



# Forest Based Tribal Economy and Role of Women: A Study from South West Bengal (1947-2006)

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**Abstract:** Tribal dependency on forest is well known. They have symbiotic relationship with forest. The colonial government disturbed this relationship with focused on only revenue generation. This relationship recognized in the forest policy of 1988 of independent India. In tribal economy women play crucial role. Although the main occupation of tribal of South West Bengal was agriculture, forest deeply influenced their economy. Non-timber Forest Products (NTFP) provided them a substantial resource of livelihood. Generally tribal women used to collect various NTFPs, i.e. sal leaves, kendu leaves, sal seeds, mahua flowers, mushroom, medicinal plants, fuel wood, fodder etc. They also collect raw material for handicraft products. Since women were engaged in collection of NTFPs for sustenance, later government gave importance to women in Joint forest management (JFM). As tribal women were the main user of forest product, they were the worst sufferer of deforestation. Government plantation programmes failed to meet their need and it created extra work load on women. Now, several non-government and government institutions are working for upliftment of tribal women. More attention is needed for the improvement of their condition.

**Keywords:** Tribal women, NTFP, JFM, handicraft, South West Bengal.

## Introduction:

Tribes, who are notified by the Government as ‘Scheduled Tribes’, lives in and around the forests from times immemorial. Altogether, there are about 744 scheduled tribes across the country. Most of scheduled tribes are concentrated in the eight states- Madhya Pradesh, Orissa, Bihar, Maharashtra, Gujrat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal. The Scheduled tribe’s population in west Bengal is 5,296,953 which is 5.8 percent of total state population.<sup>1</sup> According to, “The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Order [Amendment] Act” 2002, there are 41 group of tribes enlisted as scheduled tribes in West Bengal. Among these tribes, Santal are the major tribal group in West Bengal.

Forest plays an important role in daily life of tribal community. As they reside along with the forest from the beginning of the human civilization, a strong bondage has been established with forest. Their economy deeply influenced by the forest. They lived on variety of fruits, roots, flowers, leave, mushrooms etc. derived from forest. But under the British rule their natural bondage with forest was severally disturbed. For the interest of revenue generation colonial government forced tribal to clear jungle for cultivation. As a result of agrarian invasion there was large scale deforestation in colonial time. Further, when government understood the importance of the timber for railway sleeper, they shifted their policy toward forest from destruction to conservation and this policy again deprived tribal from forest. After independence, The National Forest Policy 1952 also focussed on revenue generation and again they deprived from the forest. Later, the National Forest Policy 1988 envisaged tribal people’s involvement in the development and protection of the forest to meet the growing demands of food, fodder and firewood etc.

<sup>1</sup> <https://adibasikalyan.gov.in/html/st.php> on 01.10.2022

This paper highlights on the three districts of South-West Bengal- Bankura, Purulia, and Paschim Medinipur. Bankura and Purulia districts are known as drought prone area, and Paschim Medinipur has flood and drought – experiences both. Agriculture is the chief occupation in this study area, although land is not always suitable for agriculture due to lateritic and undulating in nature. A vast portion of this study area covered with dense forest and due to this reason the forest tract of this area was called “jungle mahal”. A large number of tribal people easily found in this area. Since they live in the forest, their economy is deeply influenced by the forest.

Now there are different tribal groups, in the three district of South West Bengal - Santhal, Munda, Bhumij, Kora, Oraon, Lodha, Sabar, Kheria, Kisan, karmali, korwa, Birhor, Mahli, Mahali, Mugh, Mech, Mru, Mal paharia, Saoria paharia, Rava, Lepcha, Bedia, Ho, Garet etc. Among these tribal group Santal, Bhumij, Kora, Munda, Lodha, Savar and Mahali are the dominant tribal groups. Agriculture is the main occupation of some tribes like Santhal, Bhumij, Munda, while primary occupation of Lodha, Birhor is hunting and food gathering and they known as the Primitive tribal group. As a result of Government initiation some of them also adopted cultivation, agri- labour as occupation. Some tribes like Mahali, Kharia engaged with seasonal activities like production of handicraft. Due to insufficient income they are very much dependent on the forest product for their livelihood.

### **JFM and tribal women:**

The Forest policy 1988 not only recognized involvement of tribal men in protection, regeneration and sustainable development of forest but women are also recognised. Joint Forest Management (JFM) was first experimented at Arabari Forest range of West Bengal involving forest dwellers for the protection, conservation and development of forests resources and was successful. JFM has been acknowledge as a tool for management of forest resources and implemented in different States of the country. There was 4096 JFM committees worked on about 0.63 million hectare of forest land up to march 2005 in the State . More than 480000 families were involved in JFM and among them around 110000 families were from tribal community.<sup>2</sup> Forest Protection Committees were formed under JFM to prevent degradation of sal forest and forest regeneration in South West Bengal. State Forest Survey reported in 1995 that West Bengal has increased 90sq km forest. This happened mainly due to regeneration of sal tree and its proper protection in Beliator and Sonamukhi range of Bankura district and Ajodhya and Baghmundi range of Purulia district.<sup>3</sup> FPCs did well here and were able to achieve their goals.

