

were buried.

This was a very strange incident where we were forced to keep hungry vultures away from their food. Normally it is the dogs that keep the vultures away from their food.

In India the vulture population has declined by 90% in last decade and the main reason is found to be the dead bodies of cattle having traces of harmful veterinary drugs.

AFRICAN VULTURE DECLINE. PETER JACKSON, 29 Lake Close, Wimbledon, London SW19 7EG, T/F: (44) 020 8947 0159, <peterfr.jackson@virgin.net>

Vulture populations across West Africa have plummeted in rural areas, on a scale comparable to the decline in South Asia. This is the alarming finding of a study in Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, reported by Guy Rondeau and JeanMarc Thiollay in the September 2004 issue of *Vulture News* (51: 13-33).

The authors counted vultures along more than 7,000 km of road transects in West Africa during a four-year period in 1969-1970, and then again in 2003-2004. Populations of six vulture species in the region had all fallen, and excluding one species - hooded vulture (*Necrosyrtes monachus*), which had declined by 45% in abundance - numbers in rural areas had dropped by an average of 95%. Worst hit were African white-backed vulture (*Gyps africanus*), down by 97%, Rüppell's griffon (*G. rueppellii*) (96%), white-headed vulture (*Trigonoceps occipitalis*) (100%) and lappet-faced vulture (*Torgos tracheliotus*) (97%). Apart from small numbers in protected areas, the latter two species have essentially disappeared from West Africa. The lappet-faced vulture is already considered Vulnerable on a global scale. The study found that vultures in protected areas have fared better, with hooded vultures not decreasing significantly, but overall vultures had declined by an average of 42%.

These massive declines are unlikely to be caused by diclofenac, the drug widely blamed for the similar losses in

POACHING OF VULTURES BY PARDHIS OF VIDARBHA.

RAJU KASAMBE, #66, Vidya Apartments, Vidya Vihar Colony, Pratap Nagar, Nagpur, PIN-440022. E-mail: rajukasambe@rediffmail.com

I was conducting a survey among the Pardhis of Maharashtra to get information about Lesser Floricans, quails, partridges and sandgrouse and their poaching of other wild animals. My work slowly turned to understanding their dialect, listing to the names of birds in Pardhi dialect, and the precarious condition of this tribal lot. It is indeed a tragedy of our country that we still have a community which mostly depends on hunting for its survival! No sincere attempts have been made to improve the lives of this community.

In December 2001, when I was taking down names of birds in Pardhi dialect, from an 85 year old Pardhi Mr. Bhura Sonawji Solanki, (At. Sawanga village, Tq. Karanja-Lad, Distt. Washim), this fellow started crying after looking at the pictures of vultures in the bird book. He said in a choked voice "I like vultures so much, they are so tasty! Whenever there was a drought, God used to send these birds as food for our hungry kids. And in the last so many years I have not tasted a single vulture! They are all gone!" This was a shocking news to me.

After this information, I changed the topic to other birds and mammals. Then each Pardhi 'beda' or hutment I went, I started gathering information from these tribals in Amravati, Washim, Akola, Yavatmal and Wardha districts about their vulture-eating habits and the names of the vulture species in their dialect. The information and names, which I collected through this survey, can be surmised under the following titles:

Study Method:

My method of obtaining information is simple. I introduce myself as a researcher of birds and clarify that I'm not a forester and it's my hobby to study birds and jungle. (Note- Pardhis are very much afraid of foresters and police officers

as hunting is now illegal.) I show them Grimmett and Inskipp's Guide and once they open-up you get a lot of information. But I have to be wary of the mob that begins to surround me. Pardhis are involved in poaching, illicit liquor business and many remain drunk most of the time. They are also very quarrelsome, ill-tempered and start fighting over petty issues and I was lucky to have escaped getting beaten up by an irate Pardhi clan, on three different occasions.

Trapping of vultures:

Pardhis used simple noose traps to catch vultures. These were laid around a fresh carcass when it is being skinned. When the vultures arrived they were allowed to consume the flesh to their stomach-full. Then the vultures were frightened with some noise or by waving a piece of cloth. Now the vultures with their bellyfulls, had to run for a while before takeoff! As they run helter-skelter their feet get entangled in the noose traps laid around the carcass. The noose traps are firmly fixed to the ground with the help of chords tied to wooden pegs. The frightened vultures are chased back and forth by the Pardhis, until all the birds get entangled in the noose traps.

