

# Issues and Challenges with Empowerment of Tribal Women in India: A Forest-Based Study

## Hindistan'daki Kabile Kadınlarının Güçlendirilmesi İle İlgili Sorunlar ve Zorluklar: Orman Temelli Bir Çalışma

Padmaja JAGATI\*

### Abstract

The forest-based resources play significant importance in the lives of tribal women and their households in India. The livelihood of the tribal families is mainly dependent on Non-wood Forest Products (NWFP). These include the collection of kendu leaves for making tobacco, mahua flowers, mahua seeds, mushrooms, tamarind, and wild brooms. The tribal women contribute to a great extent in the collection and processing of NWFP along with the sale of the final products. Due to the existence of the forest, the food and financial security of the tribal households has been secured to a great extent. Sadly, these tribal women receive less compensation through dishonest middlemen due to illiteracy. Therefore, these indigenous women must enhance their skills to increase their income. The current article intends to investigate the amount of women's employment concerning forest products and the many fields in which these women might develop their skills to increase their income and empower their family.

**Keywords:** Forest-based study, Kendu leaves, Medicinal herbs, NWFP, Tribal families, Tribal women, Women empowerment.

### Öz

Orman temelli kaynaklar, Hindistan'daki kabile kadınlarının ve onların hanelerinin yaşamlarında önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Kabile ailelerinin geçim kaynağı büyük ölçüde Orman Dışı Ürünler'e (NWFP) dayanmaktadır. Bu ürünler arasında tütün yapımında kullanılan kendu yapraklarının, mahua çiçeklerinin, mahua tohumlarının, mantarların, tamarindin ve yabani süpürgelerin toplanması yer almaktadır. Kabile kadınları, NWFP'lerin toplanması ve işlenmesi ile nihai ürünlerin satışında büyük ölçüde katkıda bulunmaktadır. Ormanın varlığı sayesinde, kabile hanelerinin gıda ve finansal güvenliği büyük ölçüde sağlanmıştır. Ne yazık ki, bu kabile kadınları okuma yazma bilmedikleri için dürüst olmayan araçlar tarafından düşük ücret almaktadırlar. Bu nedenle, bu yerli kadınların gelirlerini artırmak için becerilerini geliştirmeleri gerekmektedir. Mevcut makale, kadınların orman ürünleri ile ilgili istihdam miktarını ve bu kadınların gelirlerini artırmak ve ailelerini güçlendirmek için becerilerini geliştirebilecekleri çeşitli alanları araştırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Orman temelli çalışma, kendu yaprakları, şifalı otlar, orman dışı ürünler (NWFP), kabile aileleri, kabile kadınları, kadınların güçlendirilmesi.

### Introduction

Forests have always been central to tribal society and culture. These have been the primary source of life and livelihood of tribes since the societal and civilization evolution. Every woman in a tribal household puts earnest effort into providing stuff to the family through forest produce. For tribes, the forest is the place for survival. There has been increasing evidence that forest products particularly those of Non-Wood Forest Products (NWFPs) play a vital part in the employment and livelihoods of the rural poor and tribals (Bose, 2011; Mohapatra et al., 2022). Forest resources in a large manner helped in economic growth and the reduction of poverty in various countries. Unlike urban and industrial economies, women are very much engaged in economic activities, mainly in generating income from NWFPs than male counterparts in tribal economies. Some of these are Mahua flowers, kendu leaves (used to make indigenous cigarettes), mushrooms, mahua seeds, tamarind, and the gathering of wild brooms. Additionally, empirical research has shown that NWFPs offer extremely advantageous income returns for the time invested in collecting, and tribal families also receive consistent income from NWFPs, in which women are far more engaged than their male counterparts.

\* Research Scholar, Department of Adult Continuing Education & Extension Manipur University, [padmajajagati@gmail.com](mailto:padmajajagati@gmail.com) / ORCID: 0009-0003-2466-9411.

Undoubtedly, these men and women in forest areas put their hard effort into collection of the raw materials. Nevertheless, they cannot get much of the gain from the final product. Typically, these NWFP gatherers earn below 10% of the total selling price of the final product. Since they do not have adequate skills to bargain with distributors and retailers and lack adequate technical and financial knowledge, these NWFP gatherers benefit little in terms of monetary gain within the production chain (Mohapatra et al., 2022). Therefore, these indigenous women must enhance their skills to increase their income. The current review article intends to investigate the amount of women's work concerning forest products and the many fields in which these women might become competent to increase their income and empower their families.

