



**Emerging
Opportunities
in Forest
Economies
of India**

Women's Livelihoods

**Uma Ramaswamy
2014**

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Foreword

We are today faced with multiple crises – financial, economic, food, energy, and climate—which have had tremendous negative impact on people’s lives, livelihoods, human rights, and nature. These negative trends are seen as unavoidable by-products of globalisation. These are further exacerbated with failing state, both in terms of political will as well as the capacity to address them nationally and globally. Current situation is an outcome of dominant globalised economic model that prioritises markets, profits and growth over people and nature resulting in growing inequalities and environmental destruction. In the post 2015 process, the global community is extensively engaged in multiple dialogues and discussions on sustainable development. There is a lot of optimism from the process for a transformative approach rooted in equality and justice to ensure life with dignity for all.

There is a dichotomy in the development context of India. On the one hand, India is aspiring to the role of a leading nation in Asia with its booming economy and political power. On the other hand, if viewed through the lens of the Human Development Index (HDI), it is still far behind the most developed countries of the world. One of the components of HDI is employment or livelihood, and indeed this issue remains a challenge for policy makers in India. The matter becomes even more challenging when we add to it the dimension of gender inequalities and marginalisation. Women face multiple forms of discrimination, are food insecure and confront unequal access to productive resources. It is this question of livelihood which is central to the present volume, especially with a focus on women’s livelihood in the forests of Jharkhand and Assam. It is this question of livelihood which is central to the present volume, especially with a focus on women’s livelihood in the forests of Jharkhand and Assam.

Forest provides a very particular kind of lifestyle to forest-dwelling communities. This is especially true of women as they are the ones who spend most of their time collecting forest produce. Forest provides necessary resources to these women who are responsible not only for their own livelihood but also that of their family, especially the elderly and children. Since their contribution in sustaining the forest economy is crucial, the relationship these women have with the forest is a symbiotic one. Although their role in sustaining the forest economy has now been acknowledged by policy framers in our country, their economic condition remains fragile. This is a result of the gender-biased policy framework given to us by governments of the past which continues to exercise its effects on the living conditions of women in forest economies even now. To add to this, the depletion of forests resulting from their use for commercial, mining and industrial

purposes has a direct and adverse impact on the livelihoods of women living in these areas.

In this study, Uma Ramaswamy attempts to look at whether things have changed for women living in the forests of Jharkhand and Assam by undertaking rigorous field research in the remote villages of these two states. The importance of this study lies in the fact that it tries to map the relationship between the policy framework of the government for forest regions and its practical applicability. The study reiterates that the role of women as economic agents and their contribution to the Gross National Product through agro forestry and by collecting a variety of non-timber forest produce deserve to be recognised in future policy framing exercises.

The study highlights issues related with the rights of people for the use of forest produce. The indigenous people who have been living and surviving on forest produce are called adivasis. The forest conservation policies of the Government of India since independence have led to a tussle between the state and adivasis for the use of forest land. The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) 2006 could be seen as a step towards improving forest governance. However, as the present study shows, how successful it has been in transforming forest governance and improving women's livelihood is debatable.

The present study discusses the ownership of forest land which is one of the most important issues related with forest governance. It is unfortunate that forest-dwelling communities who have been using forest land for generations have failed to acquire its ownership. The FRA empowered them with rights over land, forest and forest produce. These rights are given to individuals, groups, communities of forest-dwelling scheduled tribes and other traditional forest dwellers. However, the implementation of these rights at ground level requires intense and sustained collaboration between the government and Gram Sabhas. What is also required for these rights to be implemented effectively are transparency and communication between these two agents. One such step in the right direction has been the implementation of Joint Forest Management which addresses livelihood issues by working in collaboration between NGOs and rural communities. However, the present volume poses the question about how useful this has been for women in particular.

Deforestation for industrial and mining purposes is also an issue tackled by Uma Ramaswamy as she looks at how a general decline in livelihood options leads to out-migration from forest regions. Men leave for urban areas looking for better employment opportunities. As a result, the women who are left behind become the sole breadearners of their families, apart from doing most of the household work along with taking care of children. Uma Ramaswamy makes the important point through the present volume that future policy framing should for all these reasons be centred on women, and that the state, civil society and organisations must make adequate efforts for the effective implementation of these women-centred policies. The time for tokenism is indeed over.

The study provides critical understanding of women's rights to livelihoods in forest sector. We hope this will be of interest to a wide range of audience.

Priti Darooka
Executive Director
PWESCR

Preface

An estimated 147 million people live in 170,000 villages within the proximity of India's resource-rich forests and another 275 million villagers eke their livelihoods from these forests. These are powerful statistics. Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), a major source of revenue to the national exchequer are obtained from about 3,000 species of plants/trees in the country and form an important source of food and livelihoods for communities, particularly forest-dwelling communities. Yet the poverty of these communities has only deepened over time. This fact is exacerbated by the fact that two-thirds of the gatherers are reported to be women. Most importantly, women whose central role in the forest economy is now well-recognized have emerged as the poorest and the most vulnerable in the fast changing development context of India.

As a result of a few studies, reports and development initiatives, the discourse on women in the forest sector has steadily grown but it needs to deepen further. International pilot projects with sole focus on women have amply demonstrated the efficacy of involving, capacitating and empowering women in forest-based pursuits. But these are time-bound projects and considerable lobbying and advocacy work is required for mainstreaming their tested results and lessons. Feminist discourse and advocacy continue to question the gender deficits in access, availability, adequacy and quality in women's livelihoods in forest economies. More and more, programmatic initiatives and studies would have to unpack these deficits to bring pressure on practitioners and policy makers.

To capture the livelihood issues that women are contending with in the forest sector, PWESCR invited me to undertake a brief field study in the forest-rich states of Jharkhand and Assam in eastern India. The present document is an outcome of this. The primary objective of this field study was to capture the contemporary challenges of women's livelihoods in forest economies, and further to explore the emerging opportunities that women would have to grasp and sustain their economic agency.

I was fortunate to enter the tribal villages in the states of Jharkhand and Assam because of my association with the Resource Centres of Church of North India-Synodical Board of Social Services (CNI-SBSS) in Assam and Jharkhand, as an evaluator and later an organizational development accompanier. It is this familiarity that emboldened me to undertake this study. Because of the time and fund constraints, during the two-week field stay, I could cover seven villages and a few hamlets in these villages. However, as I transected the adivasi villages, several villagers from neighbouring hamlets joined our discussions to share their concerns.

Being a sociologist and groomed in the field-work tradition, my research methodology was focused on interactive dialogues with women and men, village-level

officials, teachers, NGO activists, student leaders and forest officials. Predictably, my interactions with forest officials yielded defensive stances and little by way of insights. But my interactions with activists of the Save the Forest Movement in Jharkhand, leaders of the student movement in Assam and a few well-informed and empathetic officials of state-owned cooperatives were enriching. I was fortunate to interact with a couple of NGO activists who took deep interest in the study and shared their experiences. The field staff of CNI-SBSS Resource Centres in Jharkhand and Assam was yet another source of information which was a bonus for my study. Consciously, I have included a few case studies and interviews for reflection. To this extent, this study has been enriched by the experiences shared by several actors. I have also drawn analytical insights from select studies and reports to contextualize and string together the arguments of my study.

The forest sector in the states of Jharkhand and Assam is both vast and diverse. The adivasis are not a homogenous lot and have diverse socio-cultural contexts. Besides adivasis, there are other forest-dwellers in the region also. Therefore, I cannot claim this study to be representative. Since my field study which was undertaken in the months of May and June 2011, the field realities must have gone through several temporal changes. But the underlying causes of women's poverty and vulnerability are too deep to disappear overnight.

This document is organized into two parts. The first part gives an overview of women's context in the forest economies. Further, it dwells on forest policies and the opportunities that the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006, popularly known as the Forest Rights Act (FRA), offers. The second part of the document gives a field view of my visits drawn from my field interactions in the states of Jharkhand and Assam. The document concludes with a brief reflection for advocacy.

Abbreviations

CFR	:	Community forest resource
CFRt	:	Community Forest Rights
CNI-SBSS	:	Church of North India-Synodical Board of Social Services
MoTA	:	Ministry of Tribal Affairs
DLC	:	District Level Committees
FCA	:	Forest Conservation Act
FRA	:	Forest Rights Act
GNP	:	Gross National Product
IFS	:	Indian Forest Service
JFM	:	Joint Forest Management
JAMFCOFED	:	Jharkhand State Minor Forest Produce Cooperative Development and Marketing Federation Ltd
JSFDC	:	Jharkhand State Forest Development Corporation
MFI	:	Micro-Finance Institutions
MFP	:	Minor Forest Products
NREGA	:	National Rural Employment Guarantee Act
NTFPs	:	Non-timber forest products
OTFD	:	Other traditional forest dwellers
PAD	:	People's Action for Development
PDS	:	Public distribution system
PESA	:	Panchayats Extension to Scheduled Areas 1996
PTG	:	Primitive Tribal Groups
PAD	:	People's Action for Development
PNJSS	:	Probanchal Nari Jagruti Sangram Samithi
SDLCs	:	Sub-Divisional Level Committees
SHG	:	Self Help Groups
SLMC	:	State Level Monitoring Committees
TWD	:	Tribal Welfare Departments

PART 1

Women's Livelihoods in Forest Economies

There is no doubt that women are dynamic players in forest economies. Their multiple economic pursuits in agro-forestry, especially as collectors of a variety of non-timber forest products (henceforth NTFPs)³ are not just central to their own livelihoods but contribute substantially to national economies. Yet this vital contribution, as some activists and economists have begun to argue, is yet to be accounted for in India's gross national product (GNP).

Apart from their role in the collection of fuel, fodder and as gatherers of NTFPs, women engage in many activities in the fast disappearing rain-fed jhum (swidden or slash and burn)⁴ cultivation and settled agriculture. Women's role and responsibility in livestock management, whether of small ruminants (goats, sheep, pigs and chicken) or milch cattle, is also quite substantial. Beyond this, women are found getting into wage-work to supplement household earning; taking care of vegetable cultivation in their marginal farms or homesteads; selling and trading in various forest products, vegetables and home-made rice-beer in the weekly markets—all of which tells the tale of their packed work schedules. But it is gathering of NTFPs that has been the backbone of women's livelihoods, especially during non-agricultural season. Special mention must be made of the many hours and days that women put in for the collection of fuel wood from the forests to meet their household needs.

The list of women's activities is long but what is unique to their economic pursuits is the way they combine several of the above to sustain their household economies. Indeed, for women, livelihoods in forest economies are inextricably linked to the health of forests and their resources. One must acknowledge that women and forest dwellers in forest economies, especially the adivasis, derive their identity from their unique agro-forestry systems. 'Livelihood is about employment. Forests are the major employers of forest communities which neither the government nor its administration is willing to protect.' (Basu Mullick, Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement) 'Without jal (water), jangal (forests), jameen (land) and sansaadan (all resources), there is no livelihood for women in forests. (Anima Pushpa Toppo, Jharkhand Save Forest Movement). Rajgopal, the well-known activist of Ekta Parishad is accurate in his observation, 'When you (forest dwellers) are sick, you don't go to the hospital, but you go to the forest to find the right kind of herb. When you need honey, you don't go to the shop, you go to the forest. When you need some fish or meat, you don't go to the shop, you go to the forest. For the adivasis, the forest provides for a very self-sufficient model of life.'⁵ Indeed women's livelihood in forest economies takes on wider dimension because it is inextricably interwoven

³The list of NTFPs that women (as also men) collect is astonishing; it ranges from fodder and fuel at one end to medicinal herbs, raw materials such as bamboo, a variety of grass, nuts, fruit, vegetables, honey, sal leaves, mahua, lac, to mention a few at the other.

⁴An area of land made cultivable by cutting or burning off the vegetative cover and leaving the land fallow to regenerate itself for the next tranche of cultivation; it is mostly practised by forest-dwellers in the uplands of the forests.

⁵P.V. Rajgopal, 2001, India Together, December

not only with their habitat but the diverse socio-cultural context of forest-dwelling communities.

As part of forest-dwelling households, women's lives and livelihoods have come under pressure because of the denuding of forests and rigorous policy restrictions on the use of forests and their products. Nationalization of several revenue-yielding forest species led to parastatal and private bodies appropriating the sourcing, pricing and marketing of the forest produce which until the introduction of the Scheduled Tribes and other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights Act (henceforth FRA) left the gatherers at the receiving end. Many parastatal marketing bodies have become sites of patronage and often ineffectual in their functioning. It is astonishing that for years state policies have prevented gatherers from even processing forest produce. Above all, most of these institutions continue to remain masculine in their orientation and perspectives.

As one travels through the forests, one is anguished that the forests have depleted. Women's narratives, especially those of elderly women, testify to the existence of lush forests with wild life which they once inhabited. Forest projects have largely focused on species such as timber, bamboo, rubber and eucalyptus, ignoring traditional forest species which have enriched the forest with their self-renewals and undercover growth. As a result of all this, the character of the forests is fast changing.

The forest sector is also getting liberalized and globalized with its products getting exported to changing markets. Industrial onslaught of forest regions has often been unmindful of the ecological costs and livelihoods concerns of forest-dwellers. The forest-rich states of eastern and central India have been bearing the brunt of mindless use and exploitation of forests in the region. All this is happening in regions where the FRA does not provide for modification of rights for any purpose other than conservation of critical wildlife habitats.⁶ Conflicts have occurred in many areas at great human cost. The Report of Working Group on Human Rights in India (2011) is telling in its commentary, 'The number of people displaced from ostensible "development" projects over the last 60 years is estimated at 60 million; only a third of whom have been resettled. Most of the displaced are the rural poor, marginal farmers, fisher-folk; 20% are Dalits and 40% are tribals/ adivasis, who continue to face severe displacement threats.'⁷ The loss of livelihoods of forest dwellers in many regions is now the focal point of a number of protest movements. The Report says further, 'Central India (Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Orissa and West Bengal) is home to impoverished communities of indigenous people (adivasis). With corporate acquisition and privatization of land, mineral and other resources — primarily affecting the already marginalised adivasis — strong resistance movements, both popular protests as well as Maoist ("Naxalite") insurgencies, have grown. The Supreme Court strongly condemned the state-sponsored counter-insurgency militia.'⁸

With the recognition of forests as carbon sinks, they have also been appropriated by global debate and agreements associated with ecological conservation.⁹ In the midst of all this, forest-dependent women have emerged poorer and more vulnerable to the many policy restrictions, environmental changes and protest movements. Women suffer when their livelihood resources are depleted, when they

⁶N.C. Saxena et.al, 2010, Report of the Four Member Committee for Investigation into the Proposal Submitted by the Orissa mining Company for Bauxite, Submitted to the Ministry of Environment & Forests , Government of India, 16 August.

⁷WGHR, December 2011, 'Human Rights in India—An Overview', Joint Stakeholders' Report, United Nations Universal Periodic Review.

⁸Ibid.

⁹The Kyoto Protocol, 2005 is an international and legally binding agreement to reduce green house gas emissions worldwide. The three international market-based mechanisms of this include joint implementation, clean development mechanism (CDM) and emission trading. Of these only the CDM applies to India. The CDM aims to give developing countries the option for more sustainable development by permitting industrialized countries to finance greenhouse gas reduction projects in developing countries and receive credit for doing so. As a signatory to the Kyoto Protocol and a developing country, India may at some point volunteer to cooperate with the process through the CDM (World Bank, 2007, pp.90–91).

get displaced because of construction of a dam or establishment of industries, and when their men migrate, leaving them to cope with depleting livelihood options. Whenever women have migrated themselves they have returned only to find themselves discriminated against, and deprived of their traditional rights to land and decent living. Even today, the practice of witch-hunting of women in order to deny them their rights to land and property continues in many forested regions. What is evident, therefore, are the many deficits-of access, availability and adequacy-that these women are contending with for their livelihood survival. It can no longer be said that their economic pursuits allow them to earn a decent livelihood.