After a decade of initial JFM order, the MoEF issued guidelines which focused on women participation. Certain threshold criteria were proposed in the structure of JFMC i.e. at least 50 percent women membership, 33 percent women representation in executive committee, in the case of quorum of EC 1/3 women members or at least one members should be required, and there should be one women among the three post of President, Vice-President and secretary. In 1991, the State Government through an amendment of previous order 1989 recognized the joint membership of husband wife in FPCs. But the order didn't mention about status of membership when a man has more than one wife or if one of them is dead, separated or abandoned. But the order helped the tribal women to free access of NTFPs<sup>4</sup>, i.e. fallen twigs, grass, fruits (excluding cashew), flowers, leaves, seeds mushroom, and medicinal plant etc.

### **Collection of NTFPs and tribal women:**

Several million villagers in India depend totally or adequately on Non-timber forest products or Minor forest products for their livelihood, especially those products which provide food security during the lean agricultural season or during drought. <sup>5</sup> NTFPs played crucial role in tribal economy. Collection of forest products had usually been done by the tribal women. Tribal men also collect forest product or assist women in collecting and bringing those at home or market, but his role was not very significant. Tribal women are mainly responsible for providing food to their family; they go to forest daily basis in the morning and come back home in the evening. Meanwhile they spent whole day for collecting NTFPs or sometimes to sell this NTFPs in local market as they have better bargaining capability. Apart from this forest based activities, they also look after normal duties like sweeping hut, supplying water, brushing pots, rearing cattle, cooking meals etc. Tribal men did not go to forest on daily basis as they are responsible for occasional activities. Girlchild of tribal families also engaged in collection of NTFPs with their mother. Sometimes they look after their siblings in absence of her mother or other female person.

Before the introduction of JFM, tribal women of South west Bengal used to collect brushwood or jhanti in a limited rate, i.e. one head load per person or one cart load per group; some leaf, flower and fruits i.e. Sal, kendu, mahua and piasal etc. Government allowed tribal to extract pole for making of agricultural tools like plough or for the purpose of housing

<sup>2</sup> Proceedings of the National Workshop on JFM, MoEF, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> The State Forest Report, 1995, Forest Survey of India , Ministry of Environment and Forests, pp.18.

<sup>4</sup> Chanda, Anuradha, 'Tribal Women' in The Changing Status of Women in West Bengal, J, Bagchi, ed., pp 138.

<sup>5</sup> Agarwal, Bina, Environmental Action, Gender Equity and Women's Participation, Development and Change 28 (1): 1-44, Dec 2002.

construction limited to one pole for making of plough per annum and three poles for construction purposes per household.<sup>6</sup> This work was usually done by tribal men. Tribal women extract various fruit like kendu and mahul fruits for food and selling, mahul flower for liquor making, leaves of sal for making of plate, kendu leaves for making of biri, sal seed, mushroom for their own food and also for marketing, dry branches of tree for fuel, lighting and also for selling, medicinal plant for their own treatment, fodder for their cattle etc. Tribal women consumed some part of their collected NTFPs like Kendu and Mahul fruit, mushroom, fuel wood towards their family and rest of the part was sold by them in local market, as women have better bargaining power and more patient than man. Procurements of kendu leaf, Sal leaf, mahul flowers etc. generally done by women. They used to make plate from sal leaf, *chatai* from plam leaf, rope from sabai grass etc. in their free time.

List of NTFPs collected by tribal women in South West Bengal:

Name of the Produce	Part used	Used for
Amlaki	Fruit	Food and medicine
Bahera	Fruit	Medicine
Chichinga	Fruit and leaf	Food and medicine
Haritaki	Fruit	Medicine
Banpui	Plant	Food
Sal	Leaf and seed	Making Plate and oil
Kusum	Seed	Making oil (medicine)
Mahua	Flower and fruit	Making liquor and food
Kendu	Leaf and fruit	Making Biri and Food
Kontikory	Whole part	Medicine
Kurchi	Bark	Medicine
Karanj	Seed	Making oil
Kul	Fruit	Food
Kalmegh	Whole body	Medicine
Jam	Fruit, leaf and seed	Food and Medicine
Neem	Leaf and seed	Medicine
Mushroom	Whole part	Food
Sabai grass	Whole Part	Making rope
Date palm	Leaf and Fruit	Making Mats and food
Bamboo	Branches, whole	Making basket, Tray, fish-trap, broomsticks etc.

Source: field survey.

