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Odisha sal seed pickers face Amphan, COVID-19 double whammy

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About 11 million forest dwellers — most of them tribals — eke out a living from collecting sal Photo: Ipsita Behera, Vasundhara

The procurement of Sal seed (*Shorea robusta*) — that plays a significant role in the economies of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Odisha — was delayed due to cyclone Amphan.

About 90,000 forest fringe villages with a combined population of 56 million (FSI) are dependent on sal as an important livelihood resource.

In all these states, sal seed collection provides employment for more than 80 days a year. About 11 million forest dwellers — most of them tribals — eke out a living from collecting sal seeds.

No buyers, however, are ready to offer the declared minimum support price (MSP) to sal seed gatherers.

Traders in Odisha's Deogarh, Kalahandi, Koraput, Mayurbhanja, Raygada and Sambalpur are not willing to pay more than Rs 5-8 per kilogramme, at least half of the MSP declared. The Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation of Odisha Limited (TDCCOL) has undertaken sal seed procurement in 13 tribal districts through its branches involving Primary Procurement Agencies (PPAs) and Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs).

Odisha has a rich depository of sal seeds accounting for 25 per cent of the country's production. For primary collectors, selling sal seeds has been an important source of earning — with respect to the income and time — as seeds are sold in May and June, the agricultural lean seasons. Odisha is rich in sal forests and sal trees are seen in most parts of the state, except in the coastal belt.

On June 12, 2020 — citing the onset of monsoon and the collection of minor forest produce (MFP) nearing its end — TDCCOL wrote a letter to the district collectors of all the 13 districts to take a call for stopping procurement.

The sudden halting of the procurement process of the government has concerned the state's tribal community.

Most sal seeds already collected by millions of tribal and other traditional forest dwellers in these districts are yet to be procured by TDCCOL. Seeds collected by PPAs and VDVks were not procured either. Many claim this decision may lead to distress sale, something that has been reported by the local media.

Unscrupulous traders closely watch procurement undertaken by TDCCOL, as they feel the agency will not be able to procure the entire stock from primary gatherers. Once TDCCOL stops its procurement, they will step in and buy in bulk, offering low prices.

In recent years, the collection of sal declined due to non-collection by state marketing corporations. The recent trend of collecting sal seeds under MSP between 2014 and 2019 by the Odisha government showed little importance given to sal seeds.

One of the reasons is not having solvent extraction plants (all of them have been closed) in Odisha. Procurement agencies always remain on the back foot as well, because of a fear of incurred loss in the trade of sal. The Union government bears 75 per cent of losses under MSP of MFps, if any, with states bearing 25 per cent, if any.

To hide their own failures, the legitimate rights of sal seed gatherers to get fair prices is somehow avoided. This is done with a narrative that since there is not a lot of demand for sal seeds, state marketing corporations should not intervene to procure sal seeds from tribals. This, because the state government may not be in a position to pay for them. It seems the state government believes investments in promoting tribal livelihoods are a liability.

Sal fat

The potential availability of sal seeds in India was estimated to be 1.5 million tonnes. The potential of sal fat availability is around 180,000 tonnes.

However, only 6,000-9,000 tons of sal fat is produced annually in India. One of the reasons for low production of sal fat is a result of procurement policies that led to stagnating collection prices.

Sal seeds take care of the livelihood of millions of forest dwellers in Central India. Employment for millions more is also guaranteed in processing and end-use industries, apart from looking after foreign exchange needs and entrepreneurial development in the country, according to non-profit Regional Centre for Development Cooperation.

Sal fat as substitute for Cocoa Butter Equivalent (CBE)

Sal fat — which contains symmetrical triglycerides — makes is particularly useful in the food sector. It forms the primary ingredient for products like oil, soap, vanaspati, and CBEs that form very efficient substitutes for manufacturing chocolate and for tanning purposes.

The de-oiled cake is also found to have export potential as poultry, cattle and fish feed. Sal seeds ensure greater returns to primary collectors and enhance their livelihood security in the agricultural lean period.

They also enhance opportunities for domestic and international trade and guarantee employment for several millions more in processing and end-use industries, apart from looking after foreign exchange needs and entrepreneurial developments in India.

The Food Safety and Standards Authority of India on May 15, 2017 issued a final notification permitting the addition of vegetable fats (from sal, kokum, mango kernel, palm oil, mahua

oil dhupa, phulwara, dharambe, etc) to a maximum 5 per cent of the finished product to use in the manufacture of chocolates in India, promoting Make in India.

TDCCOL is the other government agency whose role was crucial in safeguarding tribal livelihoods during the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

TDCCOL has come forward to procure MFPs like tamarind and myrabolans directly from MFP gatherers in a few tribal districts, including Malkangiri, Sambalpur, Kalahandi, Mayurbhanja. TDCCOL has reportedly already procured tamarind worth Rs 1 crore under the MSP for MFP scheme during the lockdown period.

Its major task is to procure sal seeds under this same scheme. TDCCOL has undertaken a massive campaign to sensitise MFP gatherers on the MSP for MFPs.

Halting procurement may hit millions

So long as TDCCOL procures, sal seed gatherers hope they will continue to do so in the future. The gatherers hold on to their stock despite traders / middlemen attempting to allure them.

Most of the stocks currently procured by PPAs and VDVks are yet to go to TDCCOL. Once procurement stops, PPAs and VDVks may not be able to dispose to TDCCOL and can, thus, sell to middlemen in throwaway prices.

Many PPAs and VDVks are of the opinion that at least TDCCOL will procure existing stock they have with them already by extending procurement for another 15 days at least.

One adult can collect 100 kilogrammes of seeds (fresh weight) a day, but the process of drying, roasting, winnowing and pounding to remove husk and separate kernel sections takes two people and two days.

This takes the total number of man-days to five for every 100 kg (dry weight).

The absence of buyers and the government's indifference has created a big vacuum in the sal seed trade and has left the market to determine its price, holding the future of collectors in the balance.

The whole effort of TDCCOL as a rescuer for millions of sal seed gatherers during the COVID-19 lockdown phase will be futile if it stops procurement immediately.

Traders and middle men may then call the shot.

The whole idea of providing fair price and protect the livelihood of MFP gatherers will then fall at the mercy of unscrupulous market forces.

TDCCOL should open sal seed procurement up to June 30 at least, so all the stock from PPAs and VDVks can be sent to TDCCOL godowns.

If this is stopped, private traders can begin exploiting sal seed gatherers, spiking distress sales.

Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/forests/odisha-sal-seed-pickers-face-amphan-covid-19-double-whammy-71768>