Everywhere I went, forest denudation was intensely visible and talked about. Women spoke of several forest species that are disappearing and reduced yields of forest species. Illegal forest felling is a common occurrence. Despite the fact that the FRA has freed women and forest gatherers of controls while collecting NTFPs, forest guards continue to harass women. During my visit to the forest department in Ranchi in the state of Jharkhand, I was told most of the officials were away to monitor (check and probably even threaten) women who traditionally celebrate an annual festival called Sendra (during rainy season) with a ritual hunt in the forests (dressed in men's clothing). Legend has it that earlier it was men who went on this annual hunt but they were often beaten up while they were asleep by officials and workers of the British government. It was then that their women decided that they would go for ritual hunt. 'In most villages, this festival has become a token-women go to other villages and their animals are set free by villagers for simulated hunting', several women remarked. However, it seems that forest guards even now emulate their British predecessors in continuing to harass those participating in the ritual hunt for no good reason.

With recurrent drought, absence of adequate subsidies and support prices, rain-fed agriculture has stagnated. While migration has gone on for several decades, more and more women and girl children are now migrating to cities. In my interactions, many aging parents bemoaned the fact that their sons no longer want to work on their lands. The youth that have not yet migrated are on the lookout for jobs in development projects which fetch better earnings. While development discourse has been commenting on the extensive migration that is of concern in the forest regions, it is the socio-psychological impact on those who are left behind, especially the aging parents, the underemployed youth and women-headed households, that left the most lasting impression on me during my field visits.

Conservation Policies: An Overview

The Ministry of Environment and Forests now prides India as being one of the 12 'megadiverse' countries in the world, with forests accounting for 20.6 per cent of the total geographical area of the country as of 2005 while the tree cover accounts for 2.8 per cent, and offering livelihoods to 200 million people. The Ministry reports that, 'Over the last two decades, progressive national forestry legislations and policies in India aimed at conservation and sustainable management of forests have reversed deforestation and have transformed India's forests into a significant net sink of CO₂. From 1995 to 2005, the carbon stocks stored in our forests and trees have increased from 6,245 million tonnes (mt) to 6,662 mt, registering an annual increment of 38 mt of carbon or 138 mt of CO₂ equivalent.'¹⁰ Most importantly, India's forest policy pertains to 33 per cent of its forest cover.

- ◆ In the shadows behind the above statistics, impressive as they might sound, is lurking a history of consistent land alienation of adivasis and other forest-dwelling communities both in colonial and post-colonial times. 'During the colonial period...large areas of the uncultivated commons (called 'wastes' because they did not yield land revenue) were declared state forests through blanket notifications....Post-Independence, the net 'national' forest estate was further enlarged by 26 million hectares (m ha) between 1951 and 1988 (from 41 m ha to 67 m ha). This increase was achieved by declaring the non-private lands of ex-princely states (merged with the Union of India after Independence) and of zamindars as state forests. Many of the above lands, although entered as 'forests' or 'wastelands' in official records, harboured, and in many cases continue to harbour, a wide diversity of communal property use and management systems by pre-existing communities, recognized by custom rather than formal law.'¹¹
- ◆ Concerned at the rapid loss of forests for other land uses, the Government of India enacted the Forest Conservation Act (henceforth FCA) in 1980 which made it mandatory for state governments to seek central permission before diverting forest land to other uses. Since the FCA, governments have brought vast tracts of forested land under its control, over which traditionally local communities once enjoyed community rights. The changing boundaries of three types of India's forests are themselves revealing. These three forest types are: a) the reserve forests which are beyond the reach of village communities, b) the protected forests which give conditional rights for access, and c) village forests for the use

¹⁰Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, August 2009, India's Forest and Tree Cover, Contribution as a Green Sink.

¹¹Madhu Sarin, 2005, Laws, Lore and Logjams: Critical Issues in Indian Forest Conservation, International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED), Gate Keeper Series 116

of local communities. Reportedly, over the decades, the net area of the reserve forests has increased with the state steadily taking over much of the area under community land. Conservation is argued to be one reason for appropriation of forest lands. Development ventures and industrial projects account for more powerful encroachments. This is borne out by a significant statistic, 'Over 60% of the country's forest cover is found in 187 tribal districts where less than 8% of national population lives. On the other hand, the Ministry of Environment and Forest has diverted 73% (9.81 lakh hectares of forestland) of the total encroached areas for non-forest activities such as industrial and development projects.'¹² Indeed, the government itself has been the biggest violator of the spirit of the constitutional provisions.

Large sections of forest-dwellers are adivasis (indigenous communities) who have over centuries established unique and diverse livelihood systems that are culture- and ecology-specific. Many variants are to be found across the Indian states and regions. But what binds them are their interests in land and forests, two potent natural resources. Historically and in contemporary times, rights over the use and control of this rich natural resource base has been a major arena of conflict among and between forest-dwelling communities and more specifically with the state, with the latter gaining an upper hand through its policies, executive fiat and administrative powers.

The much debated climatic changes have created new challenges for the livelihoods of forest-dwelling communities. At one end, there is the growing urgency to conserve forests even as alternative land-use projects are being promoted to increase productivity and green cover. At the other end, forest-dwellers are increasingly forced to adopt new crops for commercial interests and often compelled to abandon their time-tested bio-diverse traditions. In the seven states of the north-eastern region,¹³ it is argued that, 'Both flora and fauna...are under threat due to deforestation, mining and quarrying, jhumming, charcoal making, construction of reservoirs and dams, overharvesting of medicinal plants, drying up of wetlands, and overfishing and pollution of water bodies. In addition, conflicts between development and conservation, coupled with general political conflict in the region, are likely to have negative impacts on biodiversity conservation.'¹⁴ In its trend analysis of deteriorating land-use patterns in northeastern India, the World Bank Report links the increasing poverty levels and accelerated migration rates to a number of factors, some of which include: 'shortening of fallow period of jhum resulting in poor forest management; jhum lands being brought under plantation and cash crops; afforestation of jhum lands by government; stagnant agricultural productivity due to declining soil productivity; declining of forest products, reduced incomes from agriculture and forests and conversion of community lands into private.'¹⁵

Indeed, some of the most impoverished communities are to be found in the forest sector, which on the one hand reports high levels of revenues and on the other poor land productivity and stagnant economies. All these changes in natural resource-use patterns indicate a steady decline in forest dwellers' livelihoods and by inference those of women whose concerns continue to remain largely unvoiced. Being an integral part of subsistence household economies—engaging in jhum cultivation, rain-fed agriculture, toiling on their land for longer hours than their

¹²Report of the National Consultation on the Draft Forest Rights Bill, 2005.

¹³Northeastern India includes the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim and Tripura.

¹⁴World Bank, 2007, 'Development and Growth in Northeast India, The Natural Resources, Water and Environment Nexus', Draft Strategy Report, 20 January, South Asia Region, Socially Sustainable Development Department, Environment Unit, p. xiii.

¹⁵Ibid.

men, tending to livestock, collecting minor forest produce and working as farm labourers when occasion demands—women’s livelihoods are far from stable, and hence require many strategic supports. It cannot be emphasized enough that far from being passive bystanders women have been part of many protest movements against development processes that have displaced their habitats and livelihoods. It is equally true, however, that while a few of these protest movements have raised awareness levels and acted as pressure points about the declining livelihoods of forest-dwelling communities, they have rarely given requisite attention to the practicalities of bettering women’s livelihoods. It must be said that women’s dependence and participation in the forests for their livelihoods is significant ultimately for the ecological stability of the forests. More specifically, the discourse on women’s livelihoods in the forest sector has to examine how best to consolidate their ‘livelihood’ rights and translate these into doable measures.

Regaining Rights

For the first time in the history of legislation related to forests in India, two pieces of legislation, Panchayats (Extension to the Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 for tribal areas of Central India (henceforth PESA) and the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 (which came into force on 1 January 2008) have radicalized the scope of forest governance for forest-dwelling communities.¹⁶ However, PESA which gave the tribal panchayats in the scheduled areas powers to self-rule and ownership of rights to forest products apart from asking states to bring appropriate relevant amendments did not have smooth passage. The forest departments claimed that reserve forests which have abundant NTFPs cannot come under PESA as they are outside village boundaries. Being outside the Fifth Schedule, PESA left out areas that have abundant NTFPs.¹⁷ While acknowledging the historic injustice to the forest dwellers and to overcome the lacunae of PESA, the FRA gives comprehensive provision for fundamental reforms in tenure and forest governance. With this provision, forest-dwellers involvement has gained ascendancy all over again. 'Section 3(1)(c) of the Forest Rights Act 2006 defines forest rights as inclusive of the "right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce which have traditionally been collected within or outside village boundaries". This means that communities and gram sabhas having rights under this particular section of the Act will not only have the right to use but also rights of ownership over minor forest products (henceforth MFPs).¹⁸

FRA: Highlights

Essentially, two categories of rights are incorporated under the FRA: rights over land and rights over forests and forest produce. The FRA gives the right to inhabit and own forest lands individually and by groups or entire communities of forest-dwelling scheduled tribes or other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDs). Most importantly, Section 5 of the FRA both requires and empowers the rights holders, the Gram Sabha and other village-level institutions to a) protect wild life, forest and biodiversity, and b) ensure that adjoining catchments area, water sources and other ecological sensitive areas are adequately protected". It also requires and empowers them to c) ensure that the habitat of forest-dwelling Scheduled Tribes and other traditional forest dwellers is preserved from any form of destructive

¹⁶For detailed discussion on PESA and FRA see, Pradeep Prabhu, 2006, Inclusion in Law and Exclusion in Praxis: The Scheduled Tribes & Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act). ¹⁷The Indian Constitution protects tribal interests through the Fifth and Sixth Schedules. The Sixth Schedule, applicable in the northeastern states of India gives tribal people the freedom to exercise legislative and executive powers through an autonomous regional council and an autonomous district council. The Fifth Schedule applicable in all the other identified tribal regions guarantees tribal autonomy and tribal rights. PESA gave radical constitutional and legislative mandate for devolution of local self-governance in Schedule V (tribal majority) areas. It empowered the Gram Sabha (the body of all adult voters of a self-defined community) to safeguard and preserve the traditions and customs of the people, their cultural identity, community resources, and the customary mode of dispute resolution. Gram Sabhas were given ownership of minor forest produce within their areas of purview, either directly or through the Gram Panchayat and the power to approve the plans, programmes and projects for its social and economic development before their implementation.

¹⁸The FRA has not found acceptance in the northeastern states of India on the ground that its provisions are not applicable to their contexts. For a detailed analysis of FRA, See Madhu Sarin, 2010; N.C. Saxena, 2012; Women's Rights to Forest Spaces and Resources, UN Women, India.

practices affecting their cultural and natural heritage'.¹⁹ The FRA provisioned that state governments to constitute State level monitoring committee (SLMC), District Level Committees (DLC) and Sub-Divisional Level Committees (SDLC) for monitoring and implementation of the Act.

Community Forest Rights: Opportunities and Challenges

Among other rights that the FRA confers, it is the community forest rights which offer some scope for women to improve their livelihoods. These rights include `... restitution of customary usufruct rights over forests, rights to produce of water bodies; grazing rights (both for settled and nomadic communities); rights to community tenures over "habitat" for primitive tribal groups (PTGs); ownership rights over NTFPs and rights over community forest resources. These not only enable the claimants to seek restitution of their usufruct community forest rights arbitrarily withdrawn during the declaration of a wide diversity of common lands as state forests, but also statutorily empower village Gram Sabhas to protect, conserve and manage community forests for sustainable use. This implies a major institutional reform in the country's system of forest governance by creating space for democratic decentralization of forest management. Forest Departments, however, have shown considerable resistance to permitting recognition of the community forest resource (CFR) right as it challenges their exclusive territorial jurisdiction and control over forests.'²⁰

Predictably, the above critique has already found affirmation in the review of FRA. Here is an extract from a Government report in this regard: `The progress of implementation of the Community Forest Rights (CFRt) under FRA is abysmally low. There seems a great confusion between CFRt under Section 3(1) which includes right to collect and dispose NTFP, fuelwood, grazing, fishing, right to manage and protect forests etc, and development rights under Section 3(2) and almost no information is available on the extent of area over which CFRt have been claimed or vested. As per the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA) website on 31 October 2010, in the 14 states that have provided disaggregated data for community claims, a total of 50,981 CFRt claims have been received, 6,971 have been accepted over a total area of 20,254 ha. However, majority of these claims are development rights under section 3(2), not under the community rights granted under section 3(1). Thus, the community claims actually submitted u/s sec 3(1) are likely to be far less than 50,000 across the entire country, which shows that this part of FRA implementation has been largely neglected.'²¹

It is clear, therefore, that with many vested interests involved and differing viewpoints at work, the implementation of FRA has not only happened variously across the states but it is also embroiled in contestations, unresolved cases and in some instances, even serious conflict. Narratives of forest-dwelling communities and the hard work put in by civil society organizations reveal how ill-equipped these forest dwellers are in proving their ownership rights to land and fighting for what is their due.

Representation of Women in Forest Governance: Many Hurdles

'The FRA stipulation of fair representation of women in all forest institutions and committees has shown poor results. Either women's representation has been

¹⁹Government of India, 2010, 'Manthan: Report of National Committee on Forest Rights Act', December 2010, A Joint Committee of Ministry of Environment and Forests and Ministry of Tribal Affairs, p.103. Dr. N.C Saxena was the Chairperson of this Committee.

²⁰Madhu Sarin with Oliver Springate-Baginsk, 2010, 'India's Forest Rights Act-The Anatomy of a Necessary but not Sufficient Institutional Reform', IPPG Discussion Papers.

²¹Government of India, 2010, 'Manthan', p.15.

sub-optimal or women are not found in these institutions. Steeped in patriarchal practices, it is not easy to bring women into village institutions and more importantly ensure their participation. Sub-Divisional Level Committees (SDLCs), District Level Committees (DLCs) and State Level Monitoring Committees (SLMCs) have not necessarily ensured that at least one of the PRI members is a woman. These failures are a part of the reason why the implementation of the FRA has not necessarily paid the attention to women it should have, e.g. in ensuring that land titles are in the name of both spouses..., or in looking into the special needs of women vis-à-vis the forest commons.²² Rightly, the National Committee on FRA recommends, 'SLMCs should undertake an urgent review of all FRCs, SDLCs, and DLCs and ensure that women's representation is achieved as per the FRA. Ministry of Tribal Affairs should also consider a circular reminding states of this statutory requirement, and specifying aspects to pay special attention to, such as joint (husband-wife) titles, claims to CFRt, and post-claims involvement of women in Gram Sabha committees or other forums. Ministry of Tribal Affairs, and state agencies could also sponsor studies specifically on this issue, building on the very few that have so far been carried out.'²³

N.C. Saxena in his recent publication sums up the fate of community forest rights, 'Unfortunately, in all states, the CFR process has not even got off the ground, due to Forest Department's reluctance to grant community rights, as also due to lack of awareness, amongst communities, civil society organizations, or relevant officials. State governments too have not adequately publicized the CFR provisions or even internalized their importance themselves. Most communities are not aware of the groundbreaking CFR provisions in the FRA. A simple, 'how-to' guide on CFR needs to be produced by MoTA which can be adapted by state nodal agencies as appropriate, and issued in large numbers to communities and relevant officials. Besides, forest policies relating to NTFPs must be radically changed to suit the livelihood needs of the forest dwellers, especially women.'²⁴ Pertinently, 'section 4(4) of the Act provides that the right shall be "registered in the name of both the spouses in case of married persons and in the name of single head in the case of a household headed by a single person".

