

Chapter 4

Honey Hunting in Kaski

Introduction

In Kaski, honey hunting is predominantly the preserve of Gurung villages. However, as in most of Nepal, the villages although dominated by one group are inhabited by people from a mix of caste and ethnic groups. Honey hunting is practised not only by Gurungs, but also by members of other groups. It represents a strong binding element among the diverse inhabitants of a village as the hunting and associated rituals are practised together. The size and height of the cliffs are seen by the hunters as being one of the major challenges in hunting. The sense of sharing and overcoming this challenge, and the communal sense of loss when a hunter loses his life on the cliff, further strengthen these bonds. The communal sense of challenge is shown by the way in which cliffs are designated; most are known by the name of honey hunters who have fallen from them, in recognition of their bravery and courage.

The honey hunters described the methods they used, the tools and equipment, and associated practices in detail during the APPA exercises and interviews. These descriptions and explanations are summarised in the following.

Honey Hunting Tools and Equipment

The main equipment used by the honey hunters is listed in Table 4.1, some are shown in the figures. Most are made from locally available plant-based materials, particularly bamboo. Some honey hunters now use improved equipment, for example one hunter had started to use an iron sickle in place of a wooden cutter (tango), and where honey collection baskets used to be lined with lamb's skin they are now lined with plastic.

Honey Hunting Techniques

Honey is generally harvested twice a year, during October/November (the Nepali month of Kartik) and March/April (the Nepali month of Chaitra) depending on the cliff (Table 3.2). The basic method of honey hunting is the same across Nepal. A fire is lit under the bee trees or cliffs to smoke out the bees from their combs and the combs are then cut down and collected. However, the socio-cultural and spiritual practices associated with honey hunting differ from community to community. The

following describes one example in detail: how the Gurungs of Taprang village in Kaski district hunt honey.

Honey hunting in Taprang village

Each community has its own cliff or cliffs (Table 3.1) and will only harvest honey from another cliff if specifically requested to do so by the owning community. At some stage in the honey hunting season general agreement is reached that the time has come to harvest. If a group has more than one cliff, decisions on the order in which to harvest will be based on various factors including whether the cliff has active nests. An auspicious day is then selected by the priest (pujari).

Advance planning involving all group members and villagers is essential for successful honey hunting. *Apis laboriosa* honey is only collected in the daytime, mornings and evenings are considered to be the best time. Before a honey hunting event, the trail to the cliff site is either repaired or made, the equipment is checked and repaired, and the rope ladder is soaked in water.

The six main tasks of smoking out, ladder pulling and guiding, signalling, collecting the honey from the cliff, gathering up the honey at the base of the cliff, and worship must all be properly carried out for a honey hunting event to be successful. There are also specific taboos associated with some of these steps. The honey hunters, about a dozen men in total, divide into specific groups to cover each of the tasks.

The honey hunters first gather the honey hunting equipment together – the ropes, ladders, poles, baskets, and bowls – and proceed to the bottom of the cliff.

They then perform a ceremony of worship to placate the cliff gods and ensure that the gods agree with the activity. They sacrifice a goat, sheep, or chicken and offer flowers, fruits, and grains of rice.

A fire of branches and foliage is lit to smoke out the bees. Smoking is crucial to disorient the worker bees and save the honey hunters from being stung. The fire is made with dry material for heat and covered with damp green leafy material to produce smoke. Foliage from *Machilus spp* (kath kaulo) is considered to be the best material for producing smoke. *Maesa chisia* (bilaune) is not used because people believe that it may bring bad luck, leading to accidents or other problems at any time during the honey hunting event. In most cases smoke is created in a huge quantity at the base of the cliff below the targeted nest; the smoke from the fire rises up and disperses the bees upwards from the lower edges of their combs, leaving the brood and honey sections of the combs clearly visible. Where the cliff is very high, smoking bundles are sent up and down with ropes as per the instructions of the main honey hunter. Each bundle is attached with a strong stick and a rope to facilitate the up and down movement.

The rope ladder group is made up of about five people. The rope ladder (prang) is secured to a tree trunk near the top of the cliff, hung over the cliff, and then secured to another tree at the bottom. The lead honey hunter, or kuichhe, fastens himself to the rope ladder with a rope (koho chho) and



