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EMPOWERMENT OF TRIBAL WOMEN IN FOREST-BASED LIVELIHOODS: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF GOVERNMENT MEASURES IN SOUTHERN KERALA

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ABSTRACT: Tribal women in Kerala constitute a vital component of forest-based livelihood systems, particularly in the collection and marketing of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs). Despite their significant economic contribution, they have historically faced socio-economic marginalization, limited market access, price instability, and inadequate institutional support. The Government of Kerala, through agencies such as the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department and the Scheduled Tribes Development Department, has implemented targeted interventions including Vanasree outlets, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs), and the Minimum Support Price (MSP) scheme for Minor Forest Produce to enhance income security and promote women's empowerment. The present study adopts a descriptive and analytical research design and is based on primary data collected from 60 tribal women engaged in forest resource collection and marketing in Southern Kerala. Data were gathered through a structured interview schedule and analyzed using percentage and tabular methods. The findings reveal moderate awareness and active participation in government schemes, with a majority of respondents reporting improvement in income and socio-economic status. However, persistent challenges such as price fluctuations, transportation constraints, and limited value-addition infrastructure continue to affect livelihood sustainability.

KEYWORDS: Tribal Women; Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFP); Government Interventions; Vanasree; Van Dhan Vikas Kendra; Livelihood Empowerment; Southern Kerala; Forest-Based Economy; MSP for MFP; Socio-Economic Development.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Kerala, known for its rich biodiversity and forest resources, is home to several Scheduled Tribe communities who traditionally depend on forests for their livelihood. A significant proportion of tribal women are actively engaged in the collection and marketing of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as honey, medicinal plants, bamboo products, and wild spices. These activities contribute substantially to household income and food security.

Recognizing the socio-economic vulnerabilities of tribal women, the Government of Kerala has implemented various measures through institutions such as the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, Scheduled Tribes Development Department, Kudumbashree Mission, and Kerala State Forest Development Agency. Programs such as Vanasree, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, MSP for MFP, and women-oriented livelihood schemes aim at enhancing income, eliminating middlemen exploitation, and promoting value addition and entrepreneurship. This study attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of such measures among tribal women in Southern Kerala.

2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Tribal women in Southern Kerala have traditionally depended on forest resources for their livelihood, particularly through the collection and marketing of Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs) such as honey, medicinal plants, bamboo, and wild spices. Although the Government of Kerala has introduced several welfare and livelihood support schemes through agencies like the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department and the Scheduled Tribes Development Department, many tribal women continue to experience socio-economic vulnerabilities. These include price instability, inadequate storage and transportation facilities, and limited awareness about government schemes, low educational attainment, and restricted access to formal markets.

While institutional mechanisms such as Vanasree outlets, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, and MSP schemes aim to ensure fair pricing and value addition, their actual effectiveness at the grassroots level requires empirical evaluation. It remains unclear whether these measures have substantially improved income levels, strengthened market participation, and enhanced the socio-economic empowerment of tribal women. Therefore, there is a need to systematically examine the extent to which government interventions have succeeded in uplifting tribal women engaged in forest resource collection and marketing in Southern Kerala.

3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Yogi, R., Singh, A., Kumar, N., & Sharma, K. (2018)) conducted a comparative study on procurement and marketing practices of Minor Forest Produce in Andhra Pradesh and Orissa. The study revealed lower procurement costs in Andhra Pradesh and exposed exploitation by intermediaries in both states.

N. Vijaykumar and K.N. Ushadevi (2022) investigated the problems faced by women tribals in the collection and marketing of NTFPs in Kerala. The study highlighted issues such as middlemen exploitation, lack of market access, and inadequate institutional support.

Pokhrel, D., & Thapa, G. (2007). (2019) made an attempt to know about Tribal Farmer's Agricultural needs and Accessibility in Attappady Block Palakkad district. It also tries to examine the channels of information communication and sources of information used by women tribal farmers.