## **Methodology**

The current review employs a descriptive methodology. The purpose of the review is to portray the most current issues and challenges faced by tribal women in India regarding their empowerment through forest-based produce for employment and livelihood followed by some key recommendations to combat the circumstances. An exhaustive literature review has been carried out in terms of in-depth analyses of the published research work adopting case studies, interviews, and observation methods on the selected topic. This paper reviewed the recent literature on the employment and livelihood status of tribal women in India, the nature and dimensions of change in their lives, and the challenges and prospects for their empowerment through the use of forest-based produce. The paper also suggests some key recommendations for enhancing the empowerment of tribal women in India. The review is structured with an introductory part at the outset, which is followed by a thorough explanation of the work and livelihood circumstances of tribal women, as well as their significant reliance on produce derived from the forest in Section 3. A well-thought-out and validated sustainable skill framework for the empowerment of Indian tribal women is covered in Section 4. Section 5 presents the most anticipated and significant obstacles to tribal women's empowerment in India. Finally, a well-analyzed set of recommendations has been proposed for the successful execution of tribal women empowerment in India in Section 6, followed by a conclusion section uttering the key outcomes of this review.

## **Forest Economy, Tribal Women's Livelihoods, and Employment**

Forest products offer great avenues for tribal communities, particularly women in the informal economy. As per estimates, of the livelihood of about 6.2 billion people worldwide, 25% is dependent upon to varying degrees on forest products and 350 million population taking shelter in or near this dense forest are mostly dependent on the forest for their everyday survival or livelihood (Dewangan et al., 2011). Approximately, 80% of the population from developing countries is dependent upon NWFPs for meeting health and nutritional requirements (Bose, 2011; Mohapatra et al., 2022; Dewangan et al., 2011). The revenue contribution of the non-timber forest products was about 296 billion Indian rupees to the Indian economy. Income generated from NWFPs constitutes about 50% of the overall forest revenues and 70% of the total forest export (Rani et al., 2011).

The share of income from NWFP products varies from state to state in India. Around 70% of NWFP collection happens in the central tribal belt of the country which includes Odisha, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Maharashtra. In Odisha, earnings from Bamboo, Kendu leaf, Sal seed, Mahua flower, and Tamarind contributes about 85% of hand the total income from NWFPs (Bhukya, 2015). In Gujarat, the share of income from NWFPs to the total income of the household varied from 20.1% to 34.1% on the other, it ranged from 26.5% to 55.5% in the case of West Bengal (Binjha, 2020). In Manipur alone, one of the North-Eastern states of India, about 90% of the people are dependent on forest products as

their sources of income. In the Bastar district of Chhattisgarh state, about 75% of forest dwellers are dependent upon tubers, flowers, and fruits to supplement their food around the year. While 41% of the families in two southern districts of Bihar earn income by collecting mahua flowers; 31% collect tendu leaves which are being utilized in preparing indigenous cigarettes, 55% of the families collect tamarind, 23% of the families earn income through the collection of mushrooms and mahua seeds; and 31% of the families collect wild brooms (Chakravarty, 2013). Dependence on Bamboo related products is more found in the North-eastern states while in the Himalayan states rare and valuable medicinal herbs are majorly found. In the Southern states, forest dwellers are more engaged in forest produce like tamarind and pongamia seeds, etc. In the case of Kerala, the major share of forest products is medicinal plants (Reshi and Sudha, 2022; Bhasin, 2007). 'There are around 120 items of medicinal plants, which are allowed to be collected from the forests by the tribal communities and 96 species by tribal cooperatives. About 56% of their total income is from the NWFPs (Gupta, 2016).

One of the studies revealed that kendu leaves have the potential to deliver employment for about 4 million population annually through Bidi manufacturing (Fernandes and Menon, 1987). The study further pointed out that forest-based enterprises offered up to 50% of income for 20 to 30% of labour force in India. An estimation by the Government of India reveals that NWFPs trading which consists of the collection and processing of economically valuable NWFPs species provided at least 35 million man-days of employment. Studies have pointed out that NWFPs contribute substantially to the livelihoods of forest dwellers, many of whom have limited dependence on non-agricultural income opportunities (Sharma, 2012). One of the estimates points out that 275 million poor rural populations in India are dependent on NWFPs for their subsistence and cash livelihoods (Das et al., 2017; Mahmud et al., 2017; Das, 2012). Out of the entire NWFP trade in India, about 70% of the NWFP collection happens in the tribal parts of India.

