



## Rat trapping for the dietary protein supplement in northern West Bengal

Rodent meat, as a rich proteins source for humans, has been consumed worldwide (Fiedler 1990). In India, it has been practised widely in the tribal communities of northeastern India, northern India (Singh 2016), western India (Weling 1934; Donde 2015), and southern India (Whitaker & Murali 1988). Due to the taboos, very scanty information has been published on the subject— especially about the indigenous trapping mechanisms, communities practicing it, and the nutritional value of the catch.

I witnessed an incidence of rat trapping in Alipurduar in northern West Bengal. Besides Bengali and Nepali communities, Tea Tribes, Rabha, Garo, and Mechia inhabit this region. On 19 November 2013, I visited a family originally from the Santhal tribe from central India and migrated as labours in tea gardens in Assam during the British era (Sharma 2011). The family had a small rice field with a standing crop at that time. Though paddy was looked healthy, it was infested with rats. Interestingly, at the same time, the family was visited by their distant relatives who were experts in rat hunting. They informed me that it was common among the community residing in northern Bengal and western Assam to travel to their relatives, hunt rats and store or carry the dried meat for later use. On that particular day, I got the opportunity to witness the rat trap setting by an older person. He first inspected the site to set the



**Rat trapped by the traditional device at Alipurduar district. © Sachin Ranade.**

trap as the trap had to be placed on a regular path of rats known as runways.

Rats use well-established runways to carry the paddy seeds to their nest for storage. Such storage and brood chamber have a tunnel system with at least 2–3 openings, some of which can be used during escape when rats are in danger. Moreover, rats have numerous burrows, but tribal trapper could recognize the most frequently used holes from where they raided the paddy field. The trap was built with about a meter long



bamboo stick that anchors in the soil, two small pieces of bamboo sticks –about 20 cm in length and a bamboo string. Nowadays the bamboo string could be replaced by plastic rope as well. Similar traps are known from Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya (Thakur et al. 2013). The traps were set in the evening on the runway. The bait was not required as the rat on its way to raid or returning gets trapped in such traps. The catch was collected the next morning by the tribals. The whole animal was roasted, during which its fur was lost, but the skin remained intact. In case of storage, the rats were degutted, dried or smoked, and stored.

The trapping skills fulfil a high protein diet needs of the third world people and control the agriculture pests (Oyarekua & Ketiku 2010; Meyer-Rochow et al. 2016). In contrast, Fiedler (1990) mentioned that the trapping and consumption of rodents do not have the merits of pest control at large scale and possibilities of accident and secondary poisoning of the consumer. However, the local solutions to protect small to medium scale farming need special attention. As organic farming gains popularity, this traditional trapping gear has additional advantages because it does not involve any harmful chemicals and is made up of local cheap organic materials, thus, it seems economical and eco-friendly alternative to chemical rodent pest control.

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