



Capacity Building Of Tribal Youth For Effective Implementation Of The Provisions Of The Panchayats (Extension To Scheduled Areas) Act: Issues And Challenges

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Abstract: The Provisions of the Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act (PESA Act) aims to empower tribal communities by ensuring self-governance and control over natural resources. However, there is a lack of awareness about PESA Act amongst the tribal youth which limits its effectiveness. Educating the tribal youth about the PESA Act can help improve tribal rights awareness and skill building capacity. This paper evaluates the impact of diploma program in Community Forest Rights Management, launched by the Mumbai school of Economics and Public Policy, University of Mumbai, on its participants and can provide useful cues to effectiveness of similar programs targeting better outreach and implementation of various schemes for tribal welfare. The study explores the effectiveness of an intervention programme to improve the understanding of the participants especially in the context of effective implementation of PESA.

Index Terms – PESA Act, Tribals, Capacity-Building, Tribal Rights, Education

I. INTRODUCTION

The Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA Act) was enacted to extend the provisions of the 73rd Constitutional Amendment to Scheduled Areas under Fifth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Its objective is to empower tribal communities by granting them autonomy in self-governance through Gram Sabhas and ensuring their control over natural resources, land, and traditional practices, to prevent cultural and land alienation.

PESA recognizes the unique social, cultural, and economic practices of tribal populations and seeks to protect their way of life through decentralized self-governance. At its core, PESA aims to give Gram Sabhas, village assemblies comprising all adult members of a tribal community, significant authority over natural resources, land, and customary practices. This includes the right to manage community forests, regulate minor water bodies, protect traditional knowledge systems, and be consulted before any land acquisition. By ensuring that decisions are taken at the village level, the Act helps tribals resist exploitation, prevent land alienation, and maintain control over their livelihoods. Furthermore, it encourages participatory democracy and cultural preservation by respecting tribal customs and empowering them to govern according to their traditions. If implemented effectively, PESA can act as a powerful tool to bridge the historical gap between tribal communities and mainstream governance, allowing for inclusive development that truly reflects the aspirations and needs of Adivasi populations.

However, the PESA Act faces several structural and implementation challenges that limit its effectiveness. One major issue is its limited coverage, as tribal communities residing in non-Scheduled Areas are excluded from its benefits, leaving them without any legal safeguards. Additionally, even within Scheduled Areas, many tribal communities are unaware about their rights and PESA, making it difficult for them to assert their autonomy. Furthermore, Gram Sabhas and Gram Panchayats often struggle with limited financial and infrastructural resources, restricting their ability to govern effectively. This issue is compounded by a shortage of trained personnel, leaving local self-governing bodies without the necessary expertise to implement the Act's provisions efficiently.

The true potential of the PESA Act can only be realized if tribal communities are aware of the rights, it grants them. In many Scheduled Areas, there is a significant lack of awareness about the Act, leaving communities unable to assert their autonomy or protect their resources effectively. Legal empowerment means little without grassroots understanding. Engaging and educating the tribal youth serves as a catalyst to spread awareness regarding the PESA Act and tribal rights. Empowering youth through targeted education transforms them into agents of change. Moreover, education helps dismantle the dependency on external actors by building internal capacity within communities.

This paper evaluates the experience of the participants in the Diploma Program in Community Forest Rights Management, which was launched by the Mumbai School of Economics and Public Policy (Autonomous), University of Mumbai. The syllabus for the diploma programme was created by a committee of experts which included under the guidance of renowned environmentalist Dr. Madhav Gadgil, Dr. Yedlabadkar, Devaji Tofa, Mohan Hirabai Hiralal and the project was funded through the Tribal Research and Training Institute by Tribal Development Department. Unlike conventional academic programs, this initiative was designed to train young tribal members from Gram Sabhas with forest rights, equipping them with the skills needed to prepare Forest Resources Protection and Conservation Management Plans, a crucial requirement under PESA. The first batch of the diploma program started on 2nd October 2018 in Mendha (Lekha), Gadchiroli district, first village in India that played an important role in securing forest rights in India.

