

Forests for livelihood A tribal perspective

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During the past few years, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir has initiated various projects to generate livelihood for the people of Union Territory. The Mission Youth programme is helping the new generation to generate their own livelihood taking benefit of various govt schemes. But, this time, the focus is on J&K Forest Department for its maiden initiative titled 'Forests for Livelihood'. This is an ambitious project that can provide a sustainable economic boost to millions of people living in and around forests in the foothills of north-western Himalaya -J&K mountainous ranges, by using existing forest resources categorized under 'Non Timber Minor Forest Produces.

Under this new endeavor 'Forests for Livelihood' the J&K Forest Department organized a one-day consultation meeting-cum-discussion programme on 28th Feb 2022 at Jammu, before launching this scheme. The main objective of this programme was consultation with stakeholders for undertaking diverse activities for the creation of forest-based livelihood in Jammu and Kashmir. An exhibition of forest-derived handicrafts, forest produce, and display technologies for processing of forest produce was held, followed by two technical sessions and a panel discussion wherein experts of all the related fields participated.

During the working sessions it has been observed that the initiative will undoubtedly cover a large population living in rural areas near forests and the Tribal communities who are partially or wholly dependent upon the forest and forest products.

This highly innovative scheme has the potential to impact the present and the future generation of Forest Dwelling communities, therefore a tribal perspective needs to be taken into consideration while launching the scheme in J&K.

Some suggestions on the said scheme ' Forest for livelihood' are mentioned hereunder for consideration by the concerned authorities:

Recognizing Tribal as a target community

The Tribal communities who have been a part of forests for centuries together possess a great treasure of knowledge about the biodiversity of each area. They are aware of the location, quality, quantity and age of each plant. They not only know the usage and importance of each item of forest produce including plants / herb and shrubs but also are aware of side effects of excess usage of a medicinal plant.

The implementing agency may treat them as stakeholders in the scheme. Further, they should be included as the main target group to be benefitted under the programme. Third, the scheme should be made easy for implementation and tribal friendly.

Such a recognition can bridge the gap that exists between forest authorities and the tribal people. The process for recognition of Forest Right claims under FRA needs to be expedited as forest dwelling communities can extend great help to make these initiatives successful covering a majority

of people without compromising the ecosystem that exists since time immemorial. Minor Forest Produce ownership rights under FRA

As per existing laws the 'Minor Forest Produce' comes under Forest Rights Act 2006 and is regulated on the direction and supervision of the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs, New Delhi. The Section 3(1)(c) of Forest Rights Act 2006 confers ownership rights over minor forest produces (MFP) to forest dwelling STs and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers while as the Section 2(i) of FRA Act defines a Minor Forest Produce (MFP) as all non-timber forest produce of plant origin and includes bamboo, brushwood, stumps, canes, Tusser, cocoon, honey, waxes, Lac, tendu/kendu leaves, medicinal plants and herbs, roots, tuber and the like. There are two MFPs lists. One is for the operation of MFPs within the State/UT and the other grants all India permits to transport and sell the products anywhere in India. The said list is subject to amendments/ change by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs from time to time on the recommendation of State/UTs.

The FRA expressly defines the forest rights of tribal and OFD communities including the 'Right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of minor forest produce which have traditionally been collected within or outside village boundaries', and sincere efforts are needed to make this sector feasible for tribal to operate.

Many states of India, where tribal live in forests or are dependent on forest resources have assigned not only the ownership of MFPs to boost their livelihood through collection but they are authorized for processing, trading and marketing the MFPs at national level Under Scheduled tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest rights) Act, 2006.

The Jammu and Kashmir Forest Department is a nodal agency under FRA and they can boost these activities more effectively and swiftly.

Involving Gram Sabha in Forest for Livelihood

Involving the 'Gram Sabha' constituted across Jammu and Kashmir in 2021 in such a programme – Forest for Livelihood is imperative owing to its legal position under the Act. The Gram Sabha is the highly empowered body under Forest Right Act 2006. They have the authority to regulate transit permits for MFPs. As per the laws such permit will be issued by the FRC Committee constituted by the Gram Sabha under Rule 4(1)(e) or a person authorized by the Gram Sabha. The Rules further provide that all decisions of this Committee pertaining to the issue of transit permits shall be placed before the Gram Sabha for approval.

In this pretext, the Forest department can involve these bodies in the process which will make this process more open and transparent.

Connecting Forest for livelihood with TRIFED / Van Dhan Yojna

The Tribal Affairs Department J&K can also play a pivotal role in implementation of the scheme as the said department is also working in the same direction.

On 6th October 2021 the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED), an organization established by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs , New Delhi agreed to provide assistance under various projects submitted by Tribal Affairs Department J&K, initially to the tune of Rs 50 crores for J&K. The said organization also agreed to establish a Tribal Haat at Jammu and Srinagar, opening of J&K Tribal outlet at New Delhi and display of J&K tribal products at more than 130 outlets of federation in various cities which will offer attractive returns.

Eco-trek routes – Tribal tourism

There is great potential for a new sector of Eco -trek connected with the concept of Tribal Tourism. Creation of new trekking routes on tribal routes of Pirpanchal and Trikuta Hills of north-Western Himalaya can help in making new tourist circuits in lush green forest areas. The 'Home-Stay' in nomadic huts/ Tents in 'Dhoks' and 'Bhaks' with tribal vegetarian cuisine of Gujjars like Kadhan and leeti with wild vegetables and dairy products can prove a great potential to catch the attention of domestic and foreign tourists for a new experience. Such initiatives can boost the livelihood of tribal communities at large.

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