *kalesur* is a type of herb found in the forest which is recommended for use in case of a snake bite. It is ground with pepper and mixed with water which can be then given to the snake bite victim. This concoction is said to stabilise the patient for almost 12 hours while she/he is driven to the hospital for treatment.

Mahavari – *Mahavari* is a type of herb found only in some parts which is believed to provide strength and build muscle.



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya Venkatesh

Ingua – *Ingua* is a type of herb which is used mainly for stomach aches and pains. It is given to the patient by mixing it with jaggery.

Zehar Kuchla – The herb *zehar kuchla* is used in case of a dog bite. The herb is broken and then applied as a paste to the affected area. It is to be used 2-3 times a day.



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya Venkatesh

Kesar – *Kesar* is used in its pure or unadulterated form for the purification of blood.

Rudraksh – *Rudraksh* is said to be good for the overall health, especially the heart and is worn as a pendant.

Opportunistic work in agriculture

Pardhis are often called upon by farmers to trap wild boars that cause crop damage in farms. After trapping the wild boar, the *Pardhis* are allowed to take it for meat for sale or as a means of personal consumption as the farmers in turn get some relief from these crop raiding animals.

These community members are also called upon by farmers to save their crops from destruction owing to untimely hail stones (around Dusshera) which are said to cause crop loss. *Pardhis* perform a ritual or 'puja' wherein they mark the concerned area and pray for the farm to be safe. Said to be a long ritual, the farmers reward the community members by giving them the farm produce like 'wheat' etc.

As of now there is only one *Pardhi* family in Panna which practices farming. Some of the crops grown by this family are *chana*, *til*, *alsi* and *arhar*.

Trinkets and bangles and charms



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Nag 'mani' – *Pardhis* as a community believe that once a snake has lived over a 100 years, it develops a 'mani' or a valuable stone which can provide the owner with a whole plethora of riches, good health and happiness. To this effect, they sell their own version of the 'mani' which is said to glow at night giving it a super natural appearance and is thus sold at a high price.



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya

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Ek mukhi rudraksh – The *ek mukhi rudraksh* is believed to be auspicious by the locals. It is carved from a fruit, which is first soaked overnight and then allowed to blacken. The fruit skin is then carved into beautiful shapes resembling snakes, Shivas' trident and other abstract patterns. The carving is undertaken with the help of a knife made by the *Pardhis* which also is used to carve the '*teetar*' whistles. It is also worn as a pendant and is said to have the unique ability to rotate when placed between two coins. It is also sold during Nag Panchami as a celebration of Lord Shiva.



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya Venkatesh

Nazarbatoo – The *nazarbatoo* is a type of charm in form of a stone, which is coloured black to ward off evil and to keep the wearer safe of any mishaps. It is often strung together as a chain and put on small children. There are said to be two types of *nazarbatoos*, one worn by Hindus and one worn by Muslims.

While the one worn by Hindus depicts the form of Hanuman, the one worn by Muslims is plain. Some nazarbatoos are also shaped as 'nag fani' or snake head.

The community members are also involved in the sale of bangles and necklaces, which they buy from places outside Panna, and are then resold at the local markets at Panna.

The way forward

Even though the community is sustaining themselves economically, there is a radical need for the empowerment of this community, with a few recommendations being –

- 1) To **conduct a study** using relevant references from any earlier data collected, about the community (social dynamics, religion, beliefs, culture, population, settlements etc.).
- 2) Provide the community in the region (wherever applicable) with a **caste certificate** so that they are eligible for more and better job opportunities.
- 3) Have a proper **boarding facility** for the students up to a **minimum of class XII**. This will ensure education along with additional access to the skill development programme of Government of India.
- 4) Have options for interested volunteers from cities to **coach/mentor** students for careers of interest.
- 5) **Contact and collaborate with a organizations** that are working towards Pardhi empowerment so as to gain insight into the work being done and replicate models, wherever possible. This will not only help organisations work towards a common goal but will also ensure optimum utilisation of resources and exchange of ideas.
- 6) Rope in interested adults from the community to **channelise their skills** as forest trackers, guides, and forest watchers so as to use their traditional knowledge as a source of livelihood.

7) Provide job opportunities – working with NGOs who can engage adults and provide them with job opportunities.

8) *Pardhi* skill sets of **traditional knowledge of the forests and traditional skill sets** like making of 'teetar' whistles (carved from the bark of a *tendu* or *khair* tree, the whistle imitates the call of a francolin or 'teetar', a bird of the partridge family with a high-pitched call. Members of the community claim that every time they play the whistle, a francolin is sure to respond) can be used as a source of income or potential employment opportunities.



Photo: Bhavna Menon and Vidya Venkatesh

Bhavna Menon is a project co-ordinator with the Last Wilderness Foundation (www.thelastwilderness.org), an organisation which has been working with the members of the Pardhi community at Panna for the last nine years. This article is a result of one such conversation between the community members and the Last Wilderness Foundation team.

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