

"SUSTAINING LIVELIHOODS: EXPLORING THE TRIBAL ECONOMY OF MELGHAT AMIDST FOREST DEPENDENCY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES."

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Abstract :

The tribal economy of Melghat, a forested region in Maharashtra, India, relies heavily on forest resources, shaping livelihoods amid persistent socio-economic challenges. This study explores how forest dependency influences economic sustenance for tribes like the Korku, while examining barriers such as poverty, malnutrition, and limited market access. Using a mixed-methods approach—combining field surveys, interviews, and secondary data—the research reveals that non-timber forest products (NTFPs) like mahua and tendu leaves are primary income sources, yet seasonal fluctuations and lack of infrastructure hinder stability. Government schemes provide some relief, but their impact is curtailed by poor implementation and awareness. The findings underscore a dual reality: forests are both a lifeline and a limitation, offering sustenance but restricting diversification. Socio-economic challenges, including inadequate healthcare and education, compound economic vulnerability. The study recommends enhancing market linkages, skill development, and sustainable forest management to bolster livelihoods. While offering insights into Melghat's tribal economy, it highlights the need for tailored policies that balance ecological conservation with human development, contributing to broader discussions on tribal welfare in India.

Introduction :

Melghat, located in the Satpura Range of Maharashtra, is home to tribal communities, predominantly the Korku tribe, whose livelihoods are intricately tied to its dense forests. Covering parts of Amravati and Akola districts, this region exemplifies a forest-based economy where non-timber forest products (NTFPs) such as mahua flowers, tendu leaves, and honey form the backbone of sustenance. However, this dependency coexists with stark socio-economic challenges—poverty, malnutrition, and isolation from mainstream markets—posing questions about the sustainability of these livelihoods.

The tribal economy of Melghat operates in a fragile ecosystem, where seasonal availability of resources dictates income patterns. Historically marginalized, these communities face additional pressures from forest conservation policies that restrict access to resources, alongside inadequate infrastructure like roads and healthcare facilities. Government interventions, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and tribal welfare schemes, aim to address these issues, yet their efficacy remains debated.



This research seeks to answer: How does forest dependency shape the tribal economy of Melghat? What socio-economic barriers impede sustainable livelihoods? The objectives are twofold: to analyze the role of forest resources in income generation and to evaluate the constraints hindering economic progress. This study is significant as it addresses a gap in region-specific research, offering insights for policymakers to enhance tribal welfare while preserving Melghat's ecological heritage. By exploring this intersection of economy, ecology, and society, the paper contributes to the discourse on sustainable development in India's tribal belts.

Literature Review :

Studies on tribal economies in India highlight their reliance on natural resources, particularly forests, as a primary livelihood source. Scholars like Gadgil and Guha (1992) emphasize the symbiotic relationship between tribes and forests, disrupted by colonial and post-independence policies. In Melghat, this dynamic persists, with NTFPs driving economic activity (Patil, 2018). Research shows that tribes like the Korku derive 60-70% of their income from forest products, supplemented by subsistence agriculture (Singh & Sharma, 2020).

However, forest dependency is a double-edged sword. While it provides immediate sustenance, it limits diversification due to seasonal availability and regulatory restrictions under the Forest Rights Act (2006). Socio-economic challenges compound this vulnerability. Malnutrition, a chronic issue in Melghat, is linked to food insecurity and inadequate healthcare (Dreze & Sen, 2013). Studies also note poor market integration, with middlemen exploiting tribal producers, reducing their earnings from NTFPs (Kumar, 2019).

Government interventions like MGNREGA and the Public Distribution System (PDS) aim to stabilize incomes and food access, but implementation gaps—corruption, lack of awareness—limit their reach (Mahapatra, 2021). The Sustainable Livelihoods Framework (SLF) offers a lens to analyze these dynamics, emphasizing assets (natural, human, financial) and external factors (policies, markets). Yet, Melghat-specific studies are scarce, often subsumed under broader tribal research, leaving a gap this paper addresses.

Comparatively, tribal economies in Odisha and Chhattisgarh show similar patterns, but Melghat's isolation and malnutrition rates distinguish it. This review underscores the need to explore how forest dependency and socio-economic barriers interact in Melghat, informing context-specific solutions.

Methodology :

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach to examine Melghat's tribal economy. The research was conducted in Melghat Tiger Reserve and surrounding villages in Amravati district, focusing on Korku-dominated areas like Dharni and Chikhaldara talukas. Data collection spanned primary and secondary sources.

