



RESEARCH ARTICLE

TRIBAL WOMEN AND FOREST RESOURCES: A MICRO LEVEL STUDY OF JAYPUR FOREST,
BANKURA DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Forest provides a means of livelihood for rural communities in the developing countries. It plays a vital role in global food security, providing food, fodder, fuel and medicine. Throughout the developing world, women make a significant contribution to forestry. The present paper attempts to study the organic linkages between women and forest resources. Indigenous women's knowledge plays an important role in the management, conservation and sustainable use of forest resources. They are the collector, and direct user of the forest resources to sustain livelihood, due to illiteracy, poverty, ill-skilled in technical knowledge and lack of control over land and other resources, they are less benefitted from natural resources from economic perspectives but they are still at underprivileged position in environmental decisions at households as well as society level.

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INTRODUCTION

"Is there any way-out to improve our living condition?"

- *Sourovi Hansda*, a tribal women representative from Jaypur forest.

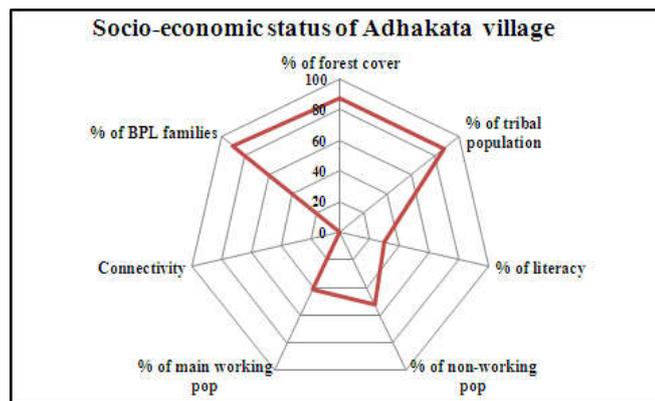
Such question has been raised from a tribal woman of Jaypur forest range which throws light on the present standard of living of those tribal women living in the core of the forest area. Though they are the collector, and direct user of the forest resources to sustain livelihood, due to illiteracy, poverty, ill-skilled in technical knowledge and lack of control over land and other resources, they are less benefitted from natural resources from economic perspectives. They have an indigenous knowledge of forest resource planning, management and conservation but they are still at underprivileged position in environmental decisions at households as well as society level. Women's labour in agriculture and the collection of firewood and fodder were recognized at the 1970s. Then a few gave importance that indigenous women's knowledge also play an important role in the management, conservation and sustainable use of forest resources. The women's movement for inclusion of their agenda in the broad environmental policies has been started by women's groups and organizations since 1970s in the developed countries of the world. Forest provides a means of livelihood for rural communities in the developing countries.

It plays a vital role in global food security, providing food, fodder, fuel and medicine. Throughout the developing world, women make a significant contribution to forestry (FAO, 2007). About 80% of the population of the developing world depends on NTFPs for their primary health and nutritional needs (FAO, 1995). The indigenous women are competent to use forest resources for domestic as well as medicinal purposes. They contribute to value-addition through selecting seed, breeding and genetic improvement. Their ecological knowledge base is a valuable data bank of information. Documentation of the resource conservation skills, knowledge and practice of poor tribal and peasant women continues to be fragmentary and episodic (Krishna, S, 2008).

Area Identity

Jaypur block, one of the poorest blocks of the Bankura district mostly covered by forest, ranks comparatively in lower position in Human Development ladder. Adhakata village (22.99°N, 87.38°E), located at the south-western part of the block, is situated at the core of the Jaypur forest and dominated by Santal tribe for a long period of time. Agro-ecologically and socio-economically it is one of the poorest regions of West Bengal. The economy of Adhakata village is predominantly dependent on forest resources. Unconductive topography, dry climate, very small size of landholdings, poor irrigation coverage and low water retention capacity of soil offer limited scope for agriculture. The literacy rate is strikingly very much low (25% of households totally illiterate). In relation to health, the village lags far behind also.

