

# Prospects Of NTFPs In Jharkhand Economy And The Role Of Tribal People In Its Production And Its Impact On Their Livelihood.

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## Abstract

*Jharkhand—The Land of Forests—exhibits a rich reserve of natural resources that sustain not just its ecology but also the fabric of tribal life. Among these resources, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) emerge as a lifeline for indigenous communities. This article analyses multidisciplinary insights to spotlight the critical role of NTFPs in tribal livelihoods—fuelling, food security, income generation, employment, and traditional knowledge systems, with women playing a pivotal role in this eco-economy.*

*Despite its huge potential, the NTFP sector in Jharkhand faces significant structural and systemic challenges, including limited market access, exploitation by middlemen, insignificant value addition, ecological degradation, climate pressures, and insufficient institutional support. Drawing from key studies, this paper explores how targeted policies, grassroots participation, and institutional frameworks can transform NTFPs into a vehicle for sustainable rural prosperity and tribal empowerment in Jharkhand.*

**Keywords:** - NTFPs, Tribals, Medicinal Plants, Cottage Industry, SHGs, Green Economy,

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## I. Introduction

Jharkhand derives its name from the Sanskrit words “Jhar” (forest) and “Khand” (land)—a reflection of its dense green cover that blankets nearly 29 per cent of its terrain. These forests are more than an ecological asset; they are the economic heartbeat of the region and the cultural spine of its tribal population.

At the centre of this green economy lie Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs)—a vibrant collection of goods, including medicinal herbs, lac, honey, tamarind, sal seeds, mahua, and tendu leaves. While these products may not draw as much attention as timber, their role in shaping tribal livelihoods is extraordinary. NTFPs provide food, energy, shelter, and income—especially in rural areas where formal employment opportunities are scarce.

This article describes the ecosystem of NTFPs in Jharkhand. It explores their economic, ecological, and cultural significance, examines the major challenges limiting their potential, and proposes actionable solutions to maximise their contribution to sustainable development and tribal prosperity.

Despite the challenges, the NTFP sector in Jharkhand is bursting with untapped potential. With the right mix of policy interventions, grassroots engagement, and infrastructure development, these forest products can evolve from mere survival tools into powerful engines of inclusive growth and tribal empowerment. This section outlines transformative strategies to strengthen the NTFP value chain and secure sustainable livelihoods for forest dwellers.

## II. NTFPs In Jharkhand: A Forest-Driven Lifeline

Jharkhand's Forest Wealth and Tribal Ties

Forests are more than just green spaces in Jharkhand—they are lifelines. Covering nearly 29 per cent of the state's geography, these woodlands serve as both ecological protectors and economic engines. For around 26 per cent of Jharkhand's population—its tribal communities—forests are deeply embedded in everyday life. Ethnic groups like the Santhal, Oraon, Munda, and Ho derive not only cultural meaning but also economic sustenance from these forest ecosystems.

Their livelihoods are a mix of subsistence agriculture, animal husbandry, seasonal labour, and artisanal crafts, all of which are supported by NTFPs. These forest products serve as a vital source of nutrition, income, and even building materials—so much so that many tribes call the forest their “natural supermarket.” The sale of forest produce isn't a seasonal endeavour—it's a daily survival mechanism.

#### Jharkhand's Key NTFPs: A Wealth of Biodiversity

Jharkhand's forests are home to a diverse bounty of commercially and nutritionally valuable NTFPs. Among the most widely collected and used items are:

- Medicinal Plants: Including Chirata, Arjuna bark, and Van tulsi
- Edible Forest Goods: Tamarind, Mahua flowers, Jamun seeds, Wild honey, Bael pulp, Aonla, Rugda, Wild mushroom
- Cottage Industry Raw Materials: Lac, Sal leaves, Bamboo, Tendu leaves
- Oilseeds and Fruits: Chironji, Kusum, Karanj, Neem
- Fuelwood and Fodder: Used year-round for energy and animal feed

These NTFPs find their place in tribal homes and around markets as food, medicine, fuel, or raw materials for craft and trade. Many are also processed into value-added products like pickles, chutneys, sweets, oils, and liquor.

#### The Many Faces of NTFPs: Utility Meets Culture

NTFPs are often undervalued in the formal economic system, yet they're essential in rural life. Their contributions span:

- Traditional Medicine: Tribal communities depend on local herbs and barks for traditional healing and treatment of different diseases.
- Nutrition and Food Security: Edible Forest items like rugda, honey, wild mushrooms, oilseeds, and wild fruits are dietary staples.
- Small-Scale Manufacturing: Lac, Sal leaves, Tendu leaves, and Bamboo feed cottage industries producing beautiful handicrafts, plates, baskets, and mats.
- Household Materials and Fuels: wood, datun (toothbrushes), housing materials, and dyes are derived from NTFPs.