### Handicrafts and tribal women:

Some minor forest produce like sal leaf, sabai grass, date palm, bamboo etc. give opportunity to tribal towards making craft and tribal women possess expertise in this work. Handicraft provided almost always deprived section -tribal women a way for sustenance. Hill Kharia of Purulia district were engaged with making of traditional broomsticks and fish-trap. One big sized and good quality bamboo cost Rs 2 and about four to five broomsticks or three fish-traps were made from it. The process needed both husband and wife equal participation.<sup>7</sup> In recent time, beside their traditional handicraft products, they also produce beautiful handicraft products, which had demand among urban and rural population. Mahali of Paschim-Medinipur and Bankura also an artisan tribe and engaged with basketry. The 'Dom', who belongs to Scheduled caste community, is also expert in basketry. Birhor tribe were a traditional rope maker. In the rope making process both sexes has their specific role. While both sexes play role in the collection of chop-fibre and selling of finished product, but making of bark rope generally done by women.

### Government Initiatives:

Now West Bengal Tribal Development Co-Operative Corporation Ltd. (WBTDCCCL) provides seasonal employment to tribal people of forest fringe area through the name of NTFP operation. Large – sized Multipurpose Co-operative Society (LAMPS) help WBTDCCCL in this operation. NTFP operation related to kendu leaf and sal seed collection. Tribal women are more suitable in this work than their male counterpart and a large number of tribal women are engaged with collection of NTFP. They collect kendu leaf for 90 days and sal seed for 30 days and collected MFP were sold to LAMPS. This

<sup>6</sup> Report on Forest Resources of Bankura District of West Bengal, Forestry Survey of India, Eastern Zone, 1985.

<sup>7</sup> Sinha, Dikshit, The Hill Kharia Of Purulia: Impact of Poverty on a Hunting and Gathering Tribe. Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1984, Pp-19.

seasonal employment minimise the pressure on seasonal migration to nearest district like Burdwan or Hooghly. They very often went for seasonal employment two or three decades' ago but now they do it rarely.<sup>8</sup> A huge chunk of tribal, where women participation was dominant, went to Burdwan and Hooghly district mainly for agricultural pursuits. Self Help Groups and NGOs also help adivasi women to improve their living conditions through its financial assistance scheme. Forest fringe SHGs paved the way toward income generation. Training and workshop were arranged on various topics to raise their livelihood level, i.e. training on sal leaf plate making, bidi making, mushroom cultivation, collection of medicinal plant and their processing, tasar cultivation, handicraft products making from sabai grass, bamboo etc. Samayita Math works to help rural women as well as tribal women towards the achievement of sustainable livelihood. The Math trained tribal women to make leaf plate with modern technique to raise their earning level as machine sewing plate has more demand in market and it consumed less time than traditional pattern of sewing with neem sticks.

Recently, govt has taken several initiatives to support the livelihood of tribal women and to use traditional handicraft products to conserve the forest of Jungle Mahal. Jungle Mahal has vast area of forest and its cover with huge number of sal tree. So here is an opportunity to use this resource in sustainable way. Recently Sal Sabai Centre of excellence at Jhargram has been established under the supervision of West Bengal Khadi and Village Industries Board. The Mission of this excellence centre is to uplift the Status of tribal women and other backward women. This centre provides training of artisan tribal women with modern technology. Tribal women are expert in collection of tender Sal leaves, in drying preparation and to make product like plate, bowl etc. Almost every tribal woman is familiar with this work. They generally use *neem* stick to stitch Sal leaves to give them a plate or bowl shape and sale in local market at Rupees 8-10 per hundred only<sup>9</sup>. Excellence centre purchase their product at Rupees 70-100 per hundred to stop the distress sale. They also have option to sell their products to outsiders if they needs. Their traditional way of making is time consuming, modern technology can produce variety of products in a very short time. It creates awareness among the tribal artisan to increase economics of scale and marketing power.

**Conclusion:** Tribal women were more directly and frequently involved with forest, so they were the worst sufferer of deforestation. It increased work load of tribal women. Fernandes and Menon shown that, tribal women actively engaged with work on an average of 14 hours. They spent additional three to four hours to walk to fetch fuel wood due to deforestation.<sup>10</sup> Quick growing species (QGS) like eucalyptus and akshmoni (*acacia auriculiformis*) are mainly used in plantation programme in South West Bengal, which failed to meet requirement of MFP and even the minimum demand for fuel wood. The situation was harder for tribal women. Government and Non- government organizations working for the upliftment of tribal women in recent time, though more attention is needed.

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<sup>8</sup> As per Field survey.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.wbkvib.org.in/index.php/village-industries/sal-sabai-centre-of-excellence> on 27.09.2022.

<sup>10</sup> Fernandes, W., G.S. Menon, *Tribal Women and Forest Economy: Deforestation, exploitation and status change*, Indian Social Institute, Delhi, 1987, pp.187.