The program had several distinctive features tailored to the realities of tribal communities. It was not meant for participants to seek urban jobs but rather to serve their own Gram Sabhas. To ensure genuine representation, admission was reserved for candidates nominated by Gram Sabhas, with formal educational qualifications being secondary to practical knowledge of local ecology, land rights, and governance issues. Instead of traditional academic criteria, applicants were assessed through written tests and interviews on competencies such as language, elementary mathematics, and measurement skills.

By assessing both the strengths and limitations of the program and its impact on students, this study seeks to determine whether such training initiatives can serve as a scalable model for strengthening PESA's implementation and achieving true tribal self-governance.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been extensive research regarding the poor educational status of tribals, which leads to lower tribal rights awareness. Rashmi and Paul's study (2021), using data from the India Human Development Survey, found that tribal children had an average educational wellbeing score of -0.41 compared to 0.04 for non-tribal children. It also stated that early household economic conditions alone accounted for 24% of this gap. The causes behind low educational attainment among tribals outlined in Raja and Krishnaveni's (2019) paper found that, poverty (34.29%), parental compulsion (22.86%), and lack of nearby schools (22.86%) were the primary barriers. For those who reached high school or higher secondary levels, poverty remained the dominant cause of dropout (47.76% and 18.92% respectively), followed by parental pressure, lack of interest, absence of nearby schools, and gender-based restrictions. These structural disadvantages result in low educational attainment, which directly contributes to poor awareness of tribal rights.

While there are various tribal training programs across India, they face several challenges. A study by the Goan government acknowledges that despite education and training programs for tribals, there is a lack of focus on the spread of tribal rights awareness, since many Scheduled Tribes and forest dwellers remain unaware of their legal entitlements, particularly under laws like the Forest Rights Act (Goa State Legal Services Authority). This lack of awareness leads to marginalization, land dispossession, and limited participation in tribal governance systems like Gram Sabhas.

Brahmanandam and BosuBabu's study finds that another major challenge in tribal education is the language barrier, as many tribals speak vernacular languages different from the state's official language (BosuBabu and Brahmanandam). Additionally, unattractive teaching methods fail to engage tribal students, leading to disinterest and high dropout rates. The lack of cultural relevance in the curriculum further alienates them, as education does not align with their traditions, lifestyle, or governance structures.

A study by Hoque et al. investigated the socio-economic status of tribal youths in Tripura and assessed the impact of various skill development training programs on their employment and livelihood outcomes (Roy et al.). A sample of 410 beneficiaries across six districts was analyzed. The findings revealed that 57.8% of the respondents claim there was no improvement in their knowledge after the training, suggesting that teachings methods or the curriculum may have been ineffective to the tribal students.

Most existing training programs for tribal communities focus on equipping individuals with skill for industrial employment, often ignoring the dissemination of knowledge regarding their constitutional rights. This leads to little desire to contribute back to the community and participate in local governance systems. A study of the Vaghaldhara Vocational Training Centre analysed the tribal training program and the kind of employment it generated to find that most participants sought private jobs, or employment in private hospitals and institutions (Sahu and Trivedi). The graduates of the program did not directly contribute back to their community by working in local Gram Sabhas, potentially leaving tribal communities underdeveloped.

The University of Mumbai's diploma program in Community Forest Rights Management directly addresses these challenges. It provides proper infrastructure, customised course with a focus on facilitating the implementation of PESA, offers instruction in both Marathi (Maharashtra's official language) and local tribal dialects to improve accessibility. The aim of this course was to encourage tribal youth to contribute back to the Gram Sabha by preparing a forest action plan after completing the course. It equips students with both theoretical and practical skills needed for forest governance and governance of natural resources around their habitats. It covers foundational topics like the history of tribal forest ownership, key laws such as PESA, Forest Rights Act and Biodiversity Act, Gram Sabha functioning, adaptive management, and basic economics. Practical training includes mapping with GPS and Google Earth, forest demarcation, sustainable harvesting, species estimation, bamboo and medicinal plant management, nursery development, and watershed planning. The practical nature of the curriculum while incorporating tribal culture and traditions, ensuring that students can apply their learning in their own communities. By equipping them with relevant knowledge and encouraging them to contribute back to the community, this program has the potential to be more effective than existing ones.

