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The Roles Of Minor Forest Produce In The Socio-Economic Empowerment Of Tribal Women

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Abstract

In this research, we studied the process of women's empowerment through forest products in the Sonbhadra region of Uttar Pradesh. In India, women are often bound by traditional roles and domestic responsibilities, which affect their economic and social status. However, when it comes to forest resources, they present a significant opportunity for women.

The main objective of the research is to understand how forest products, such as fruits, medicinal plants, and other raw materials, can make women self-reliant. We aim to explore how women's participation in the collection, exploration, and marketing of these products can aid their economic and social empowerment.

Using a stratified sampling method, we collected data through interviews and concluded that women's involvement in the forest product economy not only empowers them economically but also improves their social standing. When women become economically self-sufficient, their confidence increases, and they start participating more actively in community decision-making processes. Additionally, the roles of community cooperation and education are found to be extremely important in this process.

Ultimately, this research can serve as a guide not only for the Sonbhadra region but for women's empowerment across India. Thus, the study provides valuable insights into the empowerment of women through forest products, which could be useful for future policy-making and implementation.

Key words: Tribes, Market, MFP, Women Empowerment

Introduction

In the 20th century, anthropologists, historians, and social scientists began studying various tribal groups in different countries. They viewed these groups as societies that were separate from the mainstream, each with its own unique identity, language, culture, customs, and traditions. Some studies labeled them as a stage of development, even referring to them as wild or barbaric.

Most studies show that tribal communities, regardless of where they live in India, are economically and socially very backward. Because they cannot keep up with modernity, they are becoming marginalized. The government is always trying to connect them with the mainstream and works to preserve and develop their social, economic, and cultural heritage through various plans and policies for their proper development. This is why many of the issues faced by tribal communities are now known to the public.

In this context of development, various efforts and plans have been implemented to improve the situation of tribal women, such as the Forest Dhan scheme launched in 2018. This initiative aims to enhance the economic status of tribal women and improve their lives, marking an important step by the central government.

In India, tribal women are using natural resources to go beyond their traditional roles. Minor Forest Produce (MFP), such as fruits, herbs, and other resources, not only strengthen their economic situation but also play a crucial role in their empowerment and cultural identity. This research paper will explore how the Forest Dhan scheme is facilitating economic and social empowerment for tribal women through the marketing of minor forest products, influencing their economic lives and making them socially empowered.

Before moving forward, it's important to understand the definition and significance of minor forest products. Generally, these are resources gathered from forests, including fruits, seeds, tubers, and medicinal plants. These products hold great value for tribal communities, not just economically but also for their cultural identity. Durga Prasad, in "Forest and Their Products" (2020), explains that "minor forest products are natural resources obtained from forests, such as herbs, fruits, and seeds." Similarly, Ajay Sharma, in "Forest Products: Economy and Culture" (2018), states that minor forest products are resources directly obtained from forests, which include fruits, seeds, medicinal plants, and tubers, holding both economic and cultural significance.

Research Design and Sampling Method

In this study, a mixed research method has been chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the socio-economic status of tribal communities in Sonbhadra district. This approach combines quantitative data collection and analysis with qualitative investigations, allowing for a thorough examination of numerical trends and qualitative insights.

Since the research involves both qualitative and quantitative data, an appropriate sampling method was selected, using purposive and stratified sampling techniques. Stratified sampling is a systematic technique that

ensures representation and accuracy by selecting participants from different subgroups or levels within the population.

Research Study Area and Data Collection Method

Sonbhadra is the second largest district in Uttar Pradesh, India, and it shares borders with four states: Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Bihar. The district covers an area of 6,788 square kilometers and has a population of 1,862,559 (as per the 2011 census), with a population density of 270 people per square kilometer. Located in the southeastern part of the state, it is surrounded by Mirzapur district to the northwest, Chandauli district to the north, and parts of Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh. The district headquarters is in Robertsganj.