For the forest and revenue departments, the administrative task of surveying lands, giving statutory entitlements and most importantly letting go of their earlier control and power was daunting and disempowering. In their eagerness to reclaim their rights, adivasis and forest-dwelling communities and NGOs scurried to prove their eligibility criteria. While in the case of eligible scheduled tribes, the cut-off date of their domicility was moved forward to 13 December 2005, the other traditional forest dwellers (OTFDs) were asked to prove continuous occupation of forest land for three generations of 25 years each. This made little sense given that forest-dwelling communities have never kept records of either their land or even know how long they have inhabited the forest regions. Also much of their land is commonly owned, which would have no meaning once the individual pat-tas/land deeds were handed out.. 'As a result, two key results are apparent. Firstly, important provisions of the Act dealing with community forest resource (including biodiversity conservation), rights to minor forest produce, traditional knowledge, and empowerment of gram sabhas for conservation, have remained neglected. Secondly, in many areas, non-tribal forest-dwellers have expressed either a disinterest

²²Government of India, 'Manthan'.

²³Ibid., p.56.

²⁴N.C Saxena, 2012, Women's Rights to Forest Spaces. N.C. Saxena has written extensively, critiquing the implications and implementations of legislations on forest dwelling communities. He was appointed as the Chairperson to review the implementation of FRA.



Interacting with women in Mamarlapatra, Jharkhand—Most women sell sal leaf plates in the weekly markets.

Mukhia Tenten (Mamarlapatra Toli (hamlet) in Jharkhand) with whom I interacted holds many positions as pahan (religious head), mukhia (village head) and member of the Joint Forest Management (JFM) Committee. He claims personal ownership of the 29.5 acres of forest land adjacent to his village. While he is happy that the government has completed the survey of his village lands he continues to be anxious about whether and when the 27 households of his Toli would be given their pattas. There is little awareness in the hamlet about what the FRA actually entails. Even Mukhia Tenten seems quite unaware. He is vague about the status of the JFM committee although he is a member. All that he seems to have done is to attend a few JFM meetings. Meanwhile, with a second year of drought, villagers are in constant search of work. The youth are migrating but the villagers are reluctant to talk about their children going to work in distant places. While some do go for NREGA projects, there are complaints about delayed payments and non-availability of work. There is a visible scarcity of resources in Mamarlapatra Toli.

Dasni Bhengra of this hamlet says that women try to make little monies by making sal leaf plates .and there is no guarantee that whatever they take to the haat will be sold. Other women tell me that khattal (jackfruit) comes to their aid in times of scarcity; there are 16 households in this hamlet which own jackfruit trees. Dasni says that when there is no food at home, 'we subsist on jackfruit.' Absence of any backing by an NGO or civil society organization is quite visible in the village. (Mamarlapatra is in Torpa Block, Dorma Panchayat of Khunti District and is 50 Kilometres from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand)

to engage with the claims process or anger at being excluded. Technically, the responsibility of accurate information outreach lies with State Tribal Welfare Departments (TWD) and in a few cases, TWD material has been factually incorrect. However, the perception of the Act as a land rights Act is also rooted in larger socio-political issues: vested political interests, the culmination of a long-standing struggle for land tenure.²⁵

It is clear from the discussion above that central to the success of FRA is how power gets devolved to the Gram Sabhas and how the latter empower themselves to assume their new roles. The question remains, however, as to how gender-sensitized the Gram Sabhas are and do they include women and their issues in their discussions? Ironically, most of the Gram Sabhas are composed of men alone. It also begs question, therefore, as to how to get women into these male-dominated institutions. The challenge of introducing greater gender equity in the process is compounded by the abysmal numbers of women in the forest department itself. `Giving priority to increasing the number of women in forest departments (both field staff and officers) cannot be understated. As long as forest departments remain almost exclusively male institutions, their effectiveness in convincing village women and men of their commitments to gender equality will remain questionable....The Indian Forest Service (IFS) was opened to women as late as 1979. By 1995 batch, there were 72 women IFS officers out of a total strength of 2576 (less than three per-

cent).²⁶ One has only to walk through the forest department offices to be shocked by the overwhelming presence of men, who are further masculine in their orientation, politically correct in their stances, and often ill-informed about gender equations.

Joint Forest Management

In the wake of the FRA, the flagship programme of Joint Forest Management (JFM) has also come under attack. Introduced in the nineties, JFM was introduced with an ambitious mandate of partnering with rural communities and NGOs to regenerate degraded lands on a large scale. But in reality, there are reports of FRA and JFM overlapping in their operational areas. During my field trip, even forest officials seemed to have no clarity regarding the relevance of JFM, and the villagers were equally confused.

²⁵The Kalpavriksh, Newsletter 5

²⁶Madhu Sarin, 1998.

It must be acknowledged that JFM created new paths in advocating for the rights of communities in protecting forest lands and extending usufructs rights.²⁷ However, the role that JFM was allowed to play in the states was not consistent. 'In many states (AP, Karnataka, Orissa, UP and Chhattisgarh) the Forest Departments have used JFM for planting disputed cultivated lands with trees to convert them into state forest lands. Many of the shifting cultivators in AP and Orissa have uprooted such JFM plantations to revert to shifting cultivation. In Mangara village in Koraput district (Orissa), the villagers burnt a JFM teak plantation created on their shifting cultivation land. Clearly, JFM in such areas is meaningless until the tenurial status of the land itself has been clarified and forest dwellers' livelihoods protected.'²⁸ Despite this lack of consistency, and going by various reports, JFM projects, several of which were funded by multilateral agencies, have had positive outcomes. In some states JFM projects have even enjoyed successful involvement of women in forest governance.

But at a larger level, JFM has also been severely critiqued for its insensitivity to the diversity of gender contexts. In a three-state study of JFM (Orissa, Madhya Pradesh and the Uttarakhand region of Uttar Pradesh), Madhu Sarin forcefully argues, 'JFM in all the three states studied assumes that villagers need to be "motivated" to protect forests in accordance with the Forest Department's vision even when this implies destruction of existing livelihoods of the poorest. The programmes have assumed that local people require monetary (in two states with the help of World Bank loans) or timber incentives to "participate" in state-defined management priorities. In the process, institutional arrangements producing relatively more accountable community leadership—dependent on facilitating consensus-based decisions (within the constraints of increasing stratification and unequal power within villages)—are being replaced by male village elites interested in increasing their personal power by allying with department staff.'²⁹ Commenting on gender contexts in JFM, N.C. Saxena is forthright in saying, 'Most JFM committees are defunct now or at least have not benefited women to the desired extent. Some of the constraints to women's formal participation in JFM and their exclusion from the decision-making process are rooted in their traditional role, social and cultural barriers.'³⁰ Arguably, what has limited the sustainability of JFM is its project-based design, which ignores the need for its continued relevance beyond the time-frame of the projects, and in doing so, undermines the involvement of traditional forest groups and vests greater control in forest departments.³¹

The implementation of FRA has proved to be a knotty process replete with hurdles. The report of the Joint Committee of Ministry of Environment and Forests (MoEF)-Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA), on Forest Rights Act Implementation and Future Policy talks about the lack of preparedness and trained staff for the implementation of FRA. 'Most states have concentrated almost entirely on implementing the provisions for individual forest rights (IFRs) ...As per the statistics available on the MoTA website, against a total of 30.05 lakh claims filed by 31 October 2010 in the country, about 29 lakh (98 %) are IFR claims. About 83% of these claims have been disposed of, and 35% (10 lakh) claims have been approved, with titles issued for most of them. The overall progress is clearly significant. But some states (such as Jharkhand) have lagged behind in terms of both getting a plausible number of claims and in processing the received claims. The number of claims processed is

²⁷Under JFM, 'Those protecting are to be given usufructs like grasses, lops and tops of branches, non-timber forest produce, and a portion of the proceeds from the sale of trees when they mature. This varies from 20 to 100 per cent of the timber sold. The order exhorts the state Forest Departments to take full advantage of the expertise of committed voluntary agencies for building up meaningful people's participation in protection and development of degraded forest lands.' N.C. Saxena, 2012, Women's Rights to Forest Spaces, p. 24.

²⁸Madhu Sarin, 2005, p.14

²⁹Madhu Sarin, et.al 2003, Devolution as a Threat to Democratic Decision-making in Forestry? Findings from Three States in India, Overseas Development Institute, UK, p 57

³⁰N.C. Saxena, 2012, Women's Rights to Forest Spaces, p.32

³¹Ibid.

very low in Gujarat, Jharkhand and Tamil Nadu... The progress of implementation of the Community Forest Rights (CFRt) under FRA is abysmally low.³² Yet it is acknowledged that `...against the tide of poor implementation, there are a number of cases of innovative, pro-active moves by civil society organizations'.³³ In many instances, 'civil society groups have been strong enough to demand gram sabhas at a hamlet level, arguing that the panchayat is a large and political institution. This is converse to cases where groups are not active. Here, gram sabhas have been constituted at a panchayat level.'³⁴

³¹Ibid

³²Government of India, 2010, 'Manthan' See Executive Summary

³³Ibid., p.12

³⁴Kalpavriksh, Newsletter 5.

PART 2

Field Realities

The States of Jharkhand and Assam

Located in eastern India, the states of Jharkhand and Assam are known for their vast tracts of thick forest cover that houses well known wildlife sanctuaries and reserve forests. Some of the well-known adivasi communities such as Santhals, Mundas, Oraons, Ho and Kharia have inhabited these thick forests for centuries with their unique community management and livelihood systems. Jharkhand, formerly part of the eastern state of Bihar is also a young state and was formed on 15 November 2000.

The rich and diverse mineral and forest resources of Jharkhand have been aggressively exploited by government agencies, corporations and multinationals. In the process, while the bio-diverse forests and mineral resources have beefed up the pockets of many players, forest communities have been progressively alienated from their lands and even left behind by mainstream development. This is considered a primary reason for the growing naxal insurgency and influence in the region, especially in many tribal districts, which has further altered the socio-political fabric of the state.

Located to the south of the eastern Himalayas, the advantage of Assam is its location. The state is enclosed by the mighty Brahmaputra and the Barak river valleys along with the Karbi Anglong and the North Cachar Hills. Along with other northeastern states, Assam boasts of a past tradition of robust jhumming, and community forest management by numerous tribal communities. Being the gateway to the northeastern region, Assam is home to many migrants from the northeastern states, neighbouring states of Jharkhand and Bihar and even Bangladesh. Several areas of Assam are also under the Sixth Schedule. Assam too has been a late entrant to mainstream development. Because of insurgency by various groups that has racked the state for decades; the state of Assam has a strong military presence which has been seriously critiqued by civil society organizations and women's groups.

Numerous Categories of Land

For the outsider, the numerous categories of land in the forests are bewildering. At one end are forest regions with jhum farming which is known to have grown 15 to 60 different species of crops, especially in northeastern India; at the other end lie agro-forested areas with settled agriculture, village commons, reserve forests which house wildlife sanctuaries and what I understood as the most interesting Khutt Katti³⁵ lands in Jharkhand.

³⁵Khutt Katti means one who cleared the forest for habitation.

The adivasi of Jharkhand and central India remained outside the pale of the state until the British regime. Many were secondary states or what came to be known as jungle states. It was the British who began to clear pockets of these forests to expand settled agriculture (which was an alien concept for forest-dwelling communities) for ship-building and railways. When they cut timber, the British also had a policy of replacing it with plantations. For logging and plantation, forest dwelling communities were brought in and were settled in what came to be known as tongia villages in reserve forests. In their direct rule, the British did not include these villages in their surveys.

In Jharkhand region when there was an uprising under Birsa Munda, a reputed tribal leader known for his bravery, the British government reconciled with him by giving over 446 Mundari Khut Katti villages under the Chota Nagpur Tenancy Act. Even today, there is no tax levied in these villages. These villages pay what is called a chanda or tribute. The Khut katti villages are now reduced to 156 due to non-implementation and gradual encroachment of these lands by outsiders (Samar Basu Mullick, leader of the, Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement).³⁷

Encroached Lands: Dilemma of Exclusion and Loss of Identity

The most contested category seems to be what the forest departments term as the encroached lands which have seen evictions or the threat of evictions. In fact, the Report of the National Committee on Forest Rights Act, 2010 admits, 'The FRA stipulates that forest-dwelling STs (Scheduled Tribes) and OTFDs (Other Traditional Forest Dwellers) are not to be evicted or removed from forest land under their occupation till the process of recognition and verification of their rights is complete. During field trips, the committee members found that this provision of the Act has been violated, and Forest Officials have summarily evicted such occupants in some places.'³⁶

What is of particular concern is the state of uncertainty and ignorance of the people who inhabit these lands. This uncertainty is further compounded in the case of adivasis who have migrated to other states. In Assam, for example, these migrant adivasis (Mundas, Oraons and Kharias from Jharkhand) have even lost their tribal identity. The

story of these adivasis, now popularly termed tea tribes, and listed under other backward classes, as well as those of the Garo in Karbi Anglong district in Assam are illustrative of the attendant issues.

Village Amlonga in the State of Assam

Village Amlonga, situated along with several other villages such as Kalabil, Milanpur, Nowgaon, Tengabari, Dangsarag and Doyalpur in Sonitpur district in the state of Assam is part of an estimated 450 hectares of forest area that stretches towards the state of Arunachal Pradesh. This forest region has been home to adivasi communities that include Mundas, Oraons, Kharias, Santhals and others with origins in the neighbouring state of Jharkhand for many decades. The once thick forests, however, have receded where now two tribes, Santhals and Bodos, live at the foot of the green hills. Although categorized as encroached, the value of land in this region appears to have grown. I was told that a few outsiders bought the adivasi land in Amlonga (as much as 300 bighas) recently at throwaway prices (Rs 2000/ per bigha³⁸). The adivasis have now been alerted to the loss they have incurred and are aware that they should not sell their precious land.

The adivasis of Amlonga and their counterparts in other villages in this region are an orphaned lot, with many denials bogging them. The forest department treats them, like elsewhere in the state of Assam, as other backward classes (OBC) and their lands as encroached. As a result their lands have no titles which put them out of the purview of any development schemes. Block development officials are quick to point out that since these villages are not listed under the Panchayat, they cannot enjoy even the basic amenities made available by the state. Yet, villagers I interacted with can get resident certificates from the Panchayat office of Ghormara, and predictably politicians have ensured that they are part of the voters' list. Amlonga has no electricity or bore wells and the poor in the village are denied even

³⁶Government of India, 2010, 'Manthan', p.12.

³⁷Since my visit, more violence has erupted in this region at the cost of great human suffering.

³⁸An unit of an acre, size of which varies across the region.

ration cards under the public distribution system (PDS). When asked about the source of drinking water, women say, 'Ponds are the only source of water for us. The water can be very muddy some times. We try to filter the muddied water by putting stone, charcoal and leaves in our water pots. Very recently, at the initiative of People's Action for Development (PAD, a local NGO), the local MLA and MP were persuaded to visit the area (February 2011) and they went back having made promises of bringing electricity, water, community centre and roads. Following this an electric post has come up in the village.