III. METHODOLOGY

The study mainly relies on primary data collection from the field of study where the diploma programme was implemented. The program was carried out in mendha Lekha in Gadchiroli district, Wada Talukain Palghar District and Kinwat in Nanded covering more than 100 participants in the diploma programme. All these students were approached to collect data to get feedback on the diploma program and 41 responses were received, with 26 being male and 15 females.

Instrument used was questionnaire which was sent as a google form. Data was collected through a Google Form survey distributed to students who belonged to different tribal communities like Konkana, Warli, Thakur, Katkari, Mahadev Koli and Malhar Koli who had completed the program from the Dhanora in District Gadchiroli and Kinwat in Nanded regions and Wada in Palghar district. The survey aimed to assess their learning experience, skill development, and the overall impact of the training on their lives and communities. It covered key areas such as demographics and socioeconomic background, program awareness and enrolment, course participation and learning outcomes, effectiveness and impact and challenges. Data was collected over a period of 2 months, ensuring a diverse and representative sample from the regions, and serves as the primary dataset for evaluating the program's effectiveness. The questionnaire combined qualitative and quantitative questions to get a comprehensive understanding of the participants' experience and outcome through the program.

The collected data was analysed using qualitative content analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and insights from participant responses. Since this study focuses on participants' own experiences of the diploma program, a phenomenological approach was used to understand how the program influenced their knowledge, skill development, and ability to engage in forest governance. Since the responses were obtained through a Google Form survey, the data was first sorted and cleaned to remove incomplete entries. Furthermore, a thematic analysis approach was applied to understand the common ideas conveyed through responses. To maintain reliability and validity, themes were identified based on the frequency of similar responses across participants. Some anomalous data was explored deeper through a case study approach, comparing the result with cases in the past.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Participants' Learning Objectives and Outcome

The primary intention of students enrolling in the Diploma in Community Forest Rights Management was to gain knowledge about the Forest Rights Act, achieving collective rights, conserve village forest and studying village resources as shown in Figure 1.

The program effectively aligned with these intentions through its curriculum. Information about the Forest Rights Act was covered in-depth, ensuring participants understood their legal entitlements and governance structures. Achieving collective rights was facilitated through the Collective Forest Rights Management Plan, where students learned how to organize and implement rights-based strategies for their communities. Additionally, the study of village resources was a direct component of the course, helping participants analyze and manage forest ecosystems, biodiversity, and sustainable resource use.

This alignment between student expectations and course content suggests that the program was well-designed to meet the needs of tribal participants and equip them with practical knowledge for community-based forest governance.

4.2 Relationship between Gender and Academic Engagement

Male attendance in theory classes in the Diploma program was significantly higher than the Female participation in the diploma program, as shown in Table 1. This is symptomatic of challenges faced by women and gender inequality in the Indian education system. According to Patel's study, tribal women often bear a disproportionate share of household duties, care-giving duties among other family responsibilities, which often limit their availability for extended educational programs (Patel). This trend is also evident in general population. Using data from 1990 and 2018, the difference between the mean years of schooling for boy and girl students has increased from 2.4 years to 3.5 years. Additionally, as students reach higher grades in school, the difference between the dropout rates of male and female students exponentially increases (Iype, 2020).

Despite lower attendance in theory classes, women scored better marks, with 67% of women scoring an 'A' grade or higher as compared to only 56% of men, as depicted in Table 2. This suggests that simply measuring hours of attendance may not be the best indicator of academic success; factors like engagement, prior knowledge, motivation, and study habits play a crucial role in performance.

4.3 Relationship between Income and Academic Engagement

The sample of respondents were split into two groups: those with incomes higher than ₹1 lakh per annum and those with annual income below ₹1 lakh. Their attendance and academic performance in the exam are depicted in Table 3.

Individuals with higher income performed significantly better in the diploma program, with 75% of them scoring an A or above. In contrast, only 52% of participants with lower incomes secured an 'A' grade or above, and they saw much more grade variations. Furthermore, higher income participants had attended 204 hours of theory classes on average, as compared to 183 for lower income participants. The disparity in academic performance and attendance can be attributed to multiple factors. The advantage of higher income students likely stemmed from a more stable home environment that allowed them to concentrate on their studies as compared to lower income students who would likely be under family pressure to earn more money thereby compromising attendance in the program.