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The Adhakata village selected for micro-level study contributes high concentration of BPL families (91%) with respect to total number of families. There is a specific geographical concentration of backwardness and poverty in 'core Jaypur forest range' of the district. Only 33% households are able to take two full meals per day whereas other households are forced to starvation. Regarding basic amenities, 5% families have no house to stay. A large segment of population being tribal in nature depends on forest. Forests have customarily played a critical role in the livelihood of these tribal people.

ADHAKATA VILLAGE: AT A GLANCE

- Area: 742.99 hectares
- Total Population: 241(Census of India, 2001)
- ST population to total population: 88%
- Literacy rate: 29.46%
- 77% households work as daily wage labourer (Total households: 57)
- 89% households migrate annually for work to sustain livelihood
- No approach pave road and foot road, only mud road
- Bus facility available within 5km but no railway communication available. Nearest town Bishnupur (Distance: 11 km)
- 44% households take one full meal generally but not always in a year
- 65% landless households

Objectives and Methodology

The present paper attempts to study the organic linkages between women and forest resources. The research methods have been precisely qualitative. It includes fieldwork interview, direct participation, group discussions, observations, etc. Research study was concentrated at Adhakata village of Jaypur forest range due to its isolation and remoteness, core location in the forest, very poor accessibility and connectivity with nearby town, dominance of Santal tribe and high dependency ratio between Jaypur forest and their tribal livelihood. An initial interview process was arranged with Forest department Staffs (Beat Officers, Ranger), local ICDS worker 'Sourovi Hansda' and the members of Forest Protection Committee. To select households, random sampling technique was followed but the households having women and people more than 60 years old were given much more emphasis because they have strong connection with traditional use of forest resources and indigenous methods of forest conservation. It is noteworthy that female members of selected households were questioned elaborately as mainly women are the collectors, carriers, producers as well as preservers of the forest products.

Table 1. Jaypur forest, bankura: tasks related to collection of forest products

Tasks	Women	Men	Children
Sal Leaves	CP		CP
Dry Sal leaves	C	C	C
Dry wood (Jhanti)	CM		
Fuel wood	CM		
Medicinal Plants	P	CM	
Edible plants	CP		
Grasses	CPM		
Kendu leaf & fruit	CPM	CPM	
Mahwa	CPM		
Sal seed	C		C

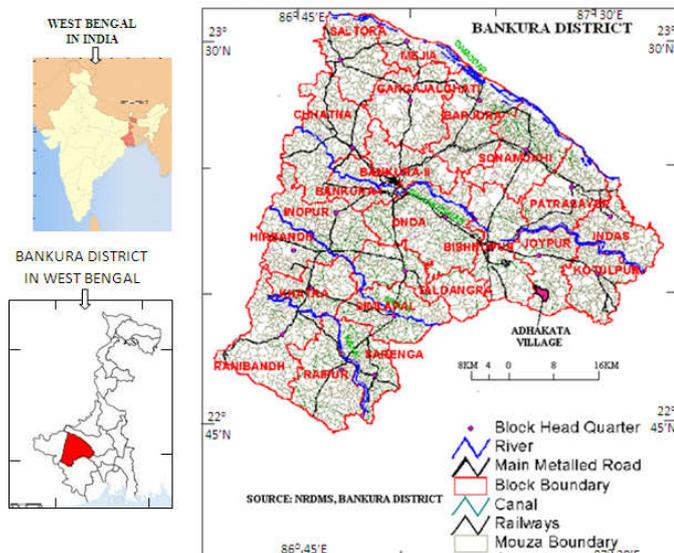
Key: C-Collection; P-Processing; M-Marketing.

Source: Primary Survey at Jaypur forest, Bankura District, 2012.