In short, NTFPs are deeply integrated into the social, cultural, and economic lives of tribal people in Jharkhand.

### **III. Socio-Economic Impact of NTFPs:**

NTFPs are engines of socio-economic empowerment. For tribal communities in Jharkhand, they are a bridge between tradition and survival, and increasingly, between survival and entrepreneurship.

#### Income and Employment Backbone

In rural Jharkhand, NTFPs are not just alternative income—they are primary income sources.

NTFPs contribute over 17 per cent of total household income, second only to agriculture, ahead of wage labour, livestock, and timber.

Over a billion people worldwide rely directly on forests for their livelihoods, while the rest of us benefit from forests' economic, social, and environmental contributions, such as rainfall regulation, biodiversity, pollinators, carbon storage, and clean water. NTFPs play a significant role in providing food, fuel, feed, health, and fibre for growing populations. Their importance in rural livelihoods, particularly in developing countries, is well recognised. In India, NTFPs generate an income equivalent to USD 2.7 billion annually and account for 55 per cent of total forestry sector employment. Additionally, 50 per cent of forest revenues and 70 per cent of forest-based export income come from these resources.

Mainly, the poor tribal households, having insignificant income from other work, depend most heavily on NTFPs, often using the income to fund basic needs, children's education, weddings, and agricultural inputs. They also use this to cushion against shocks like job loss or crop failure.

#### Women at the Heart of the NTFP Economy

Tribal women are the backbone of the NTFP value chain—from forest to market.

**Collection Role:** 42 per cent of NTFPs are gathered by women, often solo. Another 29 per cent is done jointly with men.

**Processing and Sale:** Women lead in drying, packaging, preparing, and selling—except for fuelwood, where men dominate.

**Entrepreneurial Growth:** In districts like Khunti and West Singhbhum, women outpace men in NTFP-based entrepreneurship (44 per cent vs. 36 per cent).

What's driving this change? Support from Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and cooperatives. These organisations empower women through:

- Skill-building workshops
- Credit access and financial literacy
- Training in storage, processing, and packaging

- Direct market linkages

These platforms have transformed women from labourers to entrepreneurs. Tamarind processing, lac cultivation, mahua liquor distillation, and sal leaf moulding have all seen women's involvement turn into profitable microenterprises.

As a result, women's household incomes rise, their decision-making improves, and their social status elevates—leading to broader community development.

#### Seasonal Availability and Market Patterns

The NTFP economy in Jharkhand is shaped heavily by seasonal rhythms.

NTFP Category    Availability/Trade Duration

Fuelwood, Toothbrushes: -                      Year-round

Sal Leaves, Fruits, Lac: -    9–10 months

Oilseeds, Traditional-Medicine: -    5–6 months

Mahua: -                      3 months

Summer and autumn are peak collection seasons, while the monsoon brings a deep, as forest paths become inaccessible and people shift focus to farming. Yet, NTFPs provide year-round fallback income, especially during non-agricultural months, sustaining forest dwellers through seasonal economic cycles.

### **IV.    Challenges Facing The NTFP Sector In Jharkhand:**

Despite the immense promise of NTFPs in uplifting tribal livelihoods and boosting rural economies, the sector in Jharkhand is burdened with deeply rooted structural and systemic challenges. There are a few barriers which continue to constrain both economic growth and community empowerment. We have discussed these barriers in the next section.

#### Limited Market Access:

For most tribal collectors, the journey from forest to final market is not one of opportunity, but of exploitation. The absence of organised markets forces them to rely heavily on middlemen, who often pay a fraction of the actual value. Tribals are not fully aware of the actual market price because no market price exchange exists.

Scattered Collection Centres: The decentralised nature of NTFP gathering weakens the bargaining power of individual producers.

Lack of Storage & Transport: Without cold storage, drying units, or reliable roads, perishable NTFPs often deteriorate before reaching markets, resulting in a reduction of their value.

Credit Constraints: There is no proper credit facility window for NTFPs. Most of the producers lack access to capital for packaging, bulk transport, or advanced processing, leaving them vulnerable to exploitative trade practices.

#### Absence of Value Addition:

Another gap in the NTFP economy is the lack of value addition. Most tribal producers are compelled to sell raw forest produce rather than processed or semi-processed goods that could fetch significantly higher prices. Finally, processed products fetch a good market price in comparison to raw products.

Urban Market Disconnect: These products are mainly grown in rural and forest areas, which are disconnected from the main market. Apart from that, most local producers are cut off from high-value markets like e-commerce, retail chains, or pharmaceutical firms.

The current structure pushes forest-dependent families to exit the market at the lowest tier, missing out on potential revenue that flows further downstream in the supply chain.

#### Institutional Weakness and Policy Gaps

While government schemes and forest policies existed here, their implementation is poor on the ground.