Similar findings have been observed in Stinebrickner's [study](#) in US where it was found that an increase of \$10,000 in family income corresponds to a 0.16-point rise in GPA, holding other factors constant (Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner). The study finds students from lower-income families may have to balance academics with work responsibilities, further affecting their performance.

4.4 Relationship between Family size and Engagement

Families with 5 or fewer members had higher mean and median hours of class attendance as compared to larger families, as shown in Table 4. Families with more members require more financial support and hence members are encouraged to work rather than seek further training or education. This is corroborated by Louisa and Unugo's study which found that students from larger families tend to quit education sooner to seek employment as compared to students from smaller families (Louisa and Onugo).

4.5 Relationship between Attendance in Theory Class and Academic Engagement

The data shows a strong correlation between higher attendance and higher marks in the exam. Students with greater than 150 hours of theory class attended performed significantly better than those with fewer than 150 hours, as depicted in Table 5. The strong correlation between class attendance and marks can be attributed to several key factors. Higher theory class attendance provides students with greater exposure to concepts, more practice time, and better retention of skills, all of which contribute to higher performance. These findings were mirrored in Liu's study which found a positive relationship between hours studied and academic achievement (Liu).

4.6 Relationship between Attendance in Theory Class and Communal Contribution

This study also aimed to examine the relationship between attendance and participants' ability to contribute back to the community. There were three options provided in the form: "Yes", "No" and "To Some extent." Those who responded with "Yes" were assumed to be contributing significantly to the community for the purpose of this study. Table 6 shows that students with higher attendance in theory classes have contributed significantly more to the community as compared to those with lower attendance.

A key reason for this trend could be that higher attendance provide participants with greater exposure to concepts, more hands-on practice, and higher confidence levels. In fact, individuals who completed 250 hours of theory class appeared most confident about contribution to their community.

4.7 Relationship between Gender and Communal Contribution:

The study aimed to examine the relationship between a participant's gender and their ability to significantly contribute to the community. As depicted in Table 7, more men felt that they were able to significantly contribute back to the community as compared to women. This could be due to the burden of domestic responsibilities and caregiving placed on women.

4.8 Impact of diploma program on tribal rights awareness:

As depicted in Figure 2, 100% of the participants reported an increase in tribal rights awareness, suggesting that the diploma program was effective in achieving one of its key aims. In fact, according to Table 8 and 9, there was no correlation between marks or attendance hours with tribal rights awareness which suggests that factors beyond exam performance, such as engagement with the course material, personal interest, or external discussions, may play a larger role in shaping students' awareness of tribal rights.

4.9 Long Term Impact of Diploma Program

The study aimed to understand how the skills learnt by students during the program would be implemented in the future. Figure 3 shows that most people want to work in contributing to village development, the primary aim of the program, followed by conserving the forest. This indicates that the program was relatively successful in fostering a sense of responsibility toward community development.

4.10 Program benefits

As seen in Figure 4, the program was designed to increase knowledge regarding all domains of tribal life. Participants reported gaining in-depth knowledge of collective forests and forest law, equipping them with a strong understanding of regulations and policies governing community forest rights. Additionally, the course imparted practical skills in forest work planning, enabling them to contribute effectively to sustainable resource management. Furthermore, the course has fostered community engagement skills, as many participants highlighted their improved ability to work with people, an essential aspect of collective forest management.

4.11 Feedback on the program

100% of the participants felt that the program should be continued. To make the program more effective, respondents were asked to give suggestions. A common suggestion was to introduce the program for tribal children as well, since tribal rights awareness is important to have from a young age. However, this may not be feasible due to the complex nature of the program. Furthermore, for many tribal children, even access to basic education remains a significant challenge. Therefore, efforts should first focus on strengthening foundational education till Grade 12, with the diploma program serving as a supplementary initiative thereafter. Instead of introducing such a program for children, some components can be implemented in existing curriculum in subjects such as Environmental Sciences or Civics, to ensure students learn about their tribal rights.