A majority of the adivasis here have small holdings which may range between one or two bighas to six or seven bighas of land where they grow rain-fed one-crop paddy and vegetables. Neatly kept, most of their cow-dung plastered homesteads are built with bamboo and wild grass. The majority of the households have a couple of bamboo shrubs which they use for their household needs and to fence off their lands. While the better off have bamboo roofs lined with plastic sheets, many homesteads are covered with wild grass which they bring from the forests. It is common to find a couple of goats or chickens in these homes and for those who can afford it, a cow or a couple of pigs (not many have cows though). Their marginal farming has been aided by the many shallow-ponds in the village which help in watering their lands. There is scope for deepening the ponds for improved recharge and promoting fisheries. But many of them go dry once summer arrives. It is against this complete absence of development that these adivasi households pursue their livelihoods and take their produce to markets in Rangapur which is a few miles away. Apart from this, most of the women go to neighbourhood tea gardens for wage work, getting Rs 50 or Rs 60 per day. In winter, the women of this village walk nearly two hours to the neighbourhood hills to collect fuel wood for the entire year. When asked if forest officials harass them, the women reply, 'If we take dry wood which are about to fall, they do not bother us. Sometimes, they take away our tools which are used for cutting wood and harass us, but we run away. If our men are with us we are not fearful. Often other women are not there for us to go in groups.'

The only institutional face of Amlonga is the 15 Self Help Groups (SHGs)³⁹ promoted by PAD. Although functioning well with standard savings of Rs 20 to 50 per month—a norm that runs across most of Assam, no bank loans have come their way as they have no collaterals to provide. Because of the promises made by the local MLA, women are hopeful that they can open bank accounts with the State Bank of India. Although there are a couple of youth who thought of starting a youth council, nothing much has happened. PAD has made the first move to form a cooperative with a share-capital of Rs 300 per member which women speak of with pride.

Indeed, women are the hardworking face of Amlonga as they combine many activities to keep their household economy going. Many women and girl-children

Eviction threats and consequent violence is what is feared the most. During my visit to Tezpur in Assam, I kept hearing about the horrifying violence against Santhali tribals in Lungsung forest of Kokhrajar (where I was planning to visit) during conversations. The district of Kokhrajar with its rich forest stretch is the headquarters of the Bodo Territorial Council. Believed to be instigated by militants, there was an incident on 30 and 31 October 2010, as a result of which 1,500 people of 57 villages of Santhalis in Lungsung Forest of Kokhrajar got burnt (including one small child who got badly burnt and died later). Four NGOs jumped into action – they surveyed the site of eviction; held a conference on 6 November; met the opposition leader, the former Chief Minister; met Ramdayal Mundal of the National Advisory Council to give wide media coverage and challenged the government. While these NGOs got some small international funding for relief, till today, the state has not responded to anguish of the targeted adivasi communities, mostly santhals. The adivasis could not take legal action as they have no titles to their lands. When 300 people entered the village to gut their houses, it was the women who bore the brunt of the violence as their men were away. These Santhalis are in need of much support to revive their homes and livelihoods.(As told to me by Rev. Pradeep Kawa, Diaconical Board of Social Services, who went all out to support the Santhalis.)

³⁹Self-Help Group is savings and credit group with its own savings and credit mechanisms which engages in joint income-generating activities.

go to neighbourhood tea gardens (multinational) to earn Rs 71 and rations of three kilograms of rice and wheat each per day – here they work from 8 in the morning to 4 in the evening. Do women work harder than men? Juliana Gudia (she thinks she is 45 but looks like she could be in the early 30s) who is not yet married and lives with her parents along with her brother admits with certain reluctance that except for ploughing and clearing the fields, she does much of the work in the fields. During plantation time, after doing the household work which she does from four in the morning, she is in the fields by eight. While her father and brother do the ploughing, she does much of the work on their three bighas of pond-irrigated land. She sows seeds, transplants, winnows the paddy and goes to the weekly markets to sell the vegetables they grow. Does she enjoy her work? 'It is difficult work but who else will do this work. I have come to enjoy what I do?' Juliana says that all women, including her, want to increase their earnings. 'We try to increase our yields by putting manure but this is not sufficient.'

Several of the women in the SHGs are aware that they can cultivate tea on their small patches of land and earn more. One of the women I spoke to remarked that she went to see the tea that is being successfully grown by women in Sonajuri. Berna who has a five-year-old daughter says, 'I have 10 bighas of land where I cultivate only vegetables from the water ponds, which I sell three times a week in the weekly haat (market).' When nudged she is ready to admit that she makes Rs1,500 a month from her vegetables and is saving money to get into tea plantation. Berna works in the private tea garden too. Many who were interacting with me admitted to having worked in tea gardens. They know how to cultivate tea, but what they need is capital. Several women in Amlonga are now raising tea nurseries.

Women do go to the forests which is at some distance—4–5km—only to collect fuel-wood and whatever they find by way of wild grass (if needed), and vegetables such as sweet potato, greens and herbs. So long as they collect dry-wood, the adivasis living at the foot of the hills do not object, the women observed.

As I transected the agricultural fields of Amlonga, I ran into a larger farm where an elderly adivasi couple along with their two married sons are rearing an organic model farm, growing paddy along with an impressive variety of vegetables, apart from raising areca-nut and betel vine. The family has developed a nursery of 1,000 tea saplings for cultivation of tea at a later stage. 'We do not waste even a small patch of land. The paddy from their land is stored in a stilted granary in front of the household.' Cyril, one of the sons is proud to say that they have remained self-sufficient and only buy bare essentials such as clothing, sugar and soap from outside. Cyril has been active in his support to the 15 SHGs, the cooperative that is being set up in the region, and is keen to contribute to the growth of Amlonga.

In Dialogue with Florence Minz, Development Activist⁴⁰

Would you say that women have a role in protecting forests here?

When women go to the forests they only do so to collect dry-wood and few other minor forest produce that come their way. They are not the destroyers of forests. The timber mafia and militant groups have caused much damage to the forest cover and forests have depleted and receded in this region. Women have a big role in keeping their homestead gardens and marginal lands green with vegetable cultivation,

⁴⁰As a development activist, Florence Minz has worked with People's Action for Development and has started the Adivasi Joint Action for Development & Aid-AJAD Aid, another local NGO.

bamboo shrubs, areca nut and betel vines. All this has nurtured the biodiversity here.

Is there fear of eviction of Adivasis in this region?

We hear that this entire stretch may come under eviction which is worrying. To stay any eviction, we are asking the adivasis to grow tea which is now happening in a small way. The larger issue that we are contending with is our campaign to be listed as scheduled tribes, which is eluding us. The term tea-tribes—a nomenclature that was thrust upon us because the British brought us from Jharkhand to work in tea plantations, is a misnomer. We are clubbed under this category along with several others such as Bengalis and Telugus

which is not right. The adivasis in Assam are estimated to be 20 per cent of the state population and yet we have been categorized as other backward classes (OBCs) or most other backward classes (MOBCs).

There is a broad-based movement of the adivasis in Assam to regain their identity and be listed as scheduled tribes. The All Adivasi Students Association of Assam has been actively campaigning for their cause. 'Why should we alone be called tea tribes while we have our own identity as adivasis that hail from the state of Jharkhand?' they ask. The government is not willing to accept us as adivasis as they think we are migrants and fear that if they concede our demands, others who are working in other sectors would make similar claims. Because of our lack of identity, we have been denied many rights that are due to us. Those of us who have land have not been given permanent title deeds. In Sonajuri alone, 80 per cent have only temporary titles. We do not have any quotas in government jobs. We are unhappy that we have lost our original identity.' You will notice the interest and commitment of the student leaders in fighting for the rights of the adivasi communities. They are constantly exploring new strategies and struggling for answers..

How good is credit access to adivasis?

The banks are cautious and do not believe that adivasi women could be credit-worthy. Also adivasis do not have pattas or assets that can be shown for collaterals. The SHGs in tea-plantations are not functioning well because women are illiterate and do not have time for regular savings. We are told that those SHGs that are promoting crafts and weaving in other parts of Assam are doing better. Women can only small-save (Rs 20–50). Women are able perform better with small entrepreneurial activities in fisheries, piggery, etc.

Financial institutions like NABARD, of course can do a lot. But they do not seem to go beyond training and are not sure. We do have some NGOs that have emerged as microfinance institutions. PAD is now promoting cooperatives to improve livelihoods.



Betel Vine in the tribal homestead, Sonajuri, Assam

What are the vulnerabilities of the Adivasi economy?

Many. Those who grow paddy are barely able to subsist. There are no support prices for the many rice varieties that are grown. Much of the rice is used for household consumption and has remained a subsistence crop. Our farming is bullock-driven. We do have government schemes for mini-tractors but you will not see them in the fields because they are being diverted elsewhere. During monsoon, there is work, for both wage-earners and those who are engaged in own-production on family farms. But once the monsoon is over, there is scarcity. The public distribution system of the government gives only 25 kilograms of rations in most places. and in many places the system has become a victim of political patronage.

As long as tea plantations prosper, women have wage employment. There is a big multinational tea company in this region and a shadow study some years ago apprehended that they might get into contract farming for jatropha-biofuel. We understand that this company has set up a bio-fuel plant.

Tribal Garos in Karbi Anglong District of Assam

The history and present predicament of the matrilineal Garos (refugees from the former East Pakistan) in district Karbi Anglong in the state of Assam, a prominent tribe in the neighbouring state of Meghalaya—makes for a curious case. `When they (Garos), fled to Assam in 1947, the settlement officer (SO) and the sub-divisional officer of Lanka in Nagaon district had allotted them land at Kharikhana and Kharikhong, but no records were maintained. In 1953, they were asked to vacate because it was going to be included in the Kharikhana fuel reserve. After objections from settlement officer and people's protests, 500 families were allotted land in Rangkhang reserve in the present Karbi Anglong, but these lands are not regularized. After several eviction threats, in its Judgement of 22 February 2005, the Court ordered the state and the Karbi Anglong administration not to disturb them till they considered their application objectively.⁴¹ The estimated number of Garos in Karbi Anglong in 2005 was 10,000 and has increased since. While most have established their livelihoods in agriculture and forestry, the Garos are weighed down by the fact that they have no legal ownership to their lands.

`In 1982, we were given eviction notice and when just five days were left for our eviction we had to run to MPs, MLAs and the Chief Minister to get help. A sympathetic Karbi leader advised us to go to court. We then joined the All India Garo Union at Shillong in the neighbourhood state of Meghalaya and were advised by the General Secretary to stay put as he argued that Garos are adivasis and cannot be evicted. Our case in the High Court in 2005 went in our favour and the High Court asked the administration not to disturb us. But the tragedy is we still do not have permanent settlement of our land. At the instance of the Garo Union we conducted a survey of our lands without arriving at any consensus', reported a Garo teacher, present in my meetings with members of several SHGs. With the passage of time, internal dissensions leading to confusion have added to their travails.

Although the Garos are part of the Autonomous Council of Karbi Anglong, which falls under the VIth Schedule, the autonomous council of Karbi Anglong district views Garos as outsiders. Unless the members of the autonomous council permit it, no development schemes can reach them. Nor are the Garos in positions of authority to exercise their power.

⁴¹Walter Fernandes, 'Rebuild Strategy on Green Belt', Telegraph, 21 April 2005.

Besieged by many denials, 80 per cent of the Garos are engaged in wage labour. Most of their youth and men migrate to neighbouring Meghalaya to work mostly in the coal fields while women generally stay back. For the resource-poor women, promotion of SHGs appears to have brought hope and raised their aspirations. Savings, as elsewhere in Assam are very small and not uniform—ranging from Rs 20 to Rs 50 per month. Some of the groups have managed to get subsidized loans of Rs 25,000 as first tranche with the hope of getting more credit. With small means, women are indeed eager to improve their earnings. But their aspirations are vastly truncated by lack of access to wage work, low wages and limited access to government schemes.

Discussions with Members of 7 Garo Self help Groups

Most of the women I interacted with are in wage labour with poor wages and irregular employment. Because there isn't sufficient work, they said that their men go to Meghalaya to work mostly in coal mines. Every now and then, it is common to see two or three vehicles taking their men to Meghalaya. Garo women also worry that men's work in the coal mines is hard and risky.⁴²

The women I spoke to said that several of them have marginal holdings that may range between 2 to 6 bighas. There is a segment that is landless and is quite impoverished, and hence dependent on wage labour. A few have larger holdings. They bemoaned that they are not able to access most of the government schemes. Nor are they aware of the ongoing schemes. As a result of the promotion of SHGs, several banks have given them loans. One member said that her SHG has a lakh of rupees with which she is eager to promote a cooperative.

Getting regular employment is a major concern for these Garo women. Some of them get work in NREGA projects but for less than 20 days at a time. But what seems to concern them the most is the absence of title deeds to even the small landholdings they are holding on to. Some of the more articulate women said that they are determined to earn more and change their livelihoods. These women further expressed helplessness about the fact that Garos have no representation in district governance which is dominated by the dominant Karbi tribe. They see, quite accurately, that it is this lack of political power that continues to pull them down in all walks of their lives.

⁴²In June this year, there was a general unrest in Shillong following the death of coal miners while working in the mines.

Contributing to Economies and Changing Livelihood Contexts

While the vast forest sector offers multiple livelihoods for women and their households, what is not taken into account is the contribution they have been making to the national exchequer. This is especially so with regard to NTFPs which are a major revenue earner. It is quite striking that as many as 3,000 NTFP species in the country provide livelihood opportunities especially for forest dwellers and the poor living adjacent to forests.⁴³ NTFPs alone are said to provide approximately 40 per cent of total official forest revenues, 55 per cent of forest-based employment, and 70 per cent of the total exports from forest products.⁴⁴

In India, revenue reporting on forest products is at best scattered in state and central government reports and location- and regional-specific studies. There is of course little that can be said of gender reporting that can nuance women's contribution to the local, regional and national economies. It is only when one begins to browse through a small number of reports and studies that one realizes the substantial revenues that go to government coffers on account of women's economic pursuits. This lack of recognition has denied women of the many rights they could and should claim for their livelihood improvement.

Women's livelihood stake in NTFPs is most telling if we go by a few pertinent observations: i) three times as many women as men are involved in gathering of NTFPs; ii) processing of NTFPs is exclusive to women; iii) twice as many women as men are involved in marketing of NTFPs; iv) sal leaf platemaking is mostly done by women; v) women do about 75 per cent of the marketing of mushrooms, fruits and mahua flowers; and vi) gum collection from Gujarat forests is generally done by women. In just one state, i.e., Madhya Pradesh, NTFPs primarily collected by women were valued at more than \$700 million annually (World Watch 1991 (quoted from Tewari and Campbell, 1995) However, the collectors get only 19 per cent of the sale price as against 45 per cent by government as royalty and 36 per cent by contractors/middlemen (Chambers et al, 1989). The women collecting gum in Gujarat get only one-third of the market price (Nanavaty, 1996). The wholesale price of NTFPs in West Bengal is several times the price paid to the collectors (Palit, 1993).⁴⁵

The paradox is the very mismatch between women's impressive contribution to economies and their continuing poverty. The returns on the rich collection from forests are low and volatile. Regulatory practices have not allowed women to add value to some of the NTFPs and become entrepreneurs. For example, bamboo which women can use for various livelihood pursuits, is classic example, 'A common problem faced by bamboo workers is that stocking bamboo and selling bamboo

⁴³Prema Gera, 2002, 'Women's Role and Contribution to Forest-Based Livelihoods', Sub-Group on Sex Disaggregated Data of the IAWG on Gender and Development, HDRC.