Pujari from Taprang village



Honey hunters from Khanderjung village preparing the equipment

Table 4.1: Honey hunting equipment

Local name	English translation	Description
prang	rope ladder	The prang is the ladder used to scale the cliffs. It is constructed from rope made from the cortex of the local malingo, ghunde, and/or tite bansh species of mountain bamboo. The ladders are generally around 70 metres long and made of 2 cm diameter rope. If the rope ladder is not long enough then a longer one is made to fit the height of the cliff. The rungs are made from a local wood called ku-kath, which is considered to be special because it is longer lasting than other wood.
uab	rope (to secure the ladder)	The uab is the rope used to tie the ladder to a tree trunk at the top of the cliff. The ropes are made from bamboo and are generally between 5 and 10 metres long, depending upon the distance between the tree trunk and the cliff edge.
pechho	rope (for hanging the basket)	The pechho is the rope used to hang the bamboo basket (korko) and is made from allo (<i>Gerardinia palmate</i>), babio (<i>Eulaliopsis binata</i>), and/or pat (<i>Corchorus olitorius</i>). It is usually between 50 and 70 metres long.
korko or tokari	bamboo basket	Korko are round bamboo baskets used to hold the collected honey; they can typically hold about 20 litres.
chhyakal or khaal	sheep skin	The chhyakal or khaal is a lamb's skin traditionally used to line the bottom of the korko to prevent the honey from leaking out; nowadays plastic sheets are used.
tango or ghochma	cutting stick	A tango or ghochma is a bamboo stick with a metal or wooden plate fixed on the end. It is used to dislodge and cut combs from the cliffs. The handle is usually about 7m long.
saaton	stick	A saaton is a bamboo stick used to guide the hook attached to the koili chho into the comb, also about 7m long.
koili chho	rope with hook	A koili chho is a rope made from locally available fibre with a hook on the end (koili means hook and chho means rope). These ropes are usually about 14 metres long and are used to separate the brood portion from the honey portion of nests and pull the honeycomb away from the cliff.
koho chho	a safety rope	A koho chho is a safety rope used by the honey hunter to fasten himself to his ladder. It is made from pat (<i>Corchorus olitorius</i>).
chhora	filter	Chhora are a kind of filter made from bamboo cortex; they are used to separate out and clean the wax and honey.
donga	bowl	A donga is a kind of wooden bowl used for collecting beeswax. Nowadays aluminium pots are mostly used instead.
tuju	rope	A tuju is a rope used to balance the ladder by connecting it to different points on the ground.
whibe	rope	A whibe is a rope made from bamboo fibre that is attached to the rope ladder and pulled by men on the ground to manipulate the ladder.
dabilo	knife	A dabilo is the wooden or iron plate that is fixed to end of the tango and is used to cut brood combs.



Rope ladder (prang)



Rope used to secure the ladder (uab)



Bamboo basket (korko)



Cutting sticks (tango)

descends. The kuichhe is the most important actor. He needs to have sufficient confidence and concentration to remain sitting safely on the rope ladder whilst operating the poles and shouting instructions to the rope controllers above. The kuiche works without any protective clothing. Their work demands great courage and total concentration.

Several rope controllers (pechho chaiba piba mhi) stay at the top of the cliff to make sure that the rope is secure and to raise or lower ropes to send down and collect items from the honey hunter. A signaller (ishar piba mhi) usually perches on an overhanging tree or anywhere where he can get a clear view of the proceedings. His job is to pass messages between the honey hunter and his assistants and to coordinate operations. He issues commands to the ladder pullers. The main ones are (in Gurung)

lower the ladder	ri ri
pull the ladder up	chhai chhai
lower the ladder slightly	ri
raise the ladder slightly	chhai

When the lead honey hunter has climbed down the rope ladder and is facing the nest, the bamboo collecting basket (korko) is lowered down to him on a rope (pechho). He then uses a long stick (kyar) to balance the collecting basket exactly under the comb. The basket is guided by a rope (whibe) which is held by people at the base of the cliff. Then the honey hunter separates the brood portion of the comb. He uses a bamboo stick (saaton) to push a wooden hook into the comb. The hook is first pushed through the end of the koili chho rope, so that the rope is firmly attached to the hook. The stick is used to guide the hook into the comb. The hook is pushed into the centre of the comb in the honey part just above the brood portion or in the brood portion itself. The kuiche then cuts the honeycomb with the tango or ghochma, a wooden or iron sickle fixed to the end of a bamboo stick. The basket is manoeuvred from the ground to catch the falling chunk of honeycomb. When the basket is full it is lowered to the ground, emptied, and sent up again. The lead hunter tries to leave some part of the brood portion on the cliff. This ensures immediate reclustering of bees at this site once the smoke has dissipated. Less experienced, and immature, hunters sometimes forget or are unable to do this.

The people responsible for gathering the honey stay at the bottom of the cliff. They cut the combs that are sent down and carefully put them into aluminium pots so that the honey does not become contaminated with any brood.

It usually takes two to three hours to harvest one colony. The number of colonies harvested from a single site varies greatly, for example in the study sample from as few as 2 to as many as 40 colonies.

In Taprang the harvested honey is shared out. All the community members who helped at the event receive one portion, while the main honey hunter and those people who pulled and guided the ladder get a double portion. All of those present at the event are permitted to eat as much honey as



Attaching the rope ladder at the cliff top



Honey hunter in action - spearing the comb with the koili chho and separating the brood from honey portion



Cutting the comb with the tango while balancing the basket below



Lowering the cut comb in the basket



Processing the honeycomb



Celebrating the harvest

they can on the spot. The main honey hunter is given the head of the sacrificed animal, and has the privilege of eating the first portion of the meat of the animal, which is cooked after the event. The hunters explained that in this village this is one way of expressing respect.