Schools and colleges should actively promote the diploma course or a certificate course to increase student participation, while incentives such as scholarships and prizes can encourage enrolment. Mumbai University has taken an important initiative to introduce under National Education Policy, 2020 for undergraduate students two courses in the open elective basket to educate and facilitate students to learn more about the natural resources around them such as land, water, forest, biodiversity and impart skills for conservation of these resources. Collaboration between Mumbai University, the Tribal Research and Training Institute (TRTI), the tribal department, and Gram Sabhas through a formal agreement would ensure long-term sustainability of the course. To expand outreach, awareness campaigns, village workshops, and taluka-level training programs should be conducted to inform tribal communities about the importance of collective forest rights and how the diploma can help in that regard.

V. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Though the study has been based on the feedback on the course collected by respective institutions involved in the tribal diploma program, data directly collected from students is only limited to questionnaires filled by 41 students. Such a small sample size can impact the reliability of the findings and makes it difficult to generalize the results to a larger population. The small sample also increases the risk of random variations influencing the results rather than reflecting actual patterns.

Additionally, the study primarily relies on self-reported awareness, which introduces subjectivity and potential bias. For example, participants may overestimate or underestimate their understanding of tribal rights based on their confidence rather than their actual knowledge. Since the study is qualitative, it lacks objective measures to verify whether the reported improvements in awareness translate into meaningful comprehension and real-world application. A more robust assessment could include structured knowledge-based tests or practical demonstrations of understanding rather than relying solely on self-perception.

VI. CONCLUSION

The Diploma in Community Forest Rights Management has shown significant potential in enhancing participants' understanding of forest laws, collective rights, and practical forest management. Such programs targeted at tribal youth help in improving tribal rights awareness and appreciation of the PESA Act. This helps improve their welfare and ability to contribute back to their community. While there is evidence of improved awareness and engagement, the study's limitations, such as a small sample size and reliance on self-reported data, suggest the need for further research. Despite these constraints, such educational programs appear to be

a valuable tool for empowering tribal communities, increasing knowledge, and fostering better implementation of forest rights.

Figures and Tables

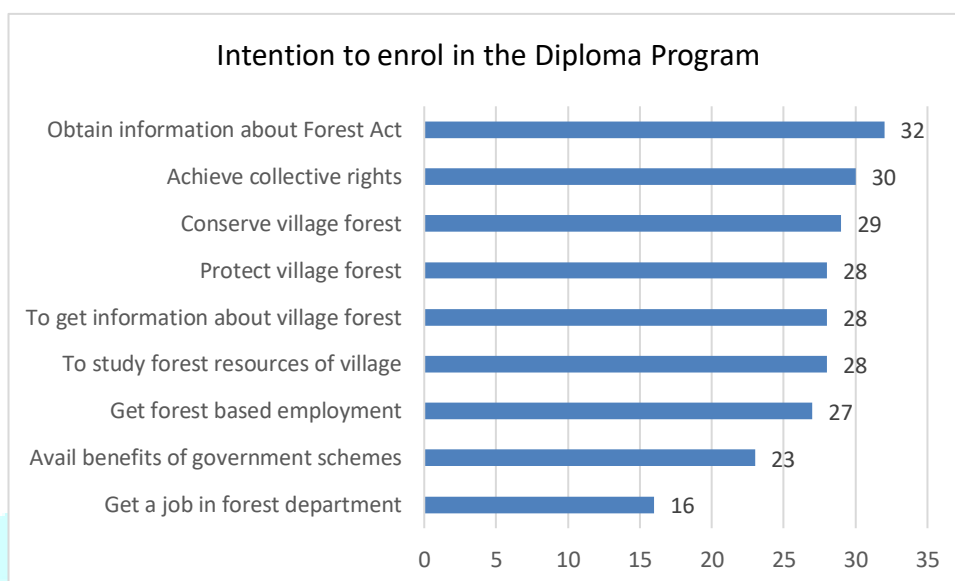


Figure 1(Computed by the Author)

Table 1 (Computed by the Authors)

Gender	Mean hours of theory class attended	Median hours of theory class attended
Male	203	250
Female	166	175

Table 2 (Computed by the Authors)

Gender	% of participants securing 'A' or above in diploma program exam
Male	56%
Female	67%

Table 3 (Computed by the Authors)