⁴⁴Quoted in N.C.Saxena, 2003, 'Livelihood Diversification and Non-Timber Forest Products in Orissa: Wider Lessons on the Scope for Policy Change?' Working Paper 223, Overseas Development Institute, London, UK.

⁴⁵Pratima S. Jattan, 2003 'Gender Issues in Participatory Forest Management in India', Paper submitted to the XIth World Forestry Congress, Quebec, Canada and see also N.C. Saxena, 2003, 'Livelihood Diversification'.

products requires permissions from the Forest Department. Freeing the artisans from such constraints can itself leads to widening the base of entrepreneurial activities in the village, as these value added activities can be undertaken in their cottages itself... Laws restricting free movement of NTFPs, even when they are not nationalised, bring uncertainty in market operations, and inhibit gatherers from maximising returns to production'⁴⁶ Again forests and their resources themselves have diminished. For example, the green fodder that women once depended on for their livestock has become a scarce resource.

Forests have also become commercial sites for timber, rubber, eucalyptus and other revenue-yielding species. Growth of usufruct-based trees such as neem, mahua, sal, tamarind or fuel or fodder species now enjoy only secondary importance. Based on facts and critical analyses one can make a strong argument for the fact that state policies have systematically taken away forest-dwellers' access and rights of collection to usufruct species with their revenue-yielding potential going up. Monopolistic policies have leased minor forest products to the state-owned corporations, cooperatives, joint sector companies and private parties. State departments have been fixing the administered prices of forest products. What is more, policy measures have further restricted collectors and growers from adding value to several forest products, storage and transportation of forest produce.

A much-cited illustration is that of the Supreme Court ban on timber cutting in northeastern states which without offer of alternative sources has left yet another trail of displacement due to the cessation of this age-long traditional livelihood pursuit. In the wake of the ban on timber, government subsidies have only resulted in diversification of occupations and in commercial pursuits. The commentary of Barik and Darlong in their five-district study in Meghalaya (with matrilineal Khasi predominance) speaks volumes, '... where most forestlands were privately owned ..., particularly in Khasi Hills, the forest land owners changed to limestone miners and charcoal makers, defeating the very objective of Supreme Court intervention (ban on timber cutting) aimed at forest conservation and providing sustainable livelihood to forest dependent poor.'⁴⁷

Changing Contexts

The FRA has finally freed the NTFPs from state controls. As a result the many state cooperatives are now challenged to compete in the open market. Poorly governed and inefficiently run, already, the margins of state-owned cooperatives appear to have declined. The official view is that forest dwellers would emerge poorer if they are left to fend for themselves in the ruthless open markets. It would be wise, as a few aver that the state-owned cooperatives that have the infrastructure to source forest produce be appointed as their agents. Interestingly, the Report of the National Committee on Forest Rights Act, December 2010, also argues, '...de-nationalisation per se may not remove all market constraints which inhibit a gatherer in realising the full value of his labour. There should be price-based aggressive buying of NTFPs by state agencies, as has been done for wheat and rice. There should be minimum support prices for NTFPs on the lines of minimum support prices for agricultural produce. Aggressive buying of NTFPs by state agencies alone can break the dominance of the wholesale traders and their linkages with the village level market. The nature of produce and actors involved makes it obvious that without

⁴⁶N.C. Saxena, 2010, pp. 13–14.

⁴⁷S. K. Barik, and V. T. Darlong, Undated, 'Natural Resource Management Policy Environment in Meghalaya Impacting Livelihood Forest Poor', Centre for International Forestry Research (CIFOR), BOGOR, Indonesia.

government support there can be no justice to forest gatherers. However, government organisations should compete with private trade, and not ask for monopoly.⁴⁸ Forest-dwellers would now have to contend with many players in the market, learn to negotiate the winding market routes to get the best price for their products. In this complex scenario, the question is how well-equipped are women to negotiate market machinations?

State Cooperative Federations

With controls over NTFPs being freed up, the many state cooperatives that have controlled the sourcing and pricing of several forest products have come under stress. In Jharkhand, for example, there are two state federations that source and market NTFPs. The Jharkhand State Forest Development Corporation (JSFDC) has been the sole agent for the collection of Kendu leaves since 2007. The other is the Jharkhand State Minor Forest Produce Cooperative Development and Marketing Federation Limited (JAMFCOFED) which sources the rest of the minor forest produce. The Jharkhand State Forest Development Corporation (JSFDC) is a three-tier body with a Managing Director and two General Managers at the state level, followed by six divisional offices, four range officers and 4,800 village pharis (hamlets) that collect kendu leaves—mostly from women, elders and children. In turn, the collected produce is sold to various agents who send the leaves to different parts of the country. The rates are decided by the government and it is illegal for collectors to sell kendu leaves outside of this corporation. Jharkhand's quota is estimated to be just 20–30 per cent of the national total while MP and Chattisgarh's collection is reported to be around 50 per cent of the national total.

Would the self-rule under Gram Sabha (village assembly) change the equations of marketing bodies such as the JSFDC? This is beginning to happen. Already, the collection of kendu leaves in JSFDC appears to have dipped by 20–30 per cent. But the thinking within the corporation is that the local governing bodies are not suitably equipped to deal with the enormity of NTFP transactions which needs managerial capacities. 'It would be good if the local governing institutions appoint JSFDC to act as their agents as we have the marketing knowhow and the infrastructure. Otherwise, the Gram Panchayats could well succumb to the corrupt culture of exploitative agents,' commented a senior official of JSFDC.

It is paradoxical that Jharkhand accounts for 3.4 per cent of the total forest cover of the country and ranks 10th among all states.⁴⁹ Almost 81 per cent of forests in Jharkhand are protected forests as against the national average of 31 per cent. Jharkhand has 29 per cent of its area under forest cover as against 23 per cent in India as a whole. Jharkhand's poverty ratio was 44 per cent as against the national average of 26 per cent in 2000. Of the 49 per cent who account for the rural poor in the state, 75 per cent are people who live either inside or on the periphery of the forests.⁵⁰

Need for People-Friendly NTFP policy

Dialogue with Ratnesh Chaturvedi, Managing Director, JAMFCOFED⁵¹

What has been your experience of working in this forested region?

My understanding of tribal livelihoods comes from many years of close interface with forest communities. I have walked through the hamlets and villages of adivasis

⁴⁸Government of India, 'Manthan', 2010, p.177.

⁴⁹Madhya Pradesh has the highest forest cover accounting for almost 11.2% of the total forest in the country followed by Arunachal Pradesh (10.01), Chhattisgarh (8.25), Orissa (7.5) and Maharashtra (7). See Jharkhand Statistics Profile, 2006

⁵⁰Sudhir Prasad and Ratnesh-Chaturvedi, 'Poverty Alleviation in Jharkhand through Forestry (MFP)', Undated

⁵¹Jharkhand State Minor Forest Produce Cooperative Development and Marketing Federation Ltd (JAMFCOFED) is a three-tier state-level marketing federation which sources and markets minor forest products on cooperative lines. According to R.K. Chaturvedi, Managing Director, JAMFCOFED, 64, cooperative societies are affiliated to it.

in Jharkhand for many years, understanding their way of life, mindsets and their concerns. Looking at their houses I can tell the tribe they hail from. I see myself as their friend and well-wisher. There is enormous scope in minor forest produce increasing the earning potential of these adivasis.

How do we see the role of traders and outsiders in forest economies?

The revenue capacity of minor forest produce in Jharkhand is anywhere between Rs 500–800 crores.⁵² But only Rs 250–300 crores reached the villagers. The minor forest produce is a buyer's and not a seller's market. With varying margins, it is the trader who makes the profits. Traders will always be there. They will purchase even half a kilogram of forest produce. You will find them sitting on charpais (native cots) in every weekly haat (market). The trader is the consumer store of the villagers—bartering, forcing villagers to sell, and working towards a gain in every transaction he makes.

Apart from honey, medicinal plants, gum, resins, herbs, we have listed 27 minor forest products from which forest-dwellers earn an income throughout the year. Some of the forest species such as mahua, sal, chiraunji, and lac trees are great revenue yielders. Chiraunji, for example, is a high-priced product fetching as much as Rs 400–500 per kilogram. Villagers often exchange chiraunji for salt and rice.

Would you say that NTFPs are optimally utilised?

Not all trees are used optimally. For example, only 40–50 per cent of host plants of lac are used until now. Non-toxic and eco-friendly, lac (*Laccifer lacca*) is a natural resin secreted by an insect that is posted on host trees (Kusum which lives up to 100 years) within 72 hours of its secretion. Lac has many uses such as coating in fruit, pharmaceuticals, toys, chocolate, jewellery, sealing and it is even used for industrial purposes. India which once enjoyed a lead in international exports of lac has now just 18 per cent share. While harvesting lac from the branch of the tree, the branch should never be cut at its root so that the branch renews itself. Many, especially newcomers are unaware and need to be trained. 500,000 tribals who were once dependent on lac are now reduced to 50,000. Outsiders who do not know how to grow and harvest lac are also destroying lac trees. 'Villagers have to be trained for increasing lac production. Most of these products (MFPs) are wasted for lack of post-harvesting technology in clearing, packing, storage and processing... mainly tribals are engaged in the collection of leaves, barks, gums, roots, flowers, fruits and entire plants from the forest areas.'⁵³

'Sal seed ...can provide nearly Rs 40 to Rs 50 crore to the villagers but due to lack of processing technologies and marketing outlets, people no longer collect these seeds. Tamarind production is about 2 lakh MT at a minimum price of Rs 6 per kilogram and will give Rs 120 crore to the tribals. Small processing units like deseeding of tamarind, and making tamarind paste will give jobs to people. SHGs can run these units. The flower of Palas (fire of the forest) is very good non-toxic natural colour. A processing unit can be established and the dry colour can be obtained which is used in carpet industries. A variety of medicinal plants (such as musali, chiraita, mulaithi, gudmar, pathar-chur, tulasi, anwa, bel, brahmi, satawari, jatamanshi) are grown in the forest areas but its unscientific collection, poor knowledge and non-availability of markets means people being benefited only on a small scale while its scope is unlimited. Tribals of Jharkhand cure themselves with the

⁵²One crore is 10 million.

⁵³Sudhir Prasad and Ratnesh Chaturvedi, 'Poverty Alleviation in Jharkhand through Forestry (MFP)', Undated

medicinal plants. This knowledge is not getting transmitted to the next generation. Therefore, a survey and listing of these plants is urgently required. There are many forest species which are long-living. Again, the sal tree which the villagers celebrate in their annual festival of sarhul regenerates itself. You will find that women never cut down the sal tree. Mahua takes many years to fruit. Unfortunately, however, road development is leading to mahua trees being cut down.

Would a Policy on Forest Produce Benefit the Adivasis?

It is unfortunate that the state of Jharkhand has no state policy on minor forest produce. We do have a bamboo mission, though. Traders take advantage of the advance tendering that we have to do and play with our price to their benefit, increasing the price by 5 to 10 per cent. To give an example, in 2009, we procured tamarind at Rs 8 per kilogram and sold it Rs13. By 2010, we procured tamarind at Rs 20 but sold it at Rs 22. We have to be quick to respond to these price fluctuations.

Would you comment on the potential of NTFPs?

There is enormous scope in minor forest produce leading to an increase in local earning. But the limitations are many, which include a lack of post-harvesting technologies, poor rural connectivity and storage facility, lack of trust among stakeholders, and shortage of information. As a livelihood policy, gatherers of minor forest produce should be given requisite support in terms of access and availability to credit, training and technologies etc to add value to NTFPs for better margins. Most of the MFPs are also taken away by traders for value additions. The processing plants are outside Jharkhand—Sal extraction plants, medicine factories, producing Chavanprash, etc., are all located outside the state. `The districts of Chatra, Garhwa and Palamu are among the poorest districts of the state but these are the districts which also have the highest forest cover... poverty is directly proportional to the forest cover.'⁵⁴

⁵⁴Sudhir Prasad and Ratnesh Chaturvedi, Undated. Undated. Some of the quotations, given in this interview, are from an unpublished paper by the Mr. Ratnesh Chaturvedi.

Women's Livelihoods: Changes and Continuing Challenges

The advocates of forest-dwelling cultures rightly maintain that indigenous cultures have deteriorated because of the inroads made by the individualistic and commercial culture of the wider society. It is now widely accepted that state initiatives in terms of infrastructure and basic civic amenities have been subprime, leaving forest dwellers among the most neglected sections of society. In contrast, numerous industrial projects have proliferated, especially in the mineral-rich states of the country.

Recurring Droughts and Migration

The subsistence agriculture of forest-dwelling communities has received minimal support. As a result, farm productivity is low and uncertain. Recurring droughts and progressive lowering of the water table has added to their woes as far as farm productivity is concerned. I heard many accounts regular migration of girl children from Jharkhand to Delhi and other cities where there is high demand for domestic service. As one tribal woman bemoaned, 'what could I do when I had not a grain of rice to feed my family; that's when I sent my adolescent daughter to Delhi. I know she is somewhere there but I do not know what she is doing.'

Women's livelihoods are hit the hardest when their lands are no longer productive and their men begin to migrate. In Jharkhand, there are villages where one or two men in each of the tribal households have migrated. 'In many villages you cannot find youth. They have gone away', many women point out. Development projects such as NREGA and other government projects have given the youth

NREGA (irrigation) Project



some employment, and they have also given higher and equal wages to women. But NREGA has over time become a source of patronage and not all villagers are privileged enough to access NREGA job cards. Nor has NREGA been providing the much-promised 100 days of employment.

With men migrating to cities due to problems related to local farming, there is an increase in the number of women-headed households and women's responsibilities in agro-forestry have increased as well. Women who traditionally stayed put within households and in agro-forestry are now seen going to the markets, becoming traders in local markets selling forest produce, and getting into wage labour. But in the midst of all this, forests continue to be their livelihood providers, and forest-dwelling communities, especially the adivasis have held on to their cultural orientations, especially in remote forested regions.

Markets: Neither the knowhow nor the Institutional Identity

The politico-commercial forces of the market have increasingly left women behind on the lowest rung of the economy, as gatherers, wage workers and rarely allowed them to rise to the entrepreneurial category. To begin with, women are seriously handicapped by the lack of information about what is due to them. `...women's rights of access and their right to collection of minor forest produce and tree products are restricted, vague or not known to them. Sharing arrangements in community forestry schemes are ill-defined or not publicized or poorly implemented. There appears to be general reluctance on the part of the government to define clearly what people are to get, at what time and at what price in exchange for the participation expected of them. But participation of the poor and women is improbable unless their benefits are secure.'⁵⁵ As for markets, women's role has also been reduced to one of supply. Women's voice or say is hardly of any consequence in many issues of marketing—be it value addition, pricing, storage, etc. There is a general lack of gender perspectives within state trading bodies where women's role plays no part in decision-making processes.

The marketing segment of forest produce is at present littered with long chains of intermediaries between primary gatherers and end users. This long chain of intermediaries is continuously negotiating complex forces related to seasonality, quality of forest produce, their storage, and fluctuations in demand and production which makes marketing logic very complex. For non-literate women, living in remote regions, the only contact with the market is during the weekly market, or while dealing with traders, shopkeepers and medicine men; all of whom are adept at depressing prices. Cooperatives of gatherers do exist but are few in numbers, and they function with limited skills and competencies. In effect, understanding and negotiating the complex marketing mechanisms is indeed beyond the reach of non-literate women. These women would have to be supported in various different ways, if they are to move up in the value chain and become dynamic players in the market.