#### Major institutional gaps include:

- Weak Enforcement of FRA 2006: Although the Forest Rights Act grants tribal communities the right to access, manage, and trade forest produce, the implementation remains inconsistent.
- Poor Coordination Between Departments: Forest, Tribal Welfare, Rural Development, and Industries departments often work in silos, leading to overlaps and inefficiencies.
- Inadequate Role of Cooperatives and SHGs: Although cooperatives and SHGs show promise in organising NTFP collectors, many remain inactive or underfunded.

- Lack of R&D and Technical Training: There is minimal effort to introduce modern tools, improved cultivation practices (e.g., for lac or medicinal herbs), or standardised drying/storage methods.
- No Pricing Mechanism: Unlike MSP for traditional and other crops, NTFPs lack consistent minimum support prices and procurement policies in practice.

As a result, many tribal households remain outside the protective umbrella of institutional support, surviving in a fragile and unregulated forest economy.

#### Environmental Degradation and Climate Pressures

NTFP sustainability is increasingly under threat due to:

- Deforestation and Encroachment of land: Illegal logging, unplanned mining, and changes in land-use patterns are reducing total forest cover area and their biodiversity.
- Climate Change: Change in rainfall patterns, rising temperatures, and droughts are altering the growth cycles and productivity of NTFP species like mahua and tamarind, and other products.
- Overharvesting and Unsustainable Extraction: In the absence of regulations or community forest management, some NTFPs are being depleted faster than they regenerate.
- Loss of Indigenous Knowledge: As younger generations move to cities, traditional harvesting techniques and ecological wisdom risk being lost. The new generation does not find this work profitable and sustainable. They do not see any charm in NTFPs' activities.

Without strong conservation strategies and community-led forest management models, the ecological foundation of the NTFP economy may soon collapse.

#### Policy Reforms and Institutional Strengthening

Strong policy support is the backbone of any sustainable development model—and NTFPs are no exception. The following policy and institutional measures can lay the groundwork for a thriving forest-based economy:

- Revitalise Forest Rights Implementation: Fully enforce the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 to ensure that tribal communities have secure legal access to collect, manage, and sell NTFPs without interference from forest departments or middlemen.
- Minimum Support Price (MSP) for NTFPs: There is a need to expand the MSP scheme for key NTFPs across Jharkhand to protect collectors from market volatility and price manipulation. Fast-track procurement through Van Dhan Vikas Kendras and local SHGs.
- Dedicated Forest Livelihood Missions: Like NRLM, create a state-level NTFP Mission under the Rural Development or Tribal Welfare department to coordinate inter-departmental efforts and integrate forest economy into rural development planning.
- Strengthen Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs): Empower Gram Sabhas and Van Suraksha Samitis to take charge of local forest governance, manage minor forest produce sustainably, and regulate trade practices.
- Build NTFP Resource and Training Centres: Establish regional hubs for knowledge exchange, capacity-building, biodiversity research, and market intelligence related to NTFPs.

#### Boosting Value Addition and Rural Entrepreneurship

To move beyond raw-product dependency, Jharkhand must build an ecosystem that nurtures processing, branding, and entrepreneurship. Value addition is the key to NTFPs development. There is an urgent need to boost the value addition framework to make these products highly valued products.

Key opportunities include:

- Processing Infrastructure: Set up low-cost processing units for drying, grinding, oil extraction, lac refinement, sal leaf moulding, and packaging at the village or block level.
- Skill Development: Train tribal youth and women in food safety, quality control, herbal processing, and sustainable harvesting practices.
- Branding & Certification: Support local entrepreneurs in obtaining organic, fair-trade, or GI-tag certifications for products like wild honey, mahua, or sal plates—boosting their value in urban and global markets.
- Digital & E-commerce Integration: To make these products famous, it is high time to promote them on platforms like Tribes India, Amazon Karigar, or local state-run portals to sell value-added NTFPs directly to consumers.
- Credit and Capital Access: Credit and capital are the keys, so it is important to link SHGs and forest producers to microfinance, NABARD, Mudra loans, or revolving funds for working capital and equipment.

#### Strengthening SHGs, Cooperatives, and Producer Companies

Collectivisation is a proven strategy to shift power from middlemen to producers. Jharkhand must scale up models like:

- Women-led Self-Help Groups (SHGs): Enhance their role beyond collection to include processing, packaging, and direct marketing. Offer managerial training and regular exposure visits to successful SHG models.
- NTFP Cooperatives and Federations: Support tribal cooperatives in aggregating produce, managing bulk procurement, and accessing better markets.
- Forest Producer Companies: Promote community-owned companies that handle end-to-end NTFP operations—collection, processing, branding, and sales. Provide them with legal, technical, and marketing support.
- Public-Private Partnerships (PPP): Encourage partnerships between tribal cooperatives and private firms or NGOs for capacity building, fair trade practices, and market expansion.