The tribal women contribute significantly to family income through collection of forest produce and participation in eco-development activities, their opportunities for formal market access, leadership in cooperative structures, and equitable income remain constrained, necessitating targeted policy support for empowerment and inclusive development.(<https://vanasree.in/>)

4. NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

The present study is necessary because tribal women constitute a vital yet economically vulnerable segment of Kerala's forest-dependent population. Their contribution to the collection and preservation

of forest resources is substantial, yet their economic returns often remain marginal due to structural disadvantages and market inefficiencies. Evaluating the effectiveness of government schemes provides crucial insights into whether policy initiatives have translated into tangible improvements in livelihood security, income stability, and social empowerment.

5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- I.To analyse the socio-economic profile of tribal women engaged in forest resource collection.
- II.To examine awareness and participation in government schemes.
- III.To evaluate the impact of government measures on income and livelihood security.
- IV.To identify challenges faced in marketing forest products.

6. METHODOLOGY

The present study adopted a descriptive and analytical research design to examine the effectiveness of government measures for the upliftment of tribal women engaged in the collection and marketing of forest resources in Southern Kerala. The study was primarily based on primary data collected from 60 tribal women respondents selected from forest fringe areas using a convenience sampling method. Data were gathered through a structured interview schedule to ensure clarity and reliability, considering the educational background of the respondents. Secondary data were obtained from reports and publications of the Kerala Forest and Wildlife Department, Scheduled Tribes Development Department, and related official documents to support the analysis. The collected data were classified, tabulated, and analysed using percentage analysis and simple descriptive statistical tools, and the results were presented in tables to substantiate the objectives of the study.

7. ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION OF DATA

Table 1: Age Profile of Respondents

Age	No.of respondents	Percentage
Below 30	12	20
30–40	22	37
40–50	18	30
Above 50	8	13.3%
Total	60	100

Interpretation: Majority (37%) belong to 30–40 years age group, indicating active working population involvement.

Table 2: Educational Qualification

Qualification	No. of respondents	Percentage
Illiterate	15	25
Primary	20	33
Secondary	18	30
Higher Secondary & Above	7	12
Total	60	100

Interpretation: Educational attainment is low; 58.3% have only primary or no formal education.

Table 3: Awareness of Government Schemes

Scheme	Awareness	Percentage
Fully Aware	24	40
Partially Aware	26	43
Not aware	10	17
Total	60	100

Interpretation: Though awareness is moderate, complete awareness remains limited.

Table 4: Participation in Government Programs (Vanasree / VDVK / MSP)

Participation level	No	Percentage
Active Participant	32	53
Occasional	18	30
Not Participating	10	17
Total	60	100

Interpretation: More than half actively participate, showing scheme penetration.

Table 5: Change in Income after Government Intervention

Change in income	No.	Percentage
Significant Increase	20	33
Moderate Increase	25	42
No Change	10	17
Decrease	5	8
Total	60	100

Interpretation: 75% experienced improvement in income, indicating positive impact.

Table 6: Major Problems Faced in Marketing

Problem	No.	Percentage
Price Fluctuation	18	30
Transportation Issues	14	23
Lack of Storage	12	20
Limited Market Access	10	17
Middlemen Exploitation	6	10
Total	60	100

Interpretation: Price instability and transportation issues are major challenges.

8. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

- (i) Majority respondents are middle-aged women actively engaged in forest-based livelihoods.
- (ii) Educational level is generally low.
- (iii) Awareness of schemes is moderate but not universal.
- (iv) More than half participate in Vanasree and related initiatives.
- (v) Government interventions have positively influenced income levels.
- (vi) Price fluctuation remains a major issue.
- (vii) Marketing infrastructure needs strengthening.
- (viii) Training and value addition improved earning capacity.
- (ix) Women reported increased self-confidence and social participation.
- (x) Seasonal dependency on forest produce still affects income stability.

9. CONCLUSION

The Government of Kerala has undertaken several commendable measures to uplift tribal women engaged in forest resource collection and marketing. Institutional mechanisms like Vanasree, Van Dhan Vikas Kendras, and MSP for MFP have reduced exploitation and enhanced income opportunities. The integration of livelihood schemes with women empowerment initiatives has improved socio-economic conditions to a considerable extent.

However, gaps remain in awareness, infrastructure, storage facilities, and price stabilization. Strengthening market linkages, improving training, ensuring consistent MSP implementation, and expanding value-addition units can further enhance the sustainability of tribal women's livelihoods.

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