Land Rights

Women's rights over land vary across forest-dwelling communities. Where lands are held commonly, women hold integral rights. The matrilineal women in northeastern India are rare exceptions who inherit land rights. Ironically, this practice too

⁵⁵N.C. Saxena, web access

has been changing with new policies which are shifting land ownership patterns. Studies have shown that wherever subsidized state projects for the promotion of forest species such as bamboo and rubber came to be promoted, land traditionally belonging to women has been shifting over to men. This is clearly in evidence in northeastern India where those who have moved away from jhumming have acquired individual rights. The introduction of rubber plantations which ruled that loans and subsidies could only be given to individual owners and heads of families i.e., men also resulted in entitlements going to men.⁵⁶

The trends in women's land rights in Jharkhand is a comment on the prevailing sway of patriarchy. I came across a commentary on the Manki Munda of Ho tribes, Majhi Parha of Santhals and Parha Panchayats of Munda who historically self-governed themselves within a prescribed territory. Oral history of these adivasi communities records that women once enjoyed equal rights to property, but lost them once the patta system (Khattiyans) was introduced by the British which converted common property into private holdings. In its wake, the patriarchal tradition of giving titles to men came into existence. Today, this patriarchal practice relegates women (single, widowed or otherwise) to being only caretakers of ancestral land. Oral history also shows that adivasi women have been exploited through marriage by many outsiders to hijack tribal land.⁵⁷ Even though tribal men too have lost lands owing to their gullible ways, women have lost much more in this way.

The 22 Parha Rajas of Munda tribe who govern their society through a three-tier system resisted the introduction of Panchayat Raj Institutions for fear of losing their traditional power and when at last the PRI elections were held in 2011, in an act of compromise they elected their own representatives. Importantly, the PRI elections made many women ward members. The position of mukhia is now reserved for women, which is expected to increase women's participation in local governance. Yet there is serious resistance to women entering the traditional three-tier governance of several tribes in Jharkhand. It That women should be allowed to enter forest governance is against the deep-rooted patriarchal fabric of tribal societies. Although there are a few initiatives that have included the names of wives in land titles (Khattiyans), the reluctance to do so by adivasi leadership continues.

Discussions with Dayal Kujur

As I travelled through a couple of hamlets in Jharkhand which are entirely surrounded by forests, Dayal Kujur, Issue Facilitator, Diaconical Board of Social Service, shared his insights from his field experience of 18 years in these districts.

How does the land of the adivasis sustain their livelihoods?

Except for a few who may hold 10 or 12 acres and in some rare cases more, the average size of lands in these parts ranges between two to five acres. Our crops are rain-fed and it is this one-crop of paddy along with pulses that provides sustenance and keeps them busy during the rainy season. But for the rest of the year they are dependent on what they get from the jungle (forest). Their livelihoods will definitely be jeopardized if there are no forests left. 30–40 per cent of adivasi households are forest-dependent. But the forests are getting cut down and the produce from the forests itself has reduced many-fold. At the same times, with lands getting divided and fragmented with every successive generation, the importance of forests for livelihoods has only increased.

⁵⁶Melville Pereira, 2005, 'Globalization and Changing Land Relations in the Northeast', Paper Presented at a Seminar on the Impact of Globalization on the Northeast, Tezpur, Himalayan Research Institute, 10–11 March 2005, Web access www.nesrc.org
⁵⁷Outsiders are called *dikhus*—a term that has gained much currency to include wily men wanting to marry adivasi women for land or even multinationals and corporates.

Do women have a major role in agriculture?

Women play a multi-faceted role in agriculture here. They break the hardened soil once men complete the ploughing of the field and manure the land. While men seed the land, women do much of the rest of the work, such as weeding, transplanting, and winnowing, cleaning and storing. But both men and women harvest the paddy. When it comes to vegetable cultivation—women do much of the work—including taking the vegetables to the weekly markets for sale. Most of the paddy and pulses that an adivasi household cultivates are retained for household needs. It is only when they are compelled to do so by drought and so on that some households sell the rice they have cultivated. This is now a reality. Several areas of Jharkhand are now going through a second year of drought which has impoverished the marginal farmers.

Would you say that women are protecting the forests?

They definitely do. You will see women cutting only dry wood for fuel and leaving dry leaves for biomass. When there is illegal felling and traders come in, it is unfortunate that they cut the trunk of the tree which forest-dwellers would never do. Women go regularly and continuously (leaving their homes by four in the morning only to return by evening) into the forests to collect mahua fruit during the months of March and April. Seeing that their own men have just stood by while outsiders have been destroying the forests, in some of my field areas—Kajra village, Kemdara block, Zarra village in Sere block of Chotanagpur district, Loringa, Gamdin in Gumla district—women have decided that they will regularly go in groups to protect the forests.

In what ways have their livelihoods changed?

Women have become mini-traders of forest produce. Earlier, they used to collect forest-produce for their household needs. Now you will see women actively participating in weekly markets—selling forest produce such as mahua, sal-leaf plates, berries (which are rare and expensive), herbs, eggs of red ants (supposed to be very medicinal), vegetables, fruit and fuel-wood. They also sell twigs at Rs 30 a bundle. Women now come in groups to sell rice-beer. They have also learnt to store forest produce so that they can sell them for better margins during the lean season. If there is a railway station within accessible distance, women these days do not hesitate to walk for a couple of hours to get to it so that they can sell their produce for a better price.

Where do you see changes in adivasi women's lives?

When I came to work here way back in the early nineties, women were mostly confined to household work and traditional pursuits in agriculture and collecting trips to the forests. When women joined SHGs in 1999, which was a difficult exercise, we saw many changes when a few of them managed to get projects to construct ponds, check dams and even roads. We have an SHG that has taken up renting tents. A couple of SHGs are managing ration shops. The women are now not afraid of going to the police station, block office or even the office of the district collector. Many who once used their thumbs for signatures have learnt how to sign.

Adivasi women's aspirations for their children have also increased. While they may still want to marry their children young, the age of marriage has gone up and

one sees many girls going to college, which is a great improvement. What we are concerned about is the increasing trend of girls going to Delhi and Bombay for domestic work.

We want women to enter gram sabhas and learn to participate in self-governance. This is happening slowly. Women have begun to attend meetings but not participate. But in bhai sabhas which is the next tier of tribal self-rule, women are still not present.

How can women's livelihoods be improved?

Many things have to happen. In remote villages SHGs and cooperatives can bring women together, make them save and encourage them to start tiny enterprises. Villagers need considerable support by way of storage facilities, technical support and information to make this a reality.

Women's Livelihoods: A Holistic Way of Life

In Conversation with Anima Pushpa Toppo⁵⁸

Pushpa, herself an Oraon, and a strong defender of adivasi rights talks with great passion on the intimate bond adivasis share with the forests and the world of unity their culture represents.

What makes women's lives and livelihoods unique in forest economies?

Without jal (water), jangal (forest), jameen (land) and sansaadan (resources), adivasi livelihoods are not complete. We get our staple food from agriculture which itself is bio-diverse, as we grow different varieties of rice and ragi (millet), some of which grows slowly and others fast. Plough agriculture enables nitrogen fixing which most are unaware of. Because of the forests, our fields are naturally manured and made fertile.

⁵⁸Pushpa Toppo is a management graduate and has been closely working with the Jharkhand Save the Forest Movement for more than a decade. The Movement is working in 70 blocks and has 20,000 registered members.

Women selling rice beer



Forest is our god. When we enter forests, we pray (parthana) by putting leaves, flowers, and small branches in one place as a token to tell our gods that we are partaking a little from the forests and asking for protection. We only take what we need and leave the rest for animals, and when we return to the village, we tell others that there is some fruit or vegetables that they could go and collect from the forest. When we have to light a fire, we do so in a way that it does not destroy the forest species. The adivasi belief system is animistic and naturistic which makes them believe in magic. When rains do not come, they go to the top of the mountains to pray. Their relationship with forests and nature is symbiotic and bio-centric.

It is the forest that provides us with so many things such as fruit, honey, medicinal plants, forest vegetables, birds, eggs and many other life forms for our livelihoods. Our entire health system is intimately connected to forests which are our dispensaries. When our cultivation is over, forests are our food providers. In our traditional systems of collecting medicinal plants, we go to forests early in the morning or in the evening and pull the plant taking one full breath as we do so, or cut only one branch so that plant survives. For us health is important and our food procured from the forests is balanced. It is the women who have the bandar (godown) on everything that is related to livelihood. You will find there is also much sharing. When transplantation of paddy happens, we call everyone to share work and at the end of the day everyone drinks hadia (rice beer) which is prepared by one household. At the end of the day, adivasis sing and dance because for us work is enjoyment.

Again, our marriages are usually between two villages where both the villages gather to celebrate. The shamiana is made from the famous sal tree which is sacred to us. And many rituals during the wedding are evidence of our close links with the forests. Such practices engender unity, but this way of life is now disappearing. We work with joy and break quickly into song and dance. If you want to know about adivasis' life, all that you need to do is to ask them to sing and dance. We are most hospitable when visitors come. When a new bride arrives, all our knowledge is passed on to her. Unfortunately, this knowledge, and its sharing, is now diminishing.

Our symbiotic relationship with nature and forests is in fact reflected in our totems that are records of our lineage. Even our surnames are derived from forest species. My name Toppo means a bird. Similarly Kujur means medicinal creeper and Minj means fish, and we are expected to protect our totem species. It is this association with plants, trees and birds of the forest which is the basis of our spirituality. Again you will find that beyond a few individual rights, it is the community rights that we have always believed in.

Our economy and our living patterns are a way of life. Our systems are not understood by outsiders, and when this unified system is disturbed, many things happen. For example, extensive mining is destroying the environment by bringing down the water table. My village is in a bauxite area. Bauxite actually holds water and you will find that during drought in a bauxite area, the whole area may go dry but a few trees survive because of water from bauxite. The state is mindlessly signing MOUs for mining. Rocks are being broken everywhere. We do not realize that many forests have rich minerals under them which creates forest springs, and they must remain. Because of such extensive mining, the water table in Jharkhand

has come down. We do not have sufficient water for drinking or for our animals. For the last two years, we have had drought.

Do adivasi women enjoy greater freedom? How are they different?

Adivasi women lead a life of dignity. They have lot of adhikar (power) both in their natal and conjugal families which gives them dignity and a dignified existence. When a girl is born there is no sorrow among adivasis. Nor do we have a dowry system. When women get married, they get similar rights as men. When a woman does not marry, the village decides how to protect her.

Women have a major role and responsibility in agriculture and forestry. You will find that it is the women who take the seeds to the fields which is symbolic of their active role in agriculture. Similarly, women take on a majority of roles in marriages while men stand and watch. Because of this dominant role, often they are called witches which actually means 'clever women'. You will also find that in any andolan, women would have played a strong role in Jharkhand.

The complex dynamics of naxals are affecting people's lives. Migration, especially seasonal migration has gone up seriously. If you go to the villages, the young are no longer there. Girls are going to Delhi and other metropolises for domestic work. Often I ask why we are being called to work as domestic workers. Outsiders know that our girls will work as long as they are asked. They know we are trustworthy and dignified people.

How has FRA benefited women?

FRA has a lot to offer. It has come out of an andolan (movement). However, awareness about FRA continues to be low. What comes as a surprise is that even in the implementing organizations, –not everyone is aware of what FRA entails, or has the political will to implement it–particularly the non-tribals. I believe that community forest management will consolidate and establish women's livelihoods, primarily because women are already part of it. FRA gives us rights in community forest management but the forest department does not agree. Our aim is to make people aware and demand our rights wherever we are working. But as regards individual land titles, surveys are being done and individual titles are being given. But not everyone is getting four hectares of land.

It is the gaosabha (gram sabha) where everyone has a share that is the focal point for self-rule. But new members are entering and they are dominating the proceedings. Even when one person from outside comes, they begin to dominate.

SHGs with just 10 to 15 members are dividing the women because those who are poor and cannot save are excluded. This is not good because women's livelihoods can be improved through cooperatives. Take kendu patta. Women can sell kendu profitably through cooperatives. In three of our villages, women who collected kendu leaves, got them sold at three times its price, taking kilos as units, in the wholesale market at Purulia. Initially we did not know the technicalities of grading, etc., but we learnt along the way. Similarly, we have to look at markets for other products such as chiraunji and turmeric. Pushpa affirmed the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and maintained that it gave a moral boost to local communities and women, and has provided enabling platforms to discuss and defend the rights of women in indigenous communities.⁵⁹

⁵⁹The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly during its 61st session at UN Headquarters in New York City on 13 September 2007, recognises the rights of 'indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions, and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations'.

The strength of collectivism, bane of middle men, larger political battle

Interaction with Gladstone Dung Dung, Human Rights Activist, Jharkhand

I live in a village in Simdeg district in Jharkhand. Even today, the source of earning in this village is agro-forestry. When Jharkhand was formed, it came out of a culture of living together. People would go to the forest together. Houses are built through collective effort. Adivasi livelihood systems are based on collectivism. If there is a mango tree, quite often the owner would only partake of some fruit and leave to the rest for others. I feel that collectivism reduces exploitation. For example, if I cannot cultivate, I know I can get others to help me cultivate my lands.

The bane of the tribal economy is the culture of middlemen. Take chiraunji which fetches such good price but you will find traders waylaying women to exchange it for rice. If we can create a mechanism to remove the middlemen, our livelihoods will improve. FRA has freed forest produce from controls. Gram Sabhas can get into entrepreneurial activities and even take projects for mining of minerals. We can do a lot for livelihood improvement.

We have dams which can be used for two crops. But unfortunately eucalyptus is being cultivated instead of fruit-bearing trees. You find that adivasis depend on livestock but we have no investments for animal husbandry. The paradox is that in the midst of the livelihood struggles of the adivasis, the state is said to have signed as many as 104 MOUs for sponge iron, steel, power plants, coal. Government projects such as NREGA do give employment but even here there is exploitation by contractors.

The larger political battle going on in our region is ravaging adivasi livelihoods. During Operation Green Hunt started by the state government in 2010 March aimed at eliminating the Maoists, many villagers have been killed. Paramilitary forces enter villages and destroy whatever people have by way of rice, millets and pulses. Livelihoods are at stake and the youth of our villages are leaving. Many have stopped going to the forests altogether. This is happening in mineral-rich areas (Simdeg district and other areas). Often blocks get closed for as long as two months. Women and children are isolated when this happens. In Singhbhum they are rationing PDS and water to torture people.

SHG-Cooperative Combine

Dialogue with Moni Gogoi⁶⁰

The entry of Self-Help Groups has provided an institutional platform for women to come together and start small savings schemes in the hope of accessing institutional loans. Although a vibrant micro-credit culture has not emerged in the forest sector, women's aspirations to upscale their livelihood pursuits and emerge as entrepreneurs have multiplied. The emergence of SHGs and their federations have also laid visible gender concerns.

Women's vulnerabilities and discrimination are often unseen and not talked about. Women do many things in pursuit of their livelihoods, which is not easy. Tea gardens give employment opportunities but at low wages and demand long hours of work. Along with wage employment, women get into many other activities to increase their earnings. Women and men have to go out to work for their live-

⁶⁰Moni Gogoi is the Secretary of Pro-banchal Nari Jagruti Sangram Samithi (PNJSS) in Sonitpur District, Assam. PNJSS is an initiative of northeastern Diaconal Board of Social Service of Church of North India, operational in six districts. It has 108 SHGs with 6,045 members.

lihoods. As much as 20 per cent of women in our federation go to distant places in search of work. From our estimates, 14 girl-children have gone to Delhi, Kerala and Mumbai for domestic work.

