



## Nature's Basket: Non-Timber Treasures from Our Forests

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### ABSTRACT

Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) represent a critical yet underutilised component of India's forest economy, providing food, income, and medicine to millions, especially tribal communities. This article explores the role of NTFPs in sustainable rural livelihoods, focusing on the forest-rich state of Odisha, where tribal populations depend heavily on products like sal leaves, tamarind, mahua, and lac. It highlights the pivotal role of women in harvesting and managing these resources and addresses key policy and market challenges such as poor value chain integration, low price realisation, and weak implementation of the Forest Rights Act. With targeted policy support, infrastructure development, and community empowerment, NTFPs can drive inclusive growth while ensuring ecological conservation. The article calls for a reimagining of forest governance that integrates NTFPs into the core of India's sustainable development strategy.

**Keywords:** Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs), Tribal Livelihoods, Sustainable Rural Development, Value Chain Development, Women Empowerment

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

When we think of forests, towering trees and timber often come to mind. Yet, hidden within the dense canopies and undergrowth lies an often overlooked but invaluable resource: Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). These include everything from wild honey, medicinal plants, bamboo, tendu leaves, to resins, fruits, seeds, and natural dyes - a true "nature's basket" that supports millions of lives, especially in forest-dependent regions like Odisha. For indigenous people in particular, forestry is essential to raising the standard of living in remote

communities (Padhi, 2014). Even though India's economy has grown significantly recently, poverty remains a major development challenge. Over 380 million people in the nation are thought to be living below the poverty level. A wide variety of aromatic and therapeutic plants, fruits, leaves, gum, bamboo, seeds, canes, and resins can be found in India's forests (Lynser & Tiwari, 2016). Almost 3,000 different plant species in India yield economically important NTFPs. Up to 50% of the income of about 25% of India's rural labour force, who mostly rely on NTFPs, comes from small-scale forest-based companies (Behera et.al., 2021).

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## 2. NTFP: THE SILENT BACKBONE OF FOREST ECONOMY

Women, particularly tribal women in Odisha's districts like Mayurbhanj, Rayagada, and Koraput, play a central role in NTFP collection, processing, and marketing (Patra et al., 2025). From sun-drying tendu leaves to selling forest fruits in haats (weekly markets), they are the invisible forest entrepreneurs (Rout et al., 2010). Their deep ecological knowledge about the right time and technique to harvest without damaging the forest is a pillar of sustainable forest management. Many of the forest products collected by tribal communities serve important roles in traditional medicine, with deep-rooted knowledge passed down through generations (Mohammed et al., 2025). Yet, this knowledge often goes unrecognised in formal policy.

## 3. WOMEN AND NTFP: CUSTODIANS OF FOREST KNOWLEDGE

Women, particularly tribal women in Odisha's districts like Mayurbhanj, Rayagada, and Koraput, play a central role in NTFP collection, processing, and marketing (Patra et al., 2025). From sun-drying tendu leaves to selling forest fruits in haats (weekly markets), they are the invisible forest entrepreneurs (Rout et al., 2010). Their deep ecological knowledge about the right time and technique to harvest without damaging the forest is a pillar of sustainable forest management. Many of the forest products collected by tribal communities serve important roles in traditional medicine, with deep-rooted knowledge passed down through generations (Mohammed et al., 2025). Yet, this knowledge often goes unrecognised in formal policy.

## 4. CHALLENGES: MARKET ACCESS AND POLICY GAPS

Despite their value, NTFP collectors receive only a fraction of the market price due to middlemen exploitation, lack of storage facilities, and limited processing capacity. Even though the Forest Rights Act (2006) recognises the right of forest dwellers over NTFPs, implementation remains patchy. In Odisha, the Odisha Forest Development Corporation (OFDC) and tribal development cooperatives like TRIFED and TDCCOL have taken steps to procure and market

NTFPs (TRIFED, 2023). However, many collectors are still unaware of Minimum Support Price (MSP) schemes or lack bargaining power in forest markets.

## 5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. Strengthen community ownership and cooperative models for NTFP trade under the FRA and PESA Acts.
- b. Improve value chains through cold storage, processing units, and direct market linkages via e-commerce and FPOs.
- c. Promote research and training on sustainable harvesting techniques and forest certification.
- d. Enhance women's participation and leadership in forest governance and NTFP-based enterprises.

## 6. THE WAY FORWARD

NTFPs are unique in that they present an environmentally sound and social development alternative to the mounting climate challenges and increasing differences in socio-economic status. These are the resources whose intimate interweaving with the traditions and sustainable land practices offers a resilient, low-carbon living way forward to livelihood security. To the millions of households that depend on forests, especially tribal people, NTFPs are not just another commodity that they can invest in, like any other commodity; it is an anchor to culture as well as a source of good nutrition. Odisha, with rich forest biodiversity and rich tribal heritage, can show the way in the world to prove how development and conservation can go hand in hand (Sahoo et al., 2021). The state can become an example of a living model of climate-adaptive rural development by placing NTFPs in the framework of the current forest governance, as well as poverty reduction and decentralised planning. The investment in NTFP is not a technical/ economic issue but the act of committing to ecological justice. It is important to recognise the rights and systems of indigenous knowledge, provide fair access to the free market, and enhance community-based institutions. Human civilisation has always been a maintenance of the forest, now it is our turn to enjoy the same and pay back to nature, to conserve the richness, enable the guardians and bring the harmony between humans and nature.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Non-Timber Forest products are not merely a secondary income earnings source; they are the foundation of a sustainable, equitable, culturally-related developmental paradigm. Through NTFPs, there is indeed a way to boost rural economies as well as preserve biodiversity in a state such as Odisha, where there are tightly-knit relationships between forest ecosystems and the lifestyles and livelihoods of tribal communities. The utilisation of the transformational potential of NTFPs will necessitate demands of strategic policy focus. These will involve the right to tenure in the community, strengthening value chains, and the implementation of market-based interventions that guarantee a fair payment to the collectors. A fundamental thread of this agenda is the empowerment of women, a monitored client group who are usually the principal maintainers of forest resources and the reinvention of grassroots institutions that intercede, counter, provide information, and generate profits. NTFPs can become as much engines of ecological stewardship as they are of economic justice through investing in forest-based enterprises and related capacity-building endeavours on sustainable harvesting and enterprise development. With the issue of mainstreaming NTFPs into the rural development discourse emerges a chance to redefine the governance of forests in the 21st century, which is based on tradition, informed by science, and community-driven.

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