



Role of forest Resources to local livelihoods: The case of Bediya Snake Charmers of West Bengal, India

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Abstract

The majority of the population in India lives in rural areas. Forests play a vital role in the rural economy. In many areas, forests and trees are among the few resources that are available to rural dwellers. They provide different kinds of benefits: *jobs and incomes* often needed to supplement inadequate returns from agriculture; *produce* such as fuel wood, food, fodder and building poles for the home; and a range of *environmental benefits*, without which other activity, such as agriculture might be impossible. Forest sector is the second largest land use after agriculture. Forests are important in the livelihood of Bediya Snake charmer community of West Bengal. They depend on forests resources for various products such as fuel wood, construction materials, medicine, and food. This community has traditional occupation snake charming, in order to carry out their occupation; they go hunting for snake in the forest. They are used cobra, king cobra and russell viper, this snake were caught from forest and broken venom teeth and kept in bamboos making basket for 3 to 4 days and this snakes are used for earning purpose. For snake bite it is also treated with herbal medicinal plants which are also taken from forest. The Bediya Snake charmer livelihood depended on the street performance. This paper will attempt to highlight the role of forest resources among the Bediya snake charmer community and their economic status.

Keywords: forest resource, livelihood, environment, technique of snake catch and charming

Introduction

India is a developing nation. The majority of its population lives in rural areas. Forests play a vital role in the rural economy. In many areas, forests and trees are among the few resources that are available to rural dwellers. In remote forest fringe villages about 300 million tribal and other local people depend on forest for their subsistence and livelihood and about 70% of India's rural population depends on fuel wood to meet its domestic energy needs. For about 100 million of them, forests are main source for livelihood and cash income from fuel wood, non-timber forest products (NTFP) or construction materials. More than half of India's 70 million tribal people, the most disadvantaged section of society, subsist from forests ^[1].

People's Involvement in Forest Management

Traditionally, forest management practices aimed at developing and understanding the protective and productive aspects of natural forests. Biological, technical and macro-economic considerations received overriding priority. In the process, people's livelihood issues were relegated to the secondary position and people's role in safeguarding the resources and their active participation were relegated to a secondary place. Only recently the social role of forests and forestry together with their protection and production roles have received attention.

After all, forestry is about people. It is about trees only in so far as trees can serve the needs of the people. Forestry and Forest Policy should concern itself in every conceivable way in which, forests, wood loots and trees can contribute to livelihood of

people in particular and human welfare in general. In fact, future of human society is intrinsically linked to the future of the forest. To arrest further degradation and to rehabilitate the degraded forestlands, social forestry, in mid 1970s, provided the most challenging area for social analysis in rural livelihood scenario and development. However, the major drawbacks of the implementation of the social forestry programme were lack of transparency and accountability, exaggeration of physical target achievements and unsustainable investments. It did not help in institutional reforms. The economic benefit to the landless poor people came through wage employment. Beyond this, the community participation was not very significant ^[2].

Joint Forest Management (JFM) and Livelihood Options

JFM provides an opportunity for managing forest resources for better productivity and availability of forest produces. Forest provides direct benefits (physical products such as wood, food, medicine, fuel, fodder, fiber, organic fertilizers and host of other products) and indirect and attributable benefits for environmental enrichment. As an inseparable component of the total land use systems, forestry has significant inter-relationships with agricultural, pastoral and food-producing systems. Through soil and water conservation, and maintenance of soil fertility, forest provides critical support for agricultural development. In addition, forest based small and cost effective enterprises can help increase in rural employment and raise the income and living standards of rural people including forest dwellers and

¹ Government of India, 2002, Joint Forest Management: A Decade of Partnership, Joint Forest Management Monitoring Cell, Ministry of Environment and Forests, New Delhi.

² National Forest Policy, 1988, Govt. of India, New Delhi.

indigenous groups. The quality of life in rural areas depends on the rehabilitation of forests, which in fact, is principal aim of Joint Forest Management [3].

