

ODISHA'S FOREST PRODUCE GATHERERS HIT HARD

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Tribal women carrying firewood and other forest produce to the weekly market in Malkangiri district. BiswaRanjan ROUTBISWARANJANROUT

For the second year running, forest dwellers across Odisha have been deprived of the right price for the non-timber forest produce (NTFP) gathered by them.

With the COVID-19 pandemic disrupting local economies across the country, the NTFP market in Odisha has also suffered due to the absence of adequate buyers this year. "Last year, when the COVID-19 pandemic surfaced, forest dwellers, especially tribals, could not get the price for their produce and even failed to dispose of NTFP stocks. After a year, the crisis has deepened further and hit them again," said Chittaranjan Pani, an expert on the NTFP market.

Around this time, tribals collect *sal* leaves, *siali* leaves, *mohua* flowers, mango kernel, *karanja* seeds, *char* seeds and tamarind. The hard cash earned by forest dwellers and tribals in the summer helps them survive the critical four monsoon months and use the money in agricultural activities.

This year, the spread of COVID-19 infections was more profound in the rural and tribal hinterland. Unscrupulous traders took advantage of the fear prevailing in society and reduced the purchase price of NTFPs. Sources said NTFP gatherers sold their forest produce at lower prices, before government agencies intervened.

Tribal activists also expressed anguish over the alleged apathetic approach of government agencies in ensuring the right price for NTFP. "Government agencies delayed procurement of NTFP," Mr. Pani pointed out.

He alleged that the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) promoted Van Dhan Vikash Kendra, which was introduced to create a market for minor forest produce while ensuring minimum support price, but it could not perform to its potential.

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