

Collection of Minor Forest Products in the Rainfed Agriculture: A study with special reference to Erode district of Tamil Nadu

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Abstract

Minor Forest Products (MFPs) play a crucial role in sustaining the livelihoods of tribal communities living in forest and rainfed agricultural regions. Traditionally, tribal households have depended on forests not only for food and medicine but also for supplementary income through the collection and sale of forest produce. This article examines the nature, scope, and limitations of minor forest product collection in the study area. The study highlights that although tribal communities historically depended heavily on forest resources, various restrictions imposed by forest authorities and market challenges have significantly reduced their participation in MFP collection. Products such as gooseberries, swallowroot, broom grass, Poosan Kottai, and other medicinal and non-timber forest products once provided substantial employment opportunities. However, lack of organized market structures, middlemen exploitation, regulatory barriers, and diminishing traditional knowledge have weakened this livelihood source. The article emphasizes the need for policy reforms, improved market access, and community-based forest management to revive the economic potential of minor forest products and enhance the livelihoods of tribal communities.

Keywords:

Minor Forest Products, Tribal Livelihoods, Forest Economy, Rainfed Agriculture, Broom Grass, Gooseberry, Forest Rights Act, Tribal Economy.

1. Introduction:

The dependence of tribal communities on forests has been a long-standing socio-economic reality in India. Forests provide a wide range of resources including food, medicine, fuel, fodder, and commercial products. Among these, Minor Forest Products (MFPs) constitute an important source of supplementary income for forest-dwelling communities. Nearly 60 million tribal people in India depend directly on forests for their livelihood. In Tamil Nadu, the tribal population accounts for about 7.2 lakh people, representing approximately 1.10 percent of the state's population. Within the study area of the present research, 115 tribal villages with about 25,000 people rely partly on forest resources for their livelihood.

Traditionally, tribal communities collected various forest products such as fruits, medicinal plants, seeds, honey, and grasses. These products were either consumed locally or sold in nearby markets to generate income. However, over time, restrictions on hunting and the collection of forest produce, combined with socio-economic changes, have reduced the role of forests in tribal livelihoods. As a result, many tribals have shifted toward small-scale

agriculture and seasonal migration. Despite this transformation, the collection of minor forest products continues to remain an important supplementary livelihood activity in the study area.

2. Types of Minor Forest Products Collected

Tribal communities in the study area traditionally collected a wide variety of forest products based on their ecological knowledge. These include at least 15 different minor forest products, such as:

- Honey
- Gooseberry (Amla)
- Nutmeg
- Swallowroot
- Broom grass
- Soap nut
- Poosan Kottai
- Kadukkai
- Thandrikkai
- Vidangakkai
- Kalakkai
- Kalpaasi
- Pongam seeds

These products have medicinal, nutritional, and commercial value. However, due to changing livelihood patterns and restrictions on forest access, the younger generation is gradually losing knowledge about these resources.

3. Collection of Gooseberries (Amla)

Indian gooseberry (Amla) is one of the most valuable minor forest products collected by tribal communities. It has significant demand in the Ayurvedic and Unani medicine industries as well as in the food processing sector for products such as pickles and herbal preparations.

Traditionally, gooseberry collection was an important source of employment for tribal families. However, the study reveals that only 144 out of 956 surveyed individuals (about 15 percent) are currently engaged in this activity.

The duration of employment generated through gooseberry collection varies:

- 23.6% collect for about 15 days
- 44.5% collect for 15–30 days
- 9.7% collect for 2–3 months

22.2% collect for 3–4 months.

Despite its market potential, several barriers limit tribal participation. Forest officials often impose informal restrictions on collection, and tribals face difficulties in obtaining fair prices due to the absence of organized procurement systems.

4. Collection of Poosan Kottai

Poosan Kottai is a medicinally valuable forest spice traditionally collected by tribal communities. Unlike several other forest products that face strict restrictions, the forest department currently allows tribals to collect Poosan Kottai under regulated conditions.

The study indicates that:

70% of eligible tribals participate in Poosan Kottai collection

However, only 20 individuals in the study area are actually involved in this activity.