The study based on empirical findings was conducted on the snake charmer community in Nimo-Malpara village under memory I block of Purba Bardhaman district in West Bengal. Their habitations type belongs to the semi-nomads group. The snake charmers collecting forest resources are snakes (king cobra, cobra and Russell vper) and different plants roots, leaf and fruits. Basically, the snake charmers hunt the snake and gathered plants roots, leaf, roots from the forest Finally snake charmers started the charming work with the deadly snakes and some along with snake charming activities sells herbal medicine which were collected from the forest.

The Kalbelas of Rajasthan are popularly known as snappers among the villagers. They earn their livelihood by several occupations but primarily by snake charming, dancing and singing and magic shows. The word 'Kal' means death and 'belia' denotes conqueror which explain the occupational pattern of the Kalbelias. They prepare and keep anti dots prepared by them to cure snake bite person. When they organize performance of magic, they have a pupil called Jamuria. (Miriam Robertson, 2014).

E. Thurston(1909) View that the 'kela' which means dances or from 'khel' which means 'play' but in common vocabulary at implies those people who along with their family member leave their house and breath and continuously move from place to place showing their snakes and skills in snake charming jugglery and acrobatic teats "

Objective of the study

1. To realize the forest resources of snake charmers.
2. To study the snake charmers traditional

Methodology

The data has been collected through intensive anthropological fieldwork method. The schedule or census method used for household data collection. The socio-economic data has been collected through questionnaire method. The snake catch and charming purposes participant observation and photographic methods were used for skill and different technique documentary purposes. Data analysis purposes used the tally marking and represent the numerical data table and figure and other draw chart. Secondary data and literature are also used for final report writing. The study conducted at Nimo-Malpara village under memory I block of Purba Bardhaman district in West Bengal. The total number of household is 144 and total number of population is 492. The study village is situated vicinity to the forest.

Result and Discussion

The snake charmers occupations depend on the street performance in rural or urban places. Their traditional occupation is snake catch and charming work and herbal medicine practicing work. In this occupation both man and women are employed to their work. Only male snake charmer involved to the snake hunting purposes and others different leaf and root's gathering from forest. Basically, snake charmers collect the venom and

non-venom snake like that king cobra, cobra, russell viper etc. The catch snakes keep them in bamboos making baskets for long time snake charming work. The snake which caught from the forest and this snake kept in bamboo basket. The snakes proper care and affection by offering foods viz., rat, grass hopper, frog, small fish and rat for long time live. Their common forest resources are maintained for livelihood. Another some young male and female are employed to the labour work in villages.

Table 1: Pattern of Occupational activities of the Snake Charmers Community

Category	Male	%	Female	%
Snake Charmers	194	39.43	32	6.50
Day Labour	18	3.66	14	2.81
Begging	4	0.81	16	3.25
Domestic Work	19	3.86	187	38.01
Pension	2	0.41	6	1.22
Total	237	48.17	255	51.83

The table 1 & fig. 1 shows that the most of the male members are involved snake charming occupation which are 194 (39.43%) but female is very few in number which is 32 (6.50%). Most of the females are engaged with domestic work, like cocking, marketing, domestic animal rearing, children rearing, cleaning and washing clothes etc. But few male are involved with domestic work like animal rearing, small business. Very few persons are engaged as day labour male is 18 (3.66%) and female is 14 (2.81%). Interestingly, after70 years independence 20 person peoples source of income is begging, which is 4.07 percent out of total surveyed population. Whereas female is higher than male. In the studied population female is preponderance than male.