	Number of people in the respective income bracket	% of participants securing 'A' or above in diploma program exam	Average hours of theory class attended
Annual income of ₹1 lakh or above	12	75%	204
Annual income below ₹1 lakh	29	52%	183

Table 4 (Computed by the Authors)

Family size	Average hours of theory class attended	Median hours of theory class attended
5 members or fewer	197	225
6 or more members	179	150

Table 5 (Computed by the Authors)

Hours of theory class attended	Academic performance ('A' or better)
Up to 150 hours	53%
Greater than 150 hours	67%

Table 6 (Computed by the Authors)

Hours of theory class attended	Significant contribution to community (Yes)
Up to 150 hours	40%
Greater than 150 hours	71%

Table 7 (Computed by the Authors)

Gender	Significant contribution to community ('Yes')
Male	68%
Female	53%

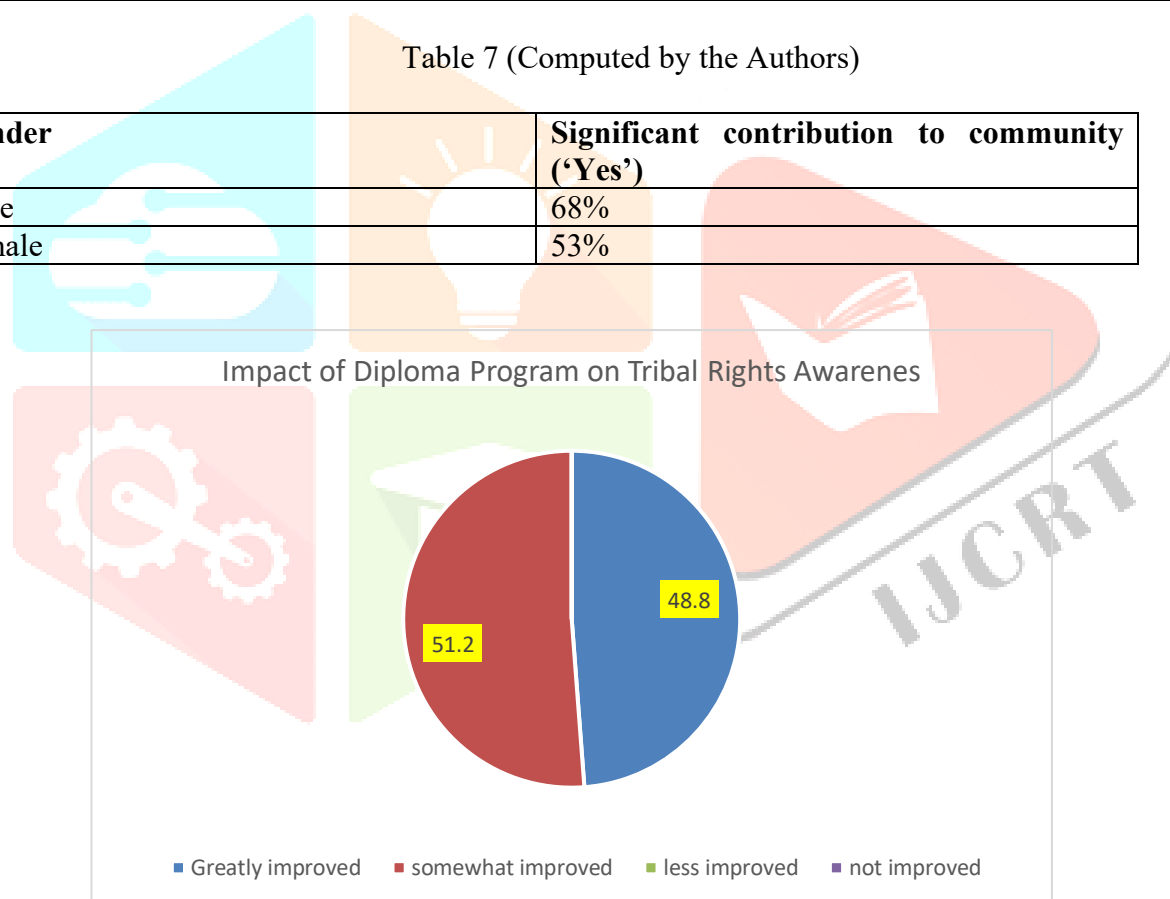


Figure 2 (Computed by the Authors)