In our area, many girls have stopped going to schools in order to work in tea gardens. Most girls study only up to middle school. Very few opt for higher schooling. Parents are also not interested in their girls' education and are eager to have them married even before they turn 18. Dowry continues to make families poor. The minimum amount required for a wedding is Rs 1,00,000 and many parents either mortgage or sell their property in order to get their daughters married. In our federation, we have as many as 20 families who have sold property or mortgaged it for this reason.

Women suffer many atrocities silently. They have few property rights and we often see men selling their property even without informing the women, plunging their households into poverty. Women are not able to even confront their husbands for such wrongdoing.⁶¹

We find that women do not get enough food to eat or are unable to have regular meals for various reasons, one of which is low income and big families. Their health is often not a priority. What is particularly disturbing is that 50 per cent of women's earnings go towards buying drink for their husbands and because of this habit that their men have, women do not eat well, clothe their children better or take care of their lives.

Moni is proud though that in her federation, 20 women are now elected ward members.

Together SHGs and Cooperatives can Impact on Women's Livelihoods

Two viewpoints prevail on SHGs and micro-finance institutions in both the states of Jharkhand and Assam. There are those who argue that SHGs tend to divide adivasi women as they do not bring all the women into their fold. have proliferated in Assam and they often lure women into getting into high credit situations. When women are not able to repay the loans they get ruthlessly exploited by the MFIs. This appears to quite rampant in urban areas of Assam.

On the other hand, in remote regions where women have little access to credit, SHGs have provided evidence of positive outcomes. But what is not readily seen is the potential of SHGs and self-run cooperatives to initiate a range of activities that can upgrade and market minor forest produce for competitive prices. The SHG-cooperative combines can get involved in `...simple and easily handled processing and packaging technologies ...However, to achieve these advantages, there needs to be local storage, and complete security of tenure over the collected items... Involving NGOs may make processing more efficient and improve market access.⁶²

Evolving Strategies for Improved Livelihood: A Village and a Mother Village Sonajuri⁶³

One has to go past a buzzing road with neatly kept shops that service the village and outsiders to enter Village Sonajuri. The village is verdant with tea gardens, bamboo shrubs, paddy crops and areca nut trees, and there are kitchen gardens in most household compounds. Reminiscing about her past, an elderly woman in the village remarked, `I came here as a child holding on to my father's shirt to work

⁶¹The high rate of domestic violence in Assam is reflected in a study conducted by the Law Research Institute, Guwahati, covering police stations in the 23 districts in Assam which reported 10,423 registered cases of violence against women (including rape, dowry, molestation and kidnapping) over the past 10 years (India Second NGO Shadow Report on CEDAW, 2006, Coordinated by National Alliance of Women (NAWO). It is pertinent that Assam `... under the shadow of conflict, has witnessed a resurgence of patriarchal values and norms, which have brought with them new restrictions on the movement of women, the dress they wear and more overtly physical violence such as rape, which is systematically used as a tactic against a particular community.'

⁶²Government of India, 2010, 'Manthan', p.178.

⁶³Sonajuri is part of Anjokpani Panchayat, in district Nagaon, located at a distance of 75 km from Tezpur District.

in the tea gardens for a mere eight annas a day. Sonajuri then was thickly forested with many wild animals.' The forests can now be seen at a distance; women continue to go to the forests to collect fuelwood and any forest produce that might come their way. Referred to as the 'tea tribes' and listed as other backward classes by the state, the adivasis here were brought from what is presently Jharkhand to Assam to work in the tea gardens by the British. The adivasis of this village are also engaged in a larger struggle to claim their identity and rights as scheduled tribes. Robert Xalco, an enthusiastic youth leader whom I met here, talks of how resentful they feel about the various kinds of discrimination they experience in their interactions with the larger public and public institutions because they have been categorised as backward and migrants.

What is noteworthy, however, is the prosperity that 50 per cent of the households in the village have enjoyed ever since they shifted from sugarcane to tea cultivation in their marginal land holdings. Robert Xalco feels that in the next five years as the rest of the households begin to grow tea, Sonajuri will become more prosperous. Many of them are already growing tea saplings to facilitate this.

There are households that continue to grow paddy which enables others to buy rice from them to meet their household needs. The visible change in the socio-economic status of the village is in evidence particularly in the fact that some women have shifted from wage work in the tea gardens to being self-cultivators of tea. Yet, it is quite common to see a mix of occupations where older women may attend to their family tea gardens while their young daughters continue to work in a 'company' tea garden in the neighbourhood. Workers in tea gardens are paid Rs 71 per day, along with rations in rice and wheat and houses for permanent workers.

What is heartening to see is the zero-waste culture of this village and other villages in the vicinity that I visited. For example, bamboo which every household grows is utilized for fencing their farms and for other household uses. Areca nut and betel leaves grown in small numbers are once again used for household needs and sold only when they are available in excess. Haystacks from paddy fields, kept in the compounds of houses, are used to feed cattle. Some households have even begun to plant rubber as it fetches a good price.

All the same, continued dependence on rains which are erratic, and lack of irrigation, which is only available to company tea gardens (which can source water from big rivers) results in low productivity and dilutes the villagers' full earning potential. A few households have their own ponds which is of help to them. About three or four households have managed to dig wells using government funds. Otherwise most of the families have their own wells which dry up during summer. When water is in shortage, women go to mountain streams. Most families have small ruminants—pigs, goats, hen and one or two cattle—which once again add to their subsistence.

The two active SHGs of Sonajuri have managed to get two tranches of bank loans amounting to Rs 25,000 and Rs 23,000 respectively, which they have used for a piggery project. The secretary of one SHG has made available a small portion of her land behind her house to upgrade the piggery project. The SHGs have zeroed in on the piggery project after a few other ventures like banana and pineapple cultivation which were unsuccessful because of a lack of markets. For various reasons, while 34 SHGs were promoted in the Anjupani block (of which Sonajuri is

a part), only 16 have survived. The busy work schedules of women is one of the reasons for the failure of SHGs.

A phenomenon that must be discussed is the agent/trader culture that has taken deep root in this village. These agents are mostly outsiders (Assamese, Muslim or Bengali) who buy tea to sell it in the tea factories for higher margins. They also do this with rubber or bamboo. One possibility for circumventing their growing influence is for the local SHGs or Dahar, a people's organization (which is not so active) to source tea collectively and sell it to the factories. While women see the potential in this solution, there appears to be no catalyzing agency to actually make it happen. When I spoke to them, the members of the two active SHGs here had not thought of this option. Robert Xalco who gives a supporting hand to the SHGs sees an opportunity here but he too has not explored in the logistics of making it happen—approaching the bank for the purchase of a vehicle for transportation, and so on. Despite the growing albeit limited prosperity, basic amenities such as electricity are not enjoyed by all households in the village. The 10 villages of the panchayat which Sonajuri falls under has two high schools, four middle schools, one public health centre (PHC) and a sub centre. Villagers have to walk several kilometres to reach a bank, school, weekly markets or the PHC.

Many villagers remark derisively, 'In Assam, what we have is—government at your door step. Every now and then, all the development officers go to the village to make an announcement about the ongoing schemes and ask people to apply. To access the schemes people have to go through technical and administrative channels which are not part of their knowhow. There are no Gram Sabhas. All meetings are held in the Panchayat office which is far away. We do have women ward members and even a few women pradhans. But their work is handled by their menfolk'.

Kuili: Own Cultivator of Tea (Sonitpur District, Assam)

Mother of four, Kuili aged about 50 is an Oraon and until two years ago she was working in a company-owned tea garden. She would work from eight in the morning until four in the evening, earning a small wage of Rs 60 per day and rationed rice and wheat. Now, however, Kuili is now cultivating tea on her seven bighas of land. Kuili is knowledgeable about tea cultivation and does much of the work in her tea garden. Three times a week she goes into the garden to clean and pluck leaves. When she cannot go to the field, she hires labour at Rs 50 per day. She says that farmers share labour when needed. To mature, tea takes four or five years and she like others in the village is able to collect tea leaves for five months in a yearly cycle which lasts from June to October. The agent to whom she sells the tea gives her a rate of Rs1,700 per quintal. She proudly says that last year she got the highest yield in the village which fetched her Rs 78,000/. One of her daughters now works in the company tea garden.

Besides tea cultivation, Kuili cultivates vegetables from which she earns an income. She has four or five bamboo bushes which she uses for fencing her farm and sells them if there is excess. She also has

Kuili in her tea garden, Sonajuri, Assam



thirty betel vines which she sells to make some additional money. Besides her old house, she has got a house from the government Indira Awas scheme which is still to be completed. She has built her own spacious house with bamboo. She has a couple of pigs and a cow. She says that she is saving so that she can get her daughter married and educate her son who is currently pursuing undergraduate studies. Like other women in the village, she goes to the nearby forest to collect fuel and other forest products.

Kuili says that most people now eat better—three meals which include fish and vegetables which was not the case with their forefathers. `We ourselves know of a time when we ate only wild fruit. Kuili is a member of one of the active SHGs in the village which has received loans from the bank.

Living with Forest Denudation and Climatic Changes

Everywhere, the character of forests has altered. But what is most alarming is the considerably adverse conditions now in evidence in the bio-diverse abundant states of northeastern India. Since their hoary past, the numerous tribal communities of northeastern India have practiced Jhum (shifting, slash and burn)) cultivation in the uplands. There has been a system of community farming without heritable rights over land.⁶⁴ One runs into two viewpoints on slash and burn cultivation: one that is critical of jhum's wasteful methods in land use, and the other which credits it for its regeneration potential. According to proponents of this second view, `... soil analyses before clearing and after burning in a jhum field show that the flush release of phosphorus and potash from the ashes improves the soil fertility several-fold. The fire pushes up the pH level of acidic soils, thus improving nutrient availability, destroys seeds of weeds, and controls pests. Research by a number of international agricultural research organizations demonstrates that fire allows a steady release of nitrogen throughout the cropping season'⁶⁵ Further, `According to recent estimates the jhum cycle has shrunk to 3–6 years or even less compared to a previous cycle of 10–15 years in earlier practice, resulting in soil degradation and ecological imbalance.'⁶⁶

Overtime, many have abandoned jhum cultivation which has resulted in a shift from community to individual ownership of land. In many instances, this shift was caused by subsidized development projects and financial institutions that gave loans only to patta holders. Invariably, ownership was transferred to men even in matrilineal communities. For instance, this happened on a large scale in the nineties when people were encouraged to plant rubber. Furthermore, as Melville Pereira notes, `...land alienation is rampant both to tribals and from tribals to non-tribals. Its main reason is that though on paper any alienation needs the consent of the community, in practice the administration treats the gaonburah (village leader) as the owner and negotiates land deals only with him. Secondly, the State bodies introduce commercial crops for which they give subsidies and financial institutions give loans only to individuals, understood as heads of families. In most cases they are men.'⁶⁷

My visit to the Hemai Lekthe hamlet close to the well-known Kaziranga National Park in Assam gives some idea about jhum cultivation in the region.

⁶⁵World Bank, 2007, 'Development and Growth in Northeast India, The Natural Resources, Water and Environment Nexus', Draft Strategy Report, 20 January, South Asia Region, Socially Sustainable Development Department, Environment Unit, 81, p. 80

⁶⁶Lian Chawll, 2007, 'Natural Resource-Based Income and Livelihood Improvement Initiatives in Northeast India', commissioned as an input to the study 'Development and Growth in Northeast India: The Natural Resources, Water, and Environment Nexus'.

⁶⁷Melville Pereira, 2005, 'Globalization and Changing Land Relations'.

A Look at Jhum Cultivation in the Hemai Lekthe Hamlet in District Karbi Anglong

Khajor from the Karbi tribe lives in the scenic surroundings of village Hemai Lekthe, which is etched with jhum- cultivated hills and a mountain stream which runs beside the 15 hamlets of the village, growing bigger as it goes downhill. A beautiful pond lies on one side of Khajor's house. One has to cross the half-furlong temporary bamboo bridge to reach the house. Her sister, Charne whose husband, Roopsingh Engling is an official in the soil conservation department, is her neighbour. The average landholdings of the hamlet range from one bigha to 10 bighas where rice is grown in the lower reaches while bamboo, areca nut, rubber are planted in the upper reaches. Although Karbis are a dominant tribe, most of the households in this area still have temporary pattas. Khajor's daughter and son go to school and her husband is a Maistry (supervisor).

While affirming that Jhumming has indeed depleted the forests, Khajor's brother-in-law argued that when trees on top of the hills are cut as it often happens, forests do disappear. Jhumming should be done on the slope and bushes should be allowed to grow when lands are left fallow, he says. Many have begun to plant rubber and bamboo on these hills. Once bamboo and rubber are grown, farmers do not want to leave these lands fallow, in other words, claiming permanency which is not the traditional custom. 'Our hills have lost their trees. The water in the river is not what it used to be and has become a small stream', observe Khajor and her sister.

Shy to talk, the slim but sturdy Khajor exemplifies the hard work that most Karbi women do for their households. Apart from many household chores, Khajor has her own loom for making mekla, a dress which Karbi women wear. Since she is busy with her jhumming cultivation, she has lent her loom to her friend. She has four cows whom she tends and sells part of the milk at a good price of Rs 40 per litre. During jhumming season which lasts four to five months during the rainy season, her days are packed. By mid-morning she walks for one hour to work on her family's jhum fields on the mountain. The tradition is that while men take

Khajor's House, Hemai Lekthe, Karbi Anglong, Assam.





Market in Karbi Anglong

on the job of clearing the bushes and setting them on fire, women take on most of the tasks entailed in cultivation. Along with her husband, Khajor grows maize, different varieties of vegetables and does much of the work of planting, weeding and plucking vegetables. She also carries the produce in beautifully woven conical bamboo baskets to the neighbourhood markets. Working on the undulating lands is not easy and a lot of time is spent in walking itself.

When I ask her if she has benefited from the government schemes, she replies 'Not much.'. From the PDS she gets 25 kg of rice for Rs 4/kg and nothing else. The Indira Awas Yojana house is currently being built next to her existing house. Out of the 15 households, four households in the village have got solar lighting because of the efforts of an NGO.

Khajor is currently a member of the only SHG in the village, which remained defunct for a while and then revived due to her brother-in-law's efforts. The members are currently rearing fish in the pond behind her house and are hoping to get a loan from the bank.

When asked what changes she has seen in her life in the last five years, she talks of the drinking water facility that the government has created. But currently, there is no water as the pipes are broken at some places and the tank that is installed near the mountain stream needs repair. She hopes that her brother-in-law will soon repair it. Her house which once had a wild-grass roof has been redone with a bamboo and tin roof. She has purchased cows which has added to the household income. Schools have opened in the area which has benefited her children. There are also two banks in the vicinity now—the State Bank of India and Langpi Dehaegtri Rural Bank.

Although they are the dominant tribe of Karbi Anglong, the Karbis have lost a lot of their land to Biharis and Bengalis who took land on lease and over time

occupied it. According to reports, in west Karbi Anglong, as many as 5,000 Bihari families have settled to cultivate sugarcane. Bengalis have also arrived in the region to cultivate paddy and vegetables. Finally, there are Muslims who since arriving here have become tenants. While there are big Karbi landowners, the average size of ownership is around four to five bighas of land.