### **Sustainable Skill Framework for Tribal Women's Empowerment**

The NWFP collection has not only been the primary avenue of earning and employment for tribals, but it also has a multi-fold influence on the economy through different other related activities such as processing, packaging, and trading activities. It also counts to be a vital income-producing activity to counterbalance the seasonal unemployment rate. Tribal women are more engaged in these activities than men in tribal areas. In India, women's employment in forest-based enterprises was calculated to be roughly 571.533 million days on an annual basis of which 90% contribution is in small-scale enterprises involving NWFP (Chakraborty, 2013). The number of overall female labour involved in the collection of forest products in Odisha is approximately 300 million-woman days. 'In all over India, tendu leaf collection provides employment on a part-time basis for 7.5 million population and a large majority of the population are tribal women (Hazra, 2021). In Odisha state, around 1.8 million women population are engaged in tendu leaf collection, which has gathered 45,000 tons of leaves on an annual basis amounting to INR 450 million. In the case of West Bengal state, sal leaves are collected by tribal women for about six months in a year. This adds to earning about INR 72 per month under the best circumstances (Khan and Hasan, 2020; Besra, 2022). A study conducted by Padhi and Patel (2021) related to forest products in Odisha, reveals that the tribal women walk up to 3 to 4 hours into the forests and engage themselves 15 hours per day, compared to the tribal men engaged in work 11 hours a day. These studies reveal that the tribal women considerably devote more time and labour to forest-related activities, and are dependent upon forests not only for the purpose to support their needs for subsistence and with the sole aim of earning. Thus, the proactive role performed by women in safeguarding food security, and generating cash income by selling

NWFPs provides them a higher status in tribal societies (Chowdhury et al., 2021). Table 1 presents the quantity of different NWFPs collected by the tribal women for self-household use and for marketing purpose in two different villages in Koraput and Kandhamal districts of Odisha in the calendar year 2019.

**Table 1.** Quantity of various NWFPs collected by tribal women in two villages in Koraput and Kandhamal districts of Odisha in the calendar year 2019 (Padhi and Patel, 2021)

Type of NWFP	Quantity of collection in Koraput dist., Odisha		Quantity of collection in Kandhamal dist., Odisha	
	For self-use (kg)	For retail (kg)	For self-use (kg)	For retail (kg)
Mahua flower	2000	7000	5000	20,000
Mahua seed	2000	4000	100	5000
Indian gooseberry	20	30	50	100
Sal leaves	1000 bundles*	4000 bundles*	300 bundles*	1000 bundles*
Hariaki (Harad)	20	50	20	50
Siali leaves	400 bundles*	1000 bundles*	100 bundles*	500 bundles*
Greenies	---	---	For daily purpose	---
Mushroom	400	100	7	50
Roots	800	---	10	---

\*One bundle = 80 leaf plates

The forest-based products, especially the NWFPs have the involvement of millions of working populations including many indigenous men and women in the most remote areas of developing countries. However, the sizable number of women being engaged in incomes generated from forest produce accrue benefits to the country's economy but there are certain limiting factors such as lack of processing skills, tenure security, and limited market access that restrain in taking out larger benefits from these forest resources. There are also huge demands for natural health and beauty products and thus, it is highly desirable that producers in developing countries be linked with these markets. Certainly, it has much potential but domestic and regional markets for such products are still not tapped properly (Sindhi, 2012; Bose, 2011). There is a need to enable indigenous populations so that they get to benefit from these new kinds of economic gains through forest products and to share correspondingly from the increased gains from globalization.

There are a few challenges that need to be solved to make these indigenous population get benefit from it. Tribal people particularly women find NWFP activities very much worthy and attractive. The reason is that the resources are available freely and further, they also get instant cash out of it. However, unless these NWFPs are processed locally, the raw materials will generate low returns and provide little prospect for the accumulation of the capital required to lift them out of poverty. Therefore, these tribal women need to be provided with technical skills so that they can process these forest products as per national and international markets and accrue benefits from those. Again, the tribal women do not have adequate access to market information and thus, they get lesser value being exploited by the intermediaries and agents. The government should intervene and decide on an MSP in this regard to enable the tribal people to get the proper price of it. Additionally, in order to eliminate poverty, particular government or non-governmental organization initiatives in relation to NWFP activities are required to establish support mechanisms for underprivileged people (Naresh, 2014; Sarma, 2014). Farmers, NGOs, government officials, and other stakeholders should all have their capacities continuously built up. The indigenous groups have relatively little management, processing, and marketing expertise and abilities in the NWFP industry. Therefore, coordinated efforts are required to increase the capability of government procurement agency executives, forest department officials, and most crucially, primary forest produce gatherers. Since there are more women working in the NWFP sector, it is important to put women's interests first while conducting training (Paray, 2019; Sethuraman, 2008).