Table 8 (Computed by the Authors)

Marks	High tribal rights awareness ('Yes')
'A' or higher	50%
Below 'A'	47%

Table 9 (Computed by the Authors)

Hours of theory class attended	High tribal rights awareness ('Yes)
150 hours or less	67%
Greater than 150 hours	38%

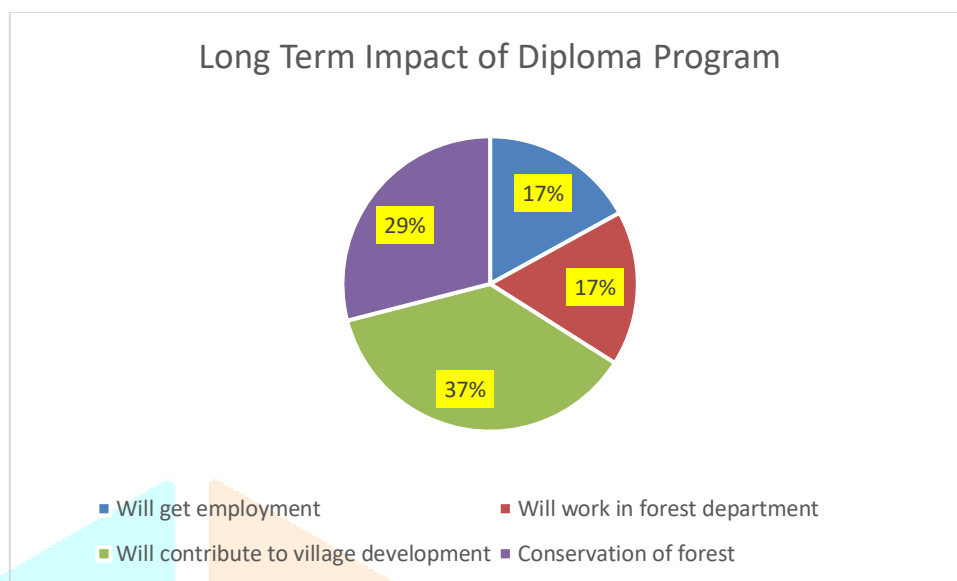


Figure 3 (Computed by Authors)

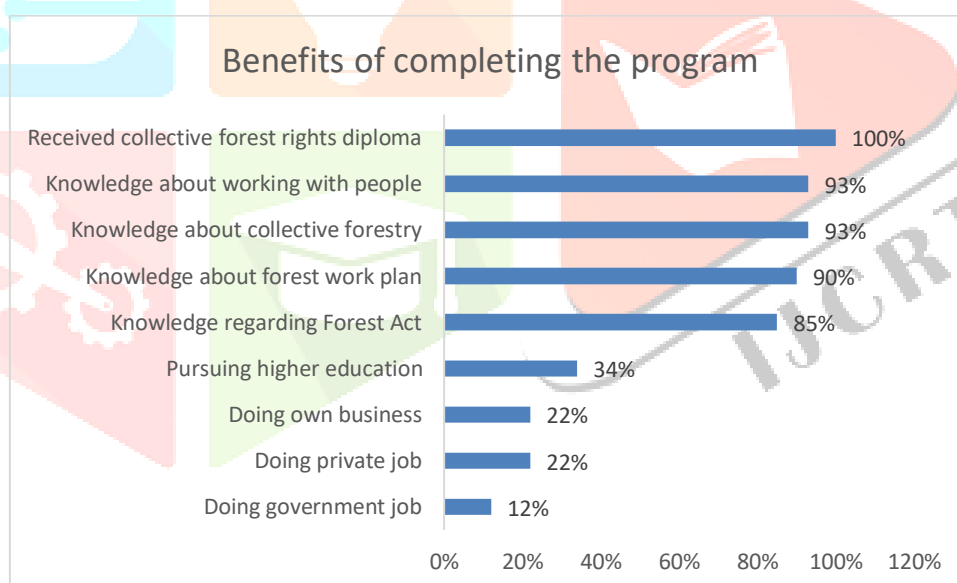


Figure 4 (Computed by the Author)

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