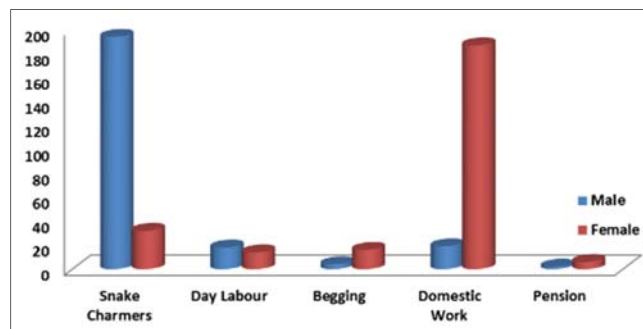


Fig 1: Occupational Status of Snake Charmers Community

Table 2: Broad age group and sex wise traditional occupational as Snake Charmers

Age Group in years	Snake Charmers			
	Male	%	Female	%
0-17	2	0.28	0	0
18-59	184	25.95	30	4.23
60-80+	8	1.12	2	0.28
Total	194	27.36	32	4.51

The table shows that the snake charming work done only male is 2 (0.28%) in the age group 0-17. The teenage groups are learned snake charming work from his parents or elder persons. Only the

³ Biswas, PK, 1988, 'Sociological Issues in Forestry' in the *Indian Journal of Social Sciences*, vol. 1, No.2.

younger males are interest to the snake charming work. The adult age groups 18-59 have involve to earn some money from snake charming work whereas male are 184 (25.95%) and female snake

charmers are 30 (4.23%). The old age group (60-80+) are very few person involve with snake charmers work which is male are 8 (1.12%) and female are 2 (0.28%).

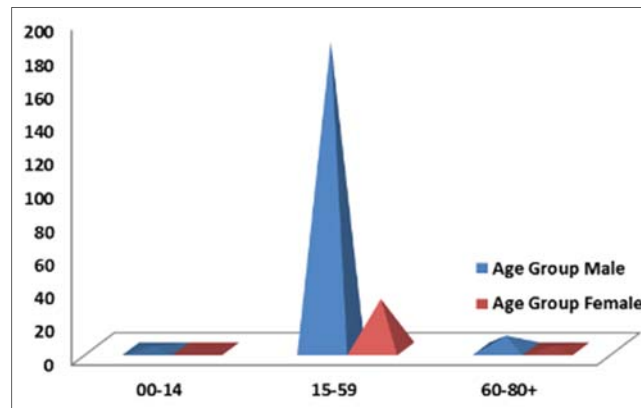


Fig 2: Age group & sex wise snake charming work

Forest Resources

The economic status of the Bediya community depends on the natural/forest resources. Mainly, snake charmers are collected

snakes, plant roots, wood and leaf from forest. They are collected forest resources in two types of way these are given below

Table 3

Types of Resources	Collecting Resources	Used of Resources
Flora	Herbs, plants roots, leafs and dry woods and spinach/Shakh	Used for ethno medicine and dry wood used for the cooking fuel and spinach used for eating
Fauna	Venom and non-venom snakes	used for snake charming work

Snake Catch Pattern

- Identify Snake Symbols:** - at first snake charmers are find out the snakes whole position in the forest and observed the snakes' entrance path, and around the whole side of the forest find out the snakes lavatory, skin cover of snake.
- Implements Used:** - During the snake catching, they are used some implements viz., hand-hoe, bamboos stick (2 – 3ft), and weapons of blade and bamboos basket and used some roots from various trees for controlling the snake.
- Snake catch Pattern and Venom Teeth Broken:**-They are caught & hold of the snake's tail and keep hanging for few minutes and which weaken the snake and after which they captured the mouth and used the weapon of blade to break the venom teeth.
- Non-venom snake were caught directly and kept in the bamboos basket.

Snake Charming Pattern

The snake charmers carry the basket on their shoulder and wonder from one place to another place to performing the snake charming work. The performing snake charming with the traditional song, hand drums, and play on flute.



Fig 3

Snake catch pattern and king cobra snake venom teeth broken by blade



Fig 4

Snakes Care

The snake charmers love the snake with special care and affection. They are also very much careful to the deadly snake for live long of life. Sometimes they kept the snake outside the bamboo basket at home, the snake moved here & there in living room for their freeness. Because whole day the snake bounded inside the basket and lived there most of the time. Basically snake charmers are cleaning the snake baskets weakly. The Bediya

community is very much careful to the snake's body fitness or health. So, they always have given very healthy food like frog, grasshopper, rat, small fish, milk, and prawn, meat of hen, snail and water. Foods are collect from nearest agricultural field and river or canal site. Interestingly, the child has not got any milk but they collect milk for snake.