Intensive awareness campaigns along with exposure visits at national and international levels and exhibitions should be organized to make the primary forest gatherers and other concerned organizations aware of various planning, designing, and implementing strategies in NWFP sectors. There are various available successful models of sustainable harvesting in India, such as tej patta collection in Uttarakhand, honey collection in Tamil Nadu, broom grass collection in Meghalaya, satabar collection in Madhya Pradesh, and lac collection in Chhattisgarh. These kinds of successful practices in agriculture require to be well-planned and properly disseminated through the provision of exposure and/or on spot training. For proper planning and strategizing of forest produce to get more revenue and further, a larger share of employment of tribal women in this sector, there has been highly desirable to have more research and generation of statistics data. Undoubtedly, research and development activities are being undertaken in a few NWFPs, namely lac, resin, tendu patta, etc., there are stringent needs for research in other sectors too particularly in the areas of developing new/alternate marketability, particularly for low-value and high volume NWFP, nursery, plantation, collection, post harvesting, semi processing, and storage. Research is also required on biological, social, trade and market, and economic dimensions (Panda, 2021; Jena and Sahoo, 2016; Raj et al., 2021). Further, there is also a need to create a database regarding gender dimensions and the involvement of men/women in different NWFP activities and livelihood strategies. This would enable the development of sustainable policies and planning to ensure the larger participation of women in these activities. Social mobilization of tribal women who are directly or indirectly involved in forest products also requires urgent attention as these tribal women are often exploited by intermediaries and agents. There is a need of strengthening women groups and Self-Help groups in the locality, which needs to be mobilized and skilled with their requisite knowledge and skills. Various IEC materials should also be used to mobilize the tribal women entrepreneurs.

### **Primary Challenges in Empowerment of Tribal Women in India**

- The indigenous women have low levels of literacy and schooling. They don't seem to be very interested in the educational system or the school curriculum.
- Since the tribal women mostly rely on agriculture, hunting, food collecting, pastoral work, and the forest to support their basic requirements, the tribes are economically destitute.
- For a living, the tribal women work in agriculture or other traditional, unprofitable vocations.
- The tribal women earn less money than men do, which decreases their socioeconomic position.
- The health of tribal women is poor; they struggle with anaemia, starvation, and other illnesses. The inability to read and write presents barriers to accessing medical facilities.
- Predominantly, the tribal women live in rural, mountainous, and interior areas. They are kept in isolation due to a lack of transportation and communication options.
- In a patriarchal tribal society, tribal women are legally prohibited from exercising certain rights that result in gender inequality.
- Due to their limited exposure to the outside world and continued reliance on traditional practices, tribal women encounter technical obstacles that reduce their effectiveness and production.

## Key Suggestions to Empower the Tribal Women in India

- The tribal women's participation in decision-making, voting, politics, running for office, and being given a fair shot at being elected at home, school, the community, and the national level, among other things.
- Usually, empowering women entails offering them the chance to pursue higher education.
- It is important to alter how women view themselves and their level of empowerment. They should work to overcome their perception of themselves as helpless, reliant, and passive and aim to become active and independent.
- India has a population that works in and is reliant on agriculture to some degree. The agriculture tasks are carried out by tribal women. Thus, their production and efficiency may be boosted by receiving training and developing their skills in all facets of agriculture.
- Tribal women labour in unorganized industries including agriculture, building, brick laying, housekeeping, etc. The government should uphold their employment rights and enact specific legislation to stop workplace abuse of female employees.
- At the village level, training sessions, seminars, and workshops regarding jobs, health, and education should be organized.
- The government should provide a market for their handicrafts, traditional commodities, agricultural, and forestry products.
- Resources like land, cattle, productive ownership, and other resources must be in the hands of tribal women.
- Micro-credit schemes should be expanded to provide indigenous women modest loans for self-employment in order to help them support themselves and their families.

## Conclusion

To empower tribal women in India, a multifaceted strategy that takes into account the variety of societal institutions that influence women's lives is necessary. In India, identity politics is a highly important political tool that is both employed and exploited in a variety of political and social organizations. Numerous social groups, like the Dalit rights movement, the tribal rights movement, etc., struggle for the rights of the marginalized. The representation of historically marginalized populations in society has benefited greatly from these efforts. As a result of the lack of clear statements on women's rights within these movements, the very structures from which they are seeking inclusion have become even more unequal. Therefore, empowering women involves more than just delivering resources; it also involves acknowledging their lived reality of many oppressions.

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