Women as collector

The picture that emerges from field investigation shows Santal women's domain entirely in Jaypur forest. In general, men are not responsible for meeting daily forest product needs. Women bear the major load of collection of forest products for their commercial needs, among which sal leaves, sal seed, firewood, mushroom, mahwa flower, kendu fruit and kendu leaves are marketable and provide the opportunity to supplement household income. Development and Planning Department, Govt. of West Bengal (2007) has estimated that in the district of Bankura each year about 20-50% of household income comes from non-timber forest products (NTFPs) harvesting. Santal women have an indigenous knowledge about forest resources and its efficient use. They are the direct user of the forest environment for domestic livelihood also, they have an organic linkage with Jaypur forest as they collect and head-load the sal wood for construction material, dry sal leaf for fuel, mahwa as food and local intoxicating liquor, mushroom, redi seed, kendu fruit as food, Alkushi, Bichhuti, Babla for spiritual activity, Mahwa fruit (Kachra) as household needs, Mahwa and sal for cultural activity. Every day, Santal women along with their children walk average 6 km into the dense forest to collect all these forest products to sustain livelihood, whereas they have to cover approximately 8 km distance for marketization of the

LOCATION MAP



products except sal leaves. Thus, forest women have the knowledge of identification of species, its uses, its geographic location, reasonability, availability and conservation of the natural resources.

Table 2. Jaypur Forest, Bankura: Agricultural tasks

Tasks	Men	Women	Both
Ploughing	√		
Sowing			√
Weeding			√
Harvesting			√
Threshing			√
Storage		√	
Cooking		√	

Source: Primary Survey at Jaypur forest, Bankura District, 2012.

It has been found that indigenous women play an important role in agriculture as they contribute between 50-80% of total agricultural labour depending upon geographical and socio-economic variations. Jaypur forest villagers practice traditional subsistence farming, after the prediction of monsoon by the elders of the village, youngers prepare and plough the field while women extends their helping hands in sowing, weeding, harvesting and threshing activities. But the work of storage and cooking are specifically gender-specific. The Santal women do all these work alone.

is passed along through generations, if no occupational changes occur.

Women as Producer

Sal leaf collection is necessary for almost all of the forest households. Generally, each and every women member of the family along with children collect sal leaf from forest, stitch them to produce sal plates, known as *Sia-pata* locally. Its monetary value is quite low, i.e. Rs. 15/- per thousand plates only in the Jaypur forest core. But after purchasing by mobile middle-men, these home-made primary products become converted into value-added machine made secondary products. Due to lack of education and training skills women do not have access to the kind of such technologies, and are less benefitted from natural resources from economic perspectives.

Processor

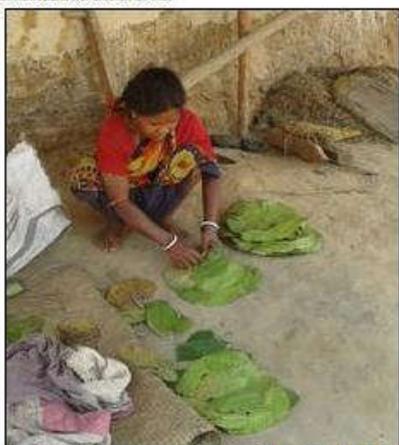
At Jaypur forest range, Santals greatly depend on wild plants and herbal drugs for curing diseases; basically they are compelled to have this type of drugs due to poor accessibility and connectivity with the town. The forest village lacks any primary health center also. In collecting and processing the wild medicinal plants, the gender roles vary to a great extent. Though men collect the plants from the forest, the preparation