For Khajor and other women and men of this hamlet, the fact that the district falls under the Sixth Schedule appears to be distant knowledge.⁶⁸ While the Sixth Schedule aims at people's participation, the autonomous council has been much politicized with spoils of the government going only to some.⁶⁹

Inroads by the Outsiders for Minor Forest Produce

Apart from the illegal and mindless cutting down of forest species, women's livelihoods are also affected by the aggressive ways of outsiders in accessing minor forest produce. This has further cut into women's livelihood resource. There are numerous episodes of women and villagers blocking outsiders from coming into forests but with little success. The cases of Chirubera and Durdungi Tolis are typical of this pattern.

Chirubera Toli (Hamlet)⁷⁰

As one drives up to the hill-capped forested region where Chirubera hamlet is located, one touches the silent sounds and serene beauty of the forests which are getting denuded. The Bano block which this toli (hamlet) comes under has 93 revenue villages with several tolis within. The Bano railway station which is about 12 km away from the village has become a point of mobility for the adivasis of this region.

Chirubera has 22 acres of land with an adjacent forest which this village owns. Being a Khutt Katti land, the villagers do not pay any tax but just a small annual tribute of Rs 200 per annum to the government. I was told that Chirubera land was bought in 1898 from the Zamindar of the region for Rs 200 by the tattooist great-grandfather of the present chief, Mansidas Topno. In 1929 his land was surveyed and a patta was given for the land by 1933. Over the years, Mansidas Topno brought the present 24 families of the village by gifting agricultural lands with title deeds, with Khatiyani documents - which ranges between two to 25 acres. With the passing of generations, the landholdings have become smaller.

The subsistence economy of this village derives from agriculture and the forest of the village. The paddy and pulses that the village cultivates are mainly used for the household needs. But it is the forest that keeps their economy going for six months of the year. Rich in lac-bearing trees, mahua (which is collected continuously by women and children in the months of March and April), sal leaves, kendu fruit, tamarind and other forest berries which fetch a good price, the forest helps the 24 households subsist in a major way. Although, the forest is full of kendu trees, the villagers have stopped the collection of kendu leaves as there is no government depot which has a monopoly for sourcing these. Because women of the village have stopped collecting kendu leaves, outsiders have now begun to come to their forest to collect kendu leaves. 'We do not know how to get the forest corporation to come to us.' observed some women.

⁶⁸The Autonomous Council has a three-tier system of Chairman and Deputy Chairman at the top, followed by 30 chief executive members out of which 4 are nominated, and managing several departments of governance. The Autonomous Council has elections once in five years wherein one party gets elected.

⁶⁹The implementation of the VIth Schedule in the tribal predominant states of northeastern India has brought in its wake many anomalies. First of all the VIth Schedule is operational only in some states and only in some of the districts of these states. The critique is that through its centralized uniform code it has ignored differing traditional systems even within the same district.

⁷⁰Chirubera Toli is in Bano Block, Ukauli Panchayat, Simdega district. By road it is 100km from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand.



*SHG members of Chirbera Toli,
Jharkhand*

The women are busy round the year doing much of the agricultural work. They collect fuel wood during winter for the entire year and then move on to collect mahua in the months of March and April. 'For mahua collection, we go by four in the morning and continue our collection till late in the evening and cook our food in the forest itself.' 'Women disappear into the forests during these two months', men of the village remark, laughing.

Due to the facilitation of DBSS, Chotanagpur, the 17-member SHG in Chirubera now have a number of assets—a flour-mill, leaf-plate machine and vermin-compost pit—which they acquired with the two bank loans they received of Rs 25,000 and Rs 20,000. The PDS shop is also under the care of the SHG. The SHG has also managed to put out a contract for the construction of a pond which could be completed within the next two years. Five families have bought pumpsets to irrigate their lands. Apart from the well which the villagers use for drinking water, there is a perennial natural spring that Chirubera is blessed with. Currently, four wells are being constructed in the vicinity of their village, where women and men go to work under the NREGA scheme. The women are keen to educate their daughters and some of the girls here are in high school and even in college.

The livelihoods of Chirubera are being threatened by outsiders who have begun to forage in their forests. The women I spoke to complained, 'Many come during night time or when we are busy in our fields. They are even taking our lac away which gives us good earnings. This has been happening since 2006. For five years we put up a fight. Although we complained to the police, the outsiders are quick to file a case against us. Now, we are tired and do not want to stop outsiders. Also not all households in our toli are in this fight. Look at the forests. They have

become bare. Our hope is that outsiders will stop coming and the forests will re-new. Outsiders are taking our livelihoods away.' When I asked them if there were any joint forest management committees, they replied, '17 or 18 committees are there in the 93 revenue villages. There are women on these committees but they only meet when government schemes for plantations are given.' This confirmed the observation of many forest officials that unless the forest-dwelling communities see personal benefits, their interest in JFM remains sub-optimal. As for women, they have little time to attend the JFM meetings as they are too busy in their homes, in the fields and collecting forest produce.

Durdungi Toli (Hamlet)⁷⁴

Around 130 km by road from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand state, as one approaches Durdungi Toli, a kaccha (mud) road leads us to 31 households of the Munda tribe. The houses are mud-plastered brick structures with Mangalore tiles. The forest produce from the 100-acre forest at the edge of the village is a major source of income for the villagers that supplements their earnings from rain-fed agriculture. There are four ponds and a perennial stream near the forest and beyond the forest there is a river. There is a well-kept well which is used by all the villagers for drinking water. To the outsider what comes as a surprise is that most of the households own a few acres of land which has several revenue-bearing forest species such as mahua, khattal, sal, mango, etc., contributing to their earnings and enhancing the green cover of the region.

Durdungi toli has organized itself well through its active gram sabha and two SHGs with the organizational backing of DBSS, Chotanagpur. The gram sabha holds regular monthly meetings in which one member of each household participates. Over the last three years, every member of the SHG has begun to save Rs 5 per month and the collection now amounts to Rs12,000.

⁷⁴Durdungi Toli is in Rania Block, Tamba Panchayat of Khunti District, located 95 km from Ranchi, the capital of Jharkhand.

Drinking Water Well in Durdungi Toli, Jharkhand



One is struck by the many strategies women of this village have been adopting to stabilize and increase their earnings. The forest produce has been a great benefactor of their livelihoods. Manoti Gudia who has two daughters and three sons talks about how she spends a lot of time collecting sal leaves, mahua and fuel wood from the forests. But she says that there are no buyers for sal plates. Besides her work in agricultural fields, she goes every week to the weekly markets to sell pakodas and idlis (popular Indian snacks). Since work in the forest keeps them busy, not many women seek wage work. She talks of the many ways in which women try to increase their earnings such as buying or stocking mahua during the rainy season and selling them at a higher price during lean season. For example, lac has been an important source of income. Although the price of lac is attractive at Rs 350 per kilogram, lac production has come down this year as the insects in the trees have flown away. Both men and women are engaged in lac collection; men climb the trees, getting the insects to the host trees while women process the lac that has been collected. The SHG Manoti Gudia belongs to has bought 1,000 kilograms of mahua from the bank loan they got with plans to sell in high season. The second SHG in the village has bought paddy with similar plans. Most of the women sell kendu leaves for Rs 65 per 100-leaf bundle to the government depot in the village. Because of the forests and greenery around and the ready availability of hay, most families are able to maintain some goats, cattle and bullocks.

Durdungi forest has recently begun to attract outsiders for its forest produce. The villagers said, 'We have got into scuffles with the outsiders and often driven them away. The year before, we found outsiders cutting our trees and we took away their instruments and confiscated whatever they cut. This year we have had no scuffles. They have been begging us to allow them into the forests once a week to collect dry sticks and other fallen produce and we have consented.' The villagers aver that ever since the block development office has been established, outsiders have started making inroads here. 'One of the problems we have to watch out for is when outsiders set fires to collect fallen produce.' The arrival of outsiders might snowball into a full-blown crisis later since on talking to the villagers, I found that although the village has got khattiyani part 2 Document from the government with details of different categories of land, there is not much awareness about FRA.

Reflections for Advocacy

It goes without saying that women's presence and contribution to forest economies is not only substantial but critical if forests are to regain their former health. While this fact is now being acknowledged in policies, translating the underlying equity principles of the policies and sustaining them in practice continues to be an uphill exercise. Racked by denials and discriminations over generations, women have lost a lot of time. Solutions which would put an end to the shackles of gender deficits are not unknown but there is need for concerted and sustained action to push the gender agenda in forest economies. Advocacy by various stakeholders would go a long way in keeping the discourse alive for policy and programmatic initiatives. The following discussion attempts to highlight a few points for reflection and dialogue.

Centrality of women's role in governance

At one level, with FRA, the scope of women to be partners in the process of governance have widened even as their aspirations to be part of the process have grown. The centrality of women's role and influence in governance emerges as a critical factor in bringing an end to gender deficits. The critical question is how would women, busy as they are with their daily lives come forward to negotiate the deep-rooted patriarchal structures of their own societies at one level and develop strategies to make their way through the tangled masculine mindsets of governance institutions?

Entangled as they are in the patriarchal traditions of their communities, women would have to be made aware and capacitated to claim their spaces and rights. Thanks to a few NGOs and civil society activism, some of the states have already begun showing evidence of women gaining a foothold in these spaces. But it must be kept in mind, that neither do all the forested villages enjoy the organizational support of NGOs, nor are all NGOs sufficiently gender-sensitized and aware of gender perspectives.

At the ground level, women's groups and NGOs could be given strategic responsibilities/powers to ensure that forest guards and implementing officials are made accountable to women and their representative institutions, be it an SHG or NGO. This is a tall order but beginnings have to be made afresh.

Ownership Rights

For the forest-dwelling communities, the battle to regain their rights appears to have just begun. While the FRA rules that women should enjoy joint land ownership and some successful attempts have been reported in this regard, for the large majority, much 'social' convincing needs to be done. The major prerequisite for improving women's livelihood lies in pushing for the implementation of community rights. Information dissemination on what the FRA entails is of utmost priority. Furthermore, nodal agencies such as the tribal welfare department, forest department and other associated line departments must be given the mandate for a renewal of traditional forest species that strengthen livelihoods of women and of forest-dwellers.

Value Additions for Better Margins

Women are aware that if they have to improve their earnings, their forest collections should be value-added. This is known but needs translation into doable projects. Women and men have to be given technical and credit supports to make this possible. That forest produce should have support pricing cannot be denied. Beyond this, institutional strengthening through cooperatives, SHGs and partnerships with marketing organizations would go a long way in enhancing women's earnings. Savings should go beyond small amounts to develop the larger agenda for better livelihood resources. Evidence suggests that SHG-cooperative combines have greatly benefited women's livelihoods.

Enhancing Leadership Potential

Women's activism in forest economies is best spearheaded by a critical number of women leaders which at present is not to found in these states. It is unfortunate that forest departments have failed in developing gender perspectives and getting more women into their organizational fold. The gender-sensitive programmes in the forest sector have not been addressed with the seriousness they deserve. The onus is on concerned departments to become capacitated and take on the mandate to implement the gender provisions of FRA. More and more women leaders have to emerge, be capacitated, and play an informed role in village institutions, ultimately getting connected to national and global discourse to take up advocacy work and advance the cause of women in forest economies.

Social Security

Entrapped in cycles of drought, endemic migration, sub-standard public services in health, education, serious deficits in earning power, and the daily domestic violence that many are subjected to, safety nets and social security for women in forest economies is of utmost importance. There is malnutrition and hunger that is both visible and invisible in several pockets. Apart from what is made available through government social security schemes, women and NGOs organizations should be supported to develop innovative models in social security.

Research and Advocacy

Contemporary livelihood statistics in terms of disaggregated data at the block and district levels would benefit greatly from strategic planning and monitoring.⁷² Much

⁷²Prema Gera, 2002, 'Women's Role and Contribution to Forest-Based Livelihoods,' Sub-Group on Sex Disaggregated Data of the IAWG on Gender and Development, HDRC

of the productive work women do as gatherers (paid and unpaid) is not acknowledged as work and therefore does not figure in national statistics nor reflected in national GDP. This lacunae itself raises the need for studies and reports that can provide contemporaneous data for analysis and strategic intervention. Civil society organizations which are in the thick of action have found little time to document in a nuanced way the many shackles that gender deficits place on women's livelihoods. There is definitely a case for promoting research studies that nuance livelihood concerns for policy advocacy and feminist discourse on global platforms.

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⁷³SBSS works in partnership with Diaconal Board of Social Services (DBSSs) across the states of north India.

Glossary of Terms

Adivasi: Adivasis are indigenous communities and listed as Scheduled Tribes by the government of India. The Constitution of India gives them special privileges which are routed through the Departments of Tribal Welfare. Often the term adivasis and tribes are used synonymously.

Andolan : Movement
Bandar : Godown
Bhai sabhas : Tribal councils

Bigha: A unit of measurement of area of a land, commonly used in Nepal, Bangladesh and in a few states of India including Uttarakhand, Maharashtra, Himachal Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Assam, Gujarat, Rajasthan etc. The precise size of abigha appears to vary considerably. Sources have given measurements that range from 1,500 to 6,771 square meters, but in several smaller pockets, it is as high as 12,400 square meters.

Carbon sinks: A carbon sink is anything, natural or artificial, that absorbs more carbon than it releases.

Charpais : Native cots
Dahar : A people's organization
Garos : In Assam, refugees from the former East Pakistan

Gram Sabha: All men and women in the village who are above 18 years of age form the Gram Sabha. The Gram Sabha meets twice a year. Meetings of the Gram Sabha are convened to ensure the development of the people through their participation and mutual co-operation. The annual budget and the development schemes for the village are placed before the Gram Sabha for consideration and approval.

Gram Panchayat: Local government body at the village level in India. The Gram Panchayat is the foundation of the Panchayat System. A Gram Panchayat can be set up in villages with a population of more than five hundred. There is a common Gram Panchayat for two or more villages if the population of these villages is less than five hundred called a Group gram Panchayat.

Haat : Market
Hadia : Rice beer
Gaonburah : Village leader

Jhum: A unique practice of clearing and burning the forest fields before the monsoon for cultivation. The land is then left fallow for two to three years during which time cultivation is happens on another site. Jhum fields are known for their diversity of crops.

Jhumming : Slash and burn agriculture

Jal : Water

Jangal : Forests

Jameen : Land

Khatiyan : Land titles

Kyoto Protocol: The Kyoto Protocol is an international agreement linked to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, which commits its Parties by setting internationally binding emission reduction targets. The Kyoto Protocol was adopted in Kyoto, Japan, on 11 December 1997 and entered into force on 16 February 2005.

Maoist : See Naxalite

Megadiverse: The megadiverse countries are a group of countries that harbour the majority of the Earth's species and are therefore considered extremely biodiverse.

Milch cattle : Cattle reared for milk

Naxalite: Generic terms used to refer to various militant Communist groups operating in different parts of India under different organizational envelopes. In the eastern states of India (Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, West Bengal and Odisha), they are usually known as, or refer to themselves as Maoists

Pattas : Land deeds

Prarthana : Pray

Sansaadan : All resources

Sendra: An annual rainy season festival celebrated by adivasis in Jharkhand

Usufruct: The right to use and enjoy the profits and advantages of something belonging to another as long as the property is not damaged or altered in any way.

Zamindars: Zamindars had hereditary rights of collecting land revenue from a number of villages which were called his talluqa or zamindari.



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