Although there is a strong demand for Poosan Kottai in traditional medicine and spice industries, tribal collectors face several challenges including limited market access, lack of value addition, and dependence on middlemen. Organizing tribal collectors through cooperatives or self-help groups could increase their income by 30–50 percent.

5. Collection of Broom Grass

Among all minor forest products, broom grass remains the most important and reliable source of income for tribal communities in the study area. While the collection of many forest products has been restricted, broom grass gathering continues to provide employment opportunities.

The study reveals that about one-third (34.31%) of the respondents are engaged in broom grass collection.

The duration of employment generated through this activity varies:

32% work for one month

31% work for 2–3 months

15% work for 3–4 months

5.9% work for six months.

Despite these opportunities, tribals face difficulties such as restricted forest access, dense vegetation covering broom grass areas, and lack of organized marketing channels.

6. Challenges in Minor Forest Product Collection

The study identifies several key challenges affecting the collection and marketing of minor forest products:

1. Regulatory Restrictions

Although the Forest Rights Act (2006) grants tribals the right to collect and sell minor forest products, forest officials often impose restrictions that limit their access.

2. Market Exploitation

Tribal collectors often depend on middlemen who purchase forest products at very low prices. The absence of government procurement centers further reduces their bargaining power.

3. Declining Traditional Knowledge

The younger generation is increasingly unfamiliar with many traditional forest products and their uses, leading to a gradual loss of indigenous knowledge.

4. Lack of Value Addition

Most tribal collectors sell raw forest products without processing or value addition, which reduces potential income.

7. Policy Recommendations

To strengthen tribal livelihoods through minor forest product collection, several policy measures are necessary:

Strict implementation of the Forest Rights Act (2006) to protect tribal rights over forest resources.

Establishment of government procurement centers in hill regions to provide Minimum Support Prices (MSP).

Formation of tribal cooperatives and self-help groups for collective marketing and value addition.

Training programs on sustainable harvesting and processing techniques.

Promotion of community-based forest management systems.

These measures could significantly enhance tribal income and reduce economic vulnerability.

8. Conclusion

Minor forest products have historically played a vital role in the economic and cultural life of tribal communities. However, in the study area, the importance of MFP collection has declined due to regulatory restrictions, market challenges, and socio-economic changes. While products such as broom grass, gooseberries, and Poosan Kottai continue to provide some income opportunities, their overall contribution to tribal livelihoods has diminished. Reviving the minor forest product sector requires a comprehensive policy approach that ensures tribal rights, promotes sustainable resource management, and strengthens market linkages. By empowering tribal communities to manage and market forest resources effectively, minor forest products can once again become a significant source of livelihood and economic security.

Annexure:

Tables used for the analysis.

TABLE NO. 6.1

Collection of gooseberries and it's limitations

S.NO.	forestry gooseberry	Respondents	Percent
1	15 days	34	23.6
2	15 - 30 (one month)	64	44.5
3	2 -3 months	14	9.7
4	3 -4 Months	32	22.2
	Total	144	100.0

Source: Primary data

TABLE NO.6.2

Nutmeg (Jathikkai)

S.NO.	Nutmeg (Jathikkai)	Respondents	Percent
1	One month	2	33.4
2	two months	4	66.6
	Total	6	100.0

Source: Primary data

TABLE NO 6.3

Collection of Swallow root (Mahalikizhangu)

S.NO.	Swallow root (Mahalikizhangu)	Respondents	Percent
1	One month	10	33.3
2	Two months	20	66.7
	Total	30	100.0

Source: Primary data

TABLE NO.6.4

Collection of Poosan Kottai

S. No.	Poosankottai	Respondents	Percent
1	15days	6	30
2	one month	14	70
	Total	20	100.0

Source: Primary data

TABLE NO. 6.5

Collection of Broom Grass

S.NO	Collection of Broom Grass	Respondents	Percent
1	1 month	76	32
2	occasionally (or) when ever get sun	38	16
3	2- 3 months	74	31.0
4	3-4 months	36	15.1

5	6 months	14	5.9
	Total	238	100.0

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