Then the Pardhis used to take the vultures back to their *bedas* on shoulders. The primaries of the birds were tied together with chords (made from vulture intestine) to prevent their flight; and with strings the vulture's legs were tied to one wooden pole (just like our livestock are tied). These vultures were then killed, cooked and eaten as and when required. Pardhi children often played with these vultures. Sometimes the vultures were kept alive for months as newer birds were captured and added to the group, producing a pet like situation. So these 'captive' or so called 'pet' vultures were taken to new carcasses for feeding. This sometimes created a misunderstanding among the non-Pardhis that these 'captive' vultures were used to attract more vultures from the sky! In one 'catch' 10 to 50 vultures were trapped. The hip portion (called '*dhepas*' in Pardhi dialect) is the most preferred part of the vulture anatomy. Empty vulture body was sometimes used as a decoy while hunting.

Names of vultures in Pardhi dialect:

The following names were collected and found to be similar throughout the study area among the tribe. There is some difference of pronunciation in different villages. They tend to use 'o' at the end of the names of most wild animals.

1. Scavenger Vulture: *Linda or Lindo*
2. White-backed Vulture: *Garad*
3. Long-billed Vulture: *Pandharo or Dholiyo*
4. King Vulture: *Raattal or Raatallyo*

Area of survey:

The survey was done in the five districts of Western Vidarbha. Surprisingly the information provided by a Pardhi in the remotest village of Yavatmal district matches with that of another Pardhi in any of the five districts. This establishes the fact that the knowledge about birds to the

tribe has come through the generations and it is not superficial.

Other observations regarding wildlife and Pardhis:

Pardhis still survive mostly on 'shikar' (hunting) of wildlife. They can consume anything from a quail to a jungle cat to a deer. They seldom eat Hyena. The common 'shikar' includes quails, partridges, sandgrouse, common peafowl, White-breasted waterhens among birds and Wild Boar, Blackbuck, Monitor Lizards, Black-naped Hare, Jungle Cat etc., among wild animals. At the onset of monsoon in Vidarbha, thousands of Monitor Lizards are hunted by Pardhis. It is a well-known fact that all these are sold openly in meat markets in Vidarbha. Even today it is not difficult to get the meat of a Blackbuck in a village, or a '*Bater-chicken*' (not '*butter-chicken*') in a restaurant.

Names of some Pardhi tribals interviewed :

Amravati district:

1. Mr. Shyamrao Bhosale (50 yrs.) At. Rajura, Tq Amravati
2. Mr. Terling Pawar, At. Rajura, Dist. Amravati
3. Mr. Ramdoshi Tarachand Pawar (80 yrs.) At. Mogra Beda, Tq. Amravati

Yavatmal District:

1. Mr. Phulkathi Chouvan (85 yrs.) At. Bijora Beda, Tq. Darwha
2. Mr. Siliman Chouvan (70 yrs.) At. Ganeshpur Beda, Tq. Darwha
3. Motilal Pawar (35 yrs.) At. Banayat Tq. Darwha
4. Mrs. Shantabai Pawar (40 yrs.) At. Bijora Beda, Tq. Darwha

Washim District:

1. Mr. Bhura Sonawji Solanke (85 yrs.) and Mr. Srikrishna Bhura Solanke, At. Savangi, Tq. Karanja-Lad

Wardha District:

1. Mr. Senapati Pawar (40 yrs.) Near Collector's Bunglow, Wardha

Akola District: Mr. Himmat Pawar, At. Tq. Akot

Discussion:

Many theories are being debated about the serious decline of vulture population in India. These include shortage of food, vehicular traffic, viral epidemic, use of veterinary drug diclofenac, among others. The poaching of vultures for food among Pardhis in Maharashtra is of course a local phenomenon and might not have led to the near wiping out of the population from the study area. But it is certainly a causative factor in the decline of the vulture population in the study area.

References:

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