Other villages share out the honey in different ways. In Landruk village, for example, the hunters are paid around 1000 NRs per day, according to the amount of honey collected. (As a comparison, paid labour in these areas usually commands from less than 100 to around 200 NRs per day depending on the level of skill.)

Traditional Beliefs and Practices

Although many of the beliefs and practices associated with honey hunting are similar across Nepal, the details differ. The local communities believe that it is crucial for them to follow the traditions – especially ritual worship — to maintain the sanctity of their cliffs and the favour of the gods. The traditional beliefs of the Kaski Gurungs are described in detail as an example to indicate the basic ideas.

The Kaski Gurungs worship their local gods before honey hunting. Thane mane – the local god – oversees all local events, the cliff god 'Abakarbhū' is specifically responsible for the honey hunting event. In general, the honey hunters make a blood sacrifice to both the gods at the start of the event by killing a goat, sheep, or chicken. At the same time they worship all dead members of the community. This worship is known as 'Ayar bhayar'. In some cases, milk is poured on the cliff before initiating honey hunting instead of animal blood. These activities are carried out by the local priest (pujari). He blesses and prays for the participants and oversees the sacrificial rituals. He performs three types of prayers (puja) using uncooked rice (accheta), pure water, incense, seven black soyabean seeds, yeast for making alcohol, locally brewed alcohol, unprocessed cotton pulled into threads (piuri), ginger (aduwa), leaf plates, and cow dung.

As for many events and many groups in Nepal, particular attention is paid to whether days are auspicious or inauspicious for honey hunting. In terms of the week, the Taprang Gurungs consider Tuesdays to be the most auspicious day, with Saturday also good. Wednesday is the most inauspicious day. In addition, honey hunting is forbidden by tradition on the eighth, twenty-third, twenty-sixth, and thirtieth days of the lunar cycle. Furthermore, certain parts of the lunar cycle are more favourable than others. The hunters prefer to gather honey 2-3 days before either a dark moon or a full moon; and they don't harvest honey during 'Sharun' times, a particular five-day period within each month in the Nepali Bikram Sambat calendar. To identify these days, the hunters must consult a lunar calendar known as the jotishi calendar (Sanskrit) or pattro (Nepali). These are prepared annually in Nepal by priest astrologers and are available on the open market. The calendar provides details of significant days in the lunar cycle including major Hindu (and Gurung) festivals and auspicious and inauspicious days for specific events like marriages, building a house, and so on.

Women are not allowed to watch honey hunting events in certain communities in Kaski, and where they are allowed they are expected to stay sitting some distance from the cliff site. It is believed

that the bees will become aggressive if women watch the proceedings. Men whose wives are menstruating or are more than six months pregnant are not allowed to join a honey hunting team.

The patterns are changing, however. In recent years several rituals have been dropped and elaborated prayer ceremonies have been simplified.

Honey Productivity

Honey hunters and local informants estimated the amount of honey harvested from the 26 sites in the survey in the previous year (1999/00, the Nepali year runs from mid April to mid April). This information is summarised in Table 4.2 Each site was harvested only once during the year. Overall some 3000 kgs of honey was harvested, slightly less than 200 kgs per site on average, with a range from only 20 kgs (from 2 colonies) to nearly 700 kgs from (40 colonies) from a single cliff.

Table 4.2: Estimated honey production from the nesting sites in Kaski district in the year 1999/2000

	Cliff name	No. of nests identified in survey during 2000/01 ¹	Number of colonies and amount of honey harvested in the year 1999/2000	
			Number of colonies	Amount kgs
1	Sodque Bhir	37 (o) 10 (e)	20	250
2	Kamro Bhir	27 (o) 11 (e)	No harvest	
3a	Chadque Keujha Sini Themai Bhir	13 (o) 3 (e)	12	90
3b	Chadque Keujha Sini Themai Bhir	4 (o) 2 (e)	No harvest	
4	Biura Pro Koira	17 (o) 1 (e)	12	100
5	Thama Thera	2 (o) 6 (e)	10	70
6	Dhoya Quincha	4 (o) 3 (e)	2	20
7	Ligha Quira	6 (e)	10	60
8	Pli Quira	8 (o) 32 (e)	15	225
9	Karshidhu	5 (e)	6	50
10	Pil Quira	11 (e)	No harvest	
11	Kaula Shoi Koira	10 (e)	No harvest	
13	Ghaya na Koira	1 (o) 6 (e)	5	60
14	Kangro Bhir, Lamakhet	8 (o) 6 (e)	8	40
18	Kuli Bhir	16 (e)	36	450
19	Silasi Bhir	8 (o) 2 (e)	40	670
22	Rohinabei	3 (o) 1 (e)	4	40
23	Kroja Bhir	20 (o)	30	450
24	Tamukharka Mahabhir	12 (o)	18	380
25	Chimro Bhir	7 (o) 2 (e)	9	100
26	Dalang Bhir	5 (o)	No harvest	
	Total		237	3055

¹Sites not mentioned had no active nests.

o – occupied nest, e – empty nest