Livelihood Status of Community:

Their traditional earning is based on the street performance and artificial or hand technique base work with the deadly snakes. The streets performing based occupation are help for their day to day livelihood purpose. Their snake based culture is generation wise transmitted to the next generation. Their semi-nomadic lives are moved on to the permanent habitation. The snake charmer hamlets are connected with the Panchayat Raj institution and get the facility from governments different schemes (ration and fuel facility and other habitation making facility etc.). The present day, their children are going to the educational institute i.e., ICDS Centre and Primary, Secondary and Higher Secondary School. The women are engaged with the Self Help Group (SHG). Through the SHG the women earned little amount of money. They are involving various types' secondary occupations like agricultural labour, day labour, and mason labour. They are also involving persimmon or dates leaf mat-making and broom making for domestic uses as well as selling. The snake charmers livelihood structure is given below:

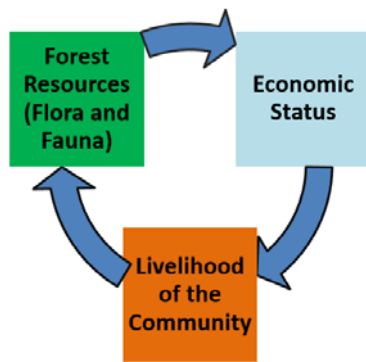


Fig 5

The snake catching and charming related experiences of the villagers and shared their traditional knowledge and skill.

Case 1 Lalu Mal is 55 years old. He is shared his snake charming experience. He has three types' snakes (king cobra, cobra, russel viper) since 10 years, He used them as earning assets. The three snakes have been given huge amount through the snake charming work. Out of which the three snakes one is own cobra snake and other two snakes (king cobra and russel viper). Neighbour. He is a snake lover; he loved his three snakes with affection. In a week four or five days is enough to showing the snake charming work. This earning resource are maintained the family livelihood. Recently, he is faced critical health condition and suffer from the blood presser with acute indication problem and his physical illness are can't support for the traditional work

Case 2. Tanu Mal, 41 years old and her family members are six. She is divorces and having three sons. She's elder son is married and his wife i.e. housewife and there have a one male child. Others two son is unmarried. She and her elder son are employed to the snake charming work and the snake charming benefit are

some rupees 100-150 and 2-3 kg rice. Their earring resources are maintained to the family livelihood.

Case 3

According to the informant his economic condition is depend on forest resources. His family member is five. He recounted 'I have no agriculture and homestead land. My family depends on forest resource collection and non-agriculture day labour. Every day my wife goes to jungle to bring the fire wood and leaf. After gathering a heavy amount of firewood, we cut the wood and prepare for selling. 3 days are required to collect such amount of firewood which can be carried by cycle to the nearest market. In very early morning they went to local Market for selling. It is sold between Rs. 200/- to 300/- per cycle. They also told "Every day, I have to cover 20-30 KM distance up & down from my home for selling the fire wood. We are sold skin, teeth, poison of snake. During lean period of the year we are engaged to playing snake all over the district".

Conclusion

The forests are most vital natural resources for the people and tribal as well as day to day life are very much related in this study village. Forest produce is their traditional natural resources to smooth running the livelihood. Their economy was subsistence in nature. Forest is the economic resources in the rural Bengal. The study revealed that most of snake charmers' livelihoods is depend on the forest resources. The forest resources are snakes (venom and Non-venom snake) hunting and gathering the root of the medicinal plant and leaves. Their snake charming work with deadly venom and non-venom snakes. Mainly, do their performing on the village or urban street, or market and along with sell the herbal medicines. Their common earning sources are maintained their livelihood. In 1972 Animals Right Acts are prohibited in whole areas. So, the snake charmers are can't catch openly snake catch and charming work and snake charmers are punished by the government administrators. In the study villages young men and women are employed to the different occupational work i.e., agricultural labor, day labour, and small business.

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