Sonbhadra is an industrial area rich in minerals such as bauxite, limestone, coal, and gold, and is known as the energy capital of India due to the numerous power plants located there. Most of the tribal communities in Uttar Pradesh can be found in Sonbhadra, making it the largest district in the state in terms of tribal population. This is why various tribal upliftment programs are primarily implemented in this district to improve the socio-economic status of tribal communities.

One such initiative is the Prime Minister's Van Dhan Yojana (PMVDY) or Van Dhan Development Scheme (VDVY), launched by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to enhance the livelihoods of tribal communities in India. This scheme focuses on developing a value chain for forest-based products and increasing the income of tribal communities through skill training and capacity building.

In the study, three blocks of Sonbhadra, Myorpur, Dudhi, and Babhani were selected as the research area, where development activities related to these schemes are being implemented. Each block has a cluster head, a treasurer, and a secretary, primarily composed of tribal women. In total, around 300 tribal women are organized into 15 groups of 20 members each within the cluster.

For this research, a stratified survey was conducted involving 100 women from three clusters. The findings aim to evaluate the socio-economic empowerment achieved through minor forest products and provide conclusions and recommendations based on the objectives of the study.

Conclusion and Suggestions

To understand the development of tribal women, it is essential to study their work and the impacts on their lives in depth. The empowerment of these women through forest products not only affects their economic lives but also strengthens their social and cultural identity.

Preservation of Traditional Knowledge: Tribal women preserve the knowledge and methods passed down from their ancestors. This knowledge is not just about collecting and using forest products; it also includes identifying medicinal plants and how to use them. This traditional knowledge is transferred from generation to generation, making it an important part of their cultural identity.

Social Harmony: When women collectively gather forest products, this process promotes unity and cooperation in the community. Working together strengthens relationships among women, enabling them to support each other and collaboratively solve community problems. This cooperation is beneficial economically and also strengthens the community socially.

Through these aspects, tribal women not only improve their lives but also maintain their cultural heritage, which reinforces their identity and community unity.

Economic Independence: For tribal women, economic independence means generating income from their resources. When women collect and sell small forest products, they reap the rewards of their hard work. This not only improves their family's economic situation but also boosts their confidence. Managing their income enhances their self-esteem, helping them better understand their rights and potential.

Community Leadership: Along with economic independence, these women start taking a more active role in community decisions. Contributing to their family's income earns them more respect in their community. This respect motivates them to influence community issues, leading them to participate in social and political decisions. Their activism helps not only their personal development but also strengthens the social structure of the entire community.

Through these two aspects, tribal women play a crucial role in reinforcing their identity and bringing positive changes to the community.

However, while forest products offer many opportunities for tribal women, there are also several challenges:

Environmental Changes: Climate change and deforestation deeply affect forest products. As the climate changes, it threatens the existence of plants and animals. This leads to a decrease in the availability of forest products, impacting the livelihoods of tribal women. Additionally, deforestation reduces their traditional resources, putting their cultural and economic stability at risk.

Economic Inequality: Fluctuations in the market are also a significant challenge. Often, tribal women are unable to obtain fair prices for their products. Due to price fluctuations in the market, they face uncertainty in their income. As a result, their economic situation weakens, and they become unable to meet their needs.

To tackle these challenges, there is a need for solid policies and support to help tribal women make better use of their resources and maintain the stability of their community.

Suggestions

1. Community-Based Training Programs: Training programs should be organized for the proper use and management of forest products, enabling women to develop their skills.
2. Community Marketing Channels: Better marketing channels should be provided for the sale of products, allowing tribal women to receive fair prices for their goods.
3. Conservation Policies: Solid policies should be formulated to combat climate change and deforestation, ensuring the sustainability of forest products.
4. Leadership Roles in the Community: Special programs should be organized to help women develop leadership skills, allowing them to take a more active role in decision-making.

Through these suggestions, significant steps can be taken to empower the development of tribal women, improving not only their economic status but also strengthening their cultural identity and community unity.

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