CARRYING SAL LEAVES FOR DOMESTIC AND COMMERCIAL USE



HEAD-LOADING OF FIREWOODS



STITCHING SAL LEAVES FOR SIA-PATA

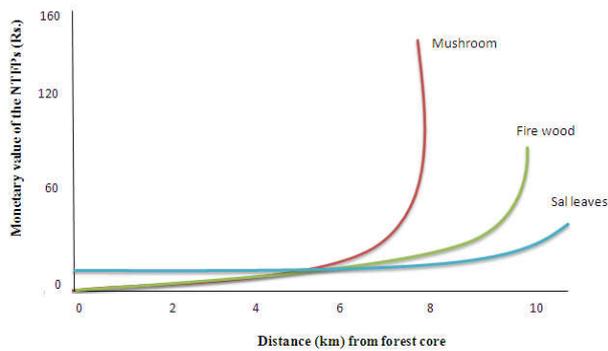


TRIBAL WOMEN COLLECTING GREEN SAL LEAVES

Photograph no.1: Some important economic activities of Santals of Jaypur forest of Bankura district.

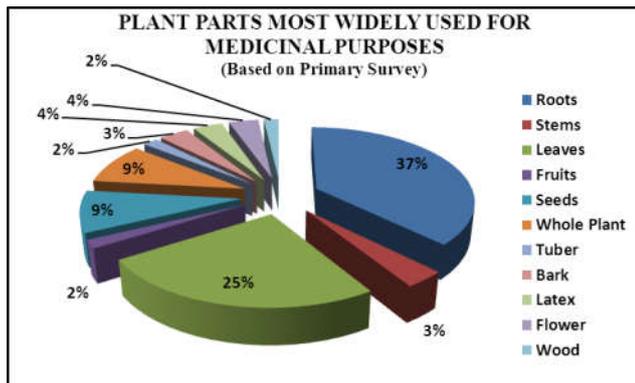
The division of labour in the forest villages results in women's daily use of the forest and the accumulation of practical knowledge about the forest. Women's traditional knowledge of forest resources is not genetically programmed, but is the result of the social roles, which make women interact more closely with their environment. This 'interactive' knowledge

of medicines from these wild plants and their preservation is a major responsibility of women only which is not only a laborious task but time-consuming also. The variety of preparation of amulet, tablet, paste and juice by different barks, roots, leaves, seeds along with cardamom, cinnamon, cumin, nutmeg, peepul, oil, sugar-candy, garlic, salt, etc. are women's task mainly.



Increase of monetary value of the NTFPs (Rs.) with increasing distance (km) from forest core.

*Source: Based on Primary Survey at study area.



Women as Manager

Because of the prevailing gender ideology of many of these socio-cultural groups women bear the major responsibility for smooth running of the family throughout the year. Adivasi women (poor daily wage casual labourers, agricultural labourers and forest-dependent groups in particular) have developed a vast repository of knowledge of lesser-known foods that are foraged from the wild; wild leaf, seeds, tubers, mushrooms, crabs, fish, etc. These alternative sources of foods have provided a reliable buffer in lean agricultural season to meet up the food requirement of the family. In addition, women lend money from the landlord with high interest during this lean time to continue family expenses because there is no raw material resource from forest to collect. Due to low level of literacy they cannot raise collateral for bank loans, it hampers to extend their agricultural activities and earn cash incomes also. However, there is a marked decline in

the forest resource base because the forest is diminishing at a faster rate. As Santal women remain responsible for feeding their families, this puts them in great pressure affecting their position badly in the household and social group.

Conclusion

From the discussions above, it can be concluded that the Santal women of the Jaypur forest is closely associated with the physical environment thus maintaining inseparable relationship with the forest resources. But to improve their life through forest, some necessary actions may be taken by any Govt. and non-Govt. Organizations as discussed below:

- To increase women’s access to information and education including the areas of Science, Technology and Economics thus enhancing their knowledge, scale and opportunities for participation in environmental decision;
- Well-organized marketing system to promote the NTFPs based value-added products;
- Training for improving knowledge in use and marketing of value-added products;
- To empower women in terms of women’s equal access of land, ownership and control over natural resources;
- To improve their way of life, drinking water facilities, literacy campaign, health care centers is needed;
- To include women in forest conservation and management system, e.g. tree plantation, cutting of branches, environment-friendly farming system, land consolidation, community participation,

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