Primary data came from field surveys and semi-structured interviews with 50 tribal households, selected via purposive sampling to represent forest-dependent families. Surveys captured income sources, forest product usage, and socio-economic conditions (e.g., education, health access). Interviews with community leaders and local NGOs provided qualitative



insights into challenges and coping strategies. Secondary data included government reports (e.g., Melghat Development Plan, 2023), census data, and academic literature.

Data analysis involved quantitative techniques—descriptive statistics to assess income patterns—and qualitative thematic analysis to identify barriers like market access and policy impacts. Tools like Excel were used for statistical summaries, while NVivo aided in coding interview transcripts. A map of Melghat’s forest cover and tribal settlements was created using GIS data to contextualize findings.

Ethical considerations included obtaining informed consent, ensuring anonymity, and respecting cultural norms during fieldwork. Limitations include the small sample size, which may not fully represent Melghat’s diversity, and reliance on self-reported income data, prone to underestimation. Despite these, the methodology offers a robust snapshot of the tribal economy, blending empirical and narrative evidence.

Results and Discussion :

Results :

The tribal economy of Melghat heavily depends on forests, with 68% of surveyed households reporting NTFPs as their primary income source. Mahua flowers (Rs. 5,000-7,000 annually per household), tendu leaves (Rs. 3,000-4,500), and honey (Rs. 1,000-2,000) dominate earnings, supplemented by subsistence crops like millets (20% of income). Seasonal labor under MGNREGA contributes 10-15% of income but is erratic due to delayed payments.

Socio-economic challenges are stark:

72% of respondents live below the poverty line (Rs. 32/day), and 60% reported child malnutrition. Market access is limited—80% sell NTFPs to middlemen at 30-40% below market rates due to poor road connectivity. Education levels are low (average 3 years of schooling), and healthcare facilities are distant (15-20 km on average).

Government schemes show mixed results:

45% access PDS food grains, but only 25% benefit consistently from MGNREGA. Forest restrictions under conservation laws reduce NTFP collection by 20-30% annually, per community estimates.

Discussion :

Forest dependency sustains livelihoods but locks tribes into a subsistence cycle. NTFPs provide immediate income, yet their seasonal nature—mahua peaks in March-May, tendu in April-June—creates financial instability. This aligns with Kumar’s (2019) findings on tribal economies, though Melghat’s isolation exacerbates reliance on middlemen, unlike better-connected regions like Bastar.

Socio-economic barriers amplify vulnerability. Malnutrition reflects food insecurity tied to low agricultural yields and forest restrictions, echoing Dreze and Sen (2013). Limited education and healthcare access hinder human capital development, restricting alternative



livelihoods. Market disconnection, a structural issue, mirrors Patil's (2018) critique of tribal exploitation, with middlemen capturing value that could lift households above poverty.

Government interventions partially mitigate these issues. MGNREGA offers a buffer, but delays and corruption reduce its impact, as Mahapatra (2021) notes. PDS penetration is moderate, yet logistical challenges in Melghat's terrain limit effectiveness. Forest policies, intended for conservation, inadvertently shrink resource access, creating a trade-off between ecology and economy.

Unexpectedly, some households (15%) adapt by bartering NTFPs locally, bypassing middlemen—a resilience strategy absent in prior studies. However, this is insufficient for scalability. The SLF reveals weak financial and physical assets (e.g., no savings, poor infrastructure), offset by strong natural capital (forests), underscoring the need for asset diversification.

Conclusion :

This study reveals that Melghat's tribal economy hinges on forest dependency, providing sustenance yet perpetuating socio-economic fragility. NTFPs are a lifeline for the Korku, but seasonal constraints and market barriers limit income stability. Poverty, malnutrition, and inadequate infrastructure compound these challenges, while government schemes offer partial relief hindered by implementation gaps.

The findings suggest a need for targeted interventions: enhancing market linkages for NTFPs, promoting skill-based livelihoods (e.g., handicrafts), and improving rural infrastructure. Sustainable forest management, balancing conservation with tribal rights, is critical. Limitations include the study's small scope and reliance on self-reported data, suggesting future longitudinal research on livelihood diversification.

This paper contributes to understanding Melghat's unique tribal economy, advocating policies that integrate ecological and human needs for sustainable development.

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