#### Promoting Ecological Sustainability and Indigenous Knowledge

Jharkhand's NTFP revival must be rooted in environmental ethics and indigenous knowledge systems.

Recommended approaches include:

- Community Forest Management (CFM): Support joint forest management models where communities play a lead role in conservation and sustainable harvesting.
- Agroforestry and Plantation Models: Promote cultivation of key NTFPs like lac, neem, karanj, or tamarind on private and community lands to reduce extraction pressure on wild forests.
- Indigenous Knowledge Documentation: To promote Indigenous knowledge to the next generation, it is important to promote documentation. Recognise, preserve, and promote traditional knowledge around healing plants, harvesting cycles, and sustainable usage through digital archives and forest schools.

#### Creating Market Linkages and Fair-Trade Ecosystems

A thriving NTFP sector needs vibrant markets that respect fair prices, quality standards, and ethical practices.

Steps to achieve this:

- Rural Market Infrastructure: Build NTFP-specific rural haats with proper weighing facilities, storage, quality labs, and cold chains.
- Market Aggregation Platforms: Facilitate digital platforms that connect tribal producers with wholesalers, cooperatives, and exporters.
- Price Information Systems: Set up mobile-based platforms to deliver real-time market rates, demand trends, and auction notices directly to forest dwellers.
- Buyer-Seller Meets and Trade Fairs: Organise state and national-level NTFP expos to showcase Jharkhand's forest produce and attract institutional buyers and investors.

### **V. Conclusion And Policy Recommendations: -**

In Jharkhand, forests are more than just ecological treasures. They are the lifeblood of tribal people, anchoring their culture, sustenance, and identity. NTFPs represent a unique intersection of environment, economy, and equity. As we've explored, these products are not only vital for tribal livelihoods but also hold immense potential to drive sustainable, inclusive growth across rural Jharkhand.

The NTFP sector today stands at a critical juncture. On one hand, there is continued exploitation, marginalisation, and ecological degradation. On the other hand, a path paved with policy innovation, grassroots empowerment, and market transformation. To move decisively toward the latter, a coordinated, multi-stakeholder approach is essential. We see NTFPs not as minor forest products but as major catalysts for tribal prosperity and green economic development of the State.

- Livelihood Creature: NTFPs provide food security, seasonal income, and cultural continuity to over 30 per cent of Jharkhand's population—especially its tribal communities.
- Untapped Economic Resource: With the right investments in value addition, branding, and market access, NTFPs could emerge as Jharkhand's most powerful rural enterprise sector.
- Ecological Linkages: Sustainable NTFP collection and processing not only protect biodiversity but also mitigate climate risks and deforestation pressures.

#### Policy Recommendations

To realise a truly inclusive and sustainable forest economy in Jharkhand, the following actions are critical:

- Strengthen Legal and Policy Frameworks: - Full and transparent implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006. Enforce Minimum Support Price (MSP) schemes for key NTFPs with assured procurement.
- Institutional Integration and Convergence: - In Jharkhand, there is no specific board or institution for NTFPs. Jharkhand Biodiversity Board plays a key role in protecting biodiversity and managing NTFPs. Department of Forest, Environment & Climate Change and the Jharkhand State Forest Development Corporation (JSFDC) are also working for NTFPs alongside other forest activities.
- Invest in Local Infrastructure: - there is need to establish decentralised processing units, adequate storage facilities, and market yards for NTFPs.
- Promote Tribal Cooperatives and Producer Companies: - Government needs to provide capital, technical support, and market linkages to community-led enterprises and women SHGs.
- Provide Skill and Create Capacity: - Government and NGOs should launch training programs in value addition, e-commerce, packaging, herbal product development, and sustainable harvesting.
- Harness Digital Tools: - In the time of Digitalisation of all sphere of life this sector lagged behind using new digital tools. Introduce mobile apps and SMS-based systems to provide market intelligence, price updates, and trade alerts directly to forest producers.
- Encourage Ecological Stewardship: - Mainstream community forest management (CFM), agroforestry practices, and biodiversity monitoring through tribal youth and forest watchers.
- Facilitate Public-Private-NGO Partnerships: - Foster collaboration among governments, corporates, and civil society to co-create scalable, ethical, and sustainable NTFP value chains.

NTFPs are not just products of the forest—they are products of the culture, history, and heritage of forest dwellers. If nurtured thoughtfully, they can serve as the cornerstone of a tribal-led green economy in Jharkhand. In Jharkhand, there is huge potential to improve livelihoods through proper storage and value addition to NTFPs, commercialisation of NTFPs, refinement and organisation of marketing systems, indigenous technologies, institutional support for training and skill development, appropriate extension and communication networks, and exploring new forest resource-based livelihood avenues through a wood and NTFP-based framework.

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