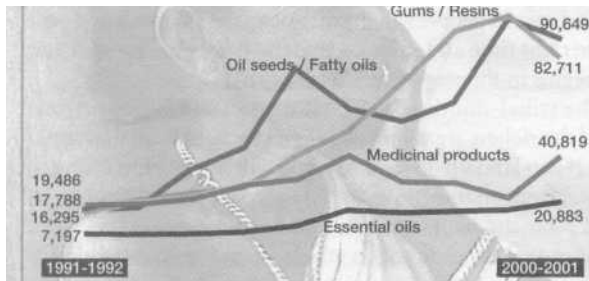


DOWN TO EARTH  
28 FEB 2003

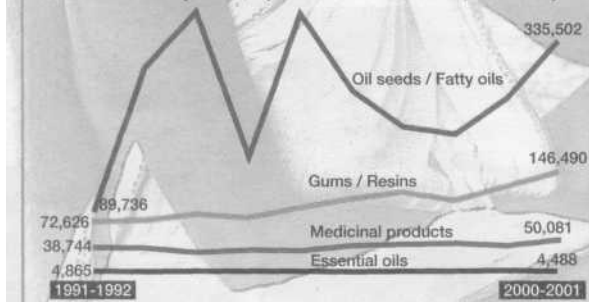
### Super earnings

Money from exports (select MFP items; Rs lakh)



### Super produce

Quantities exported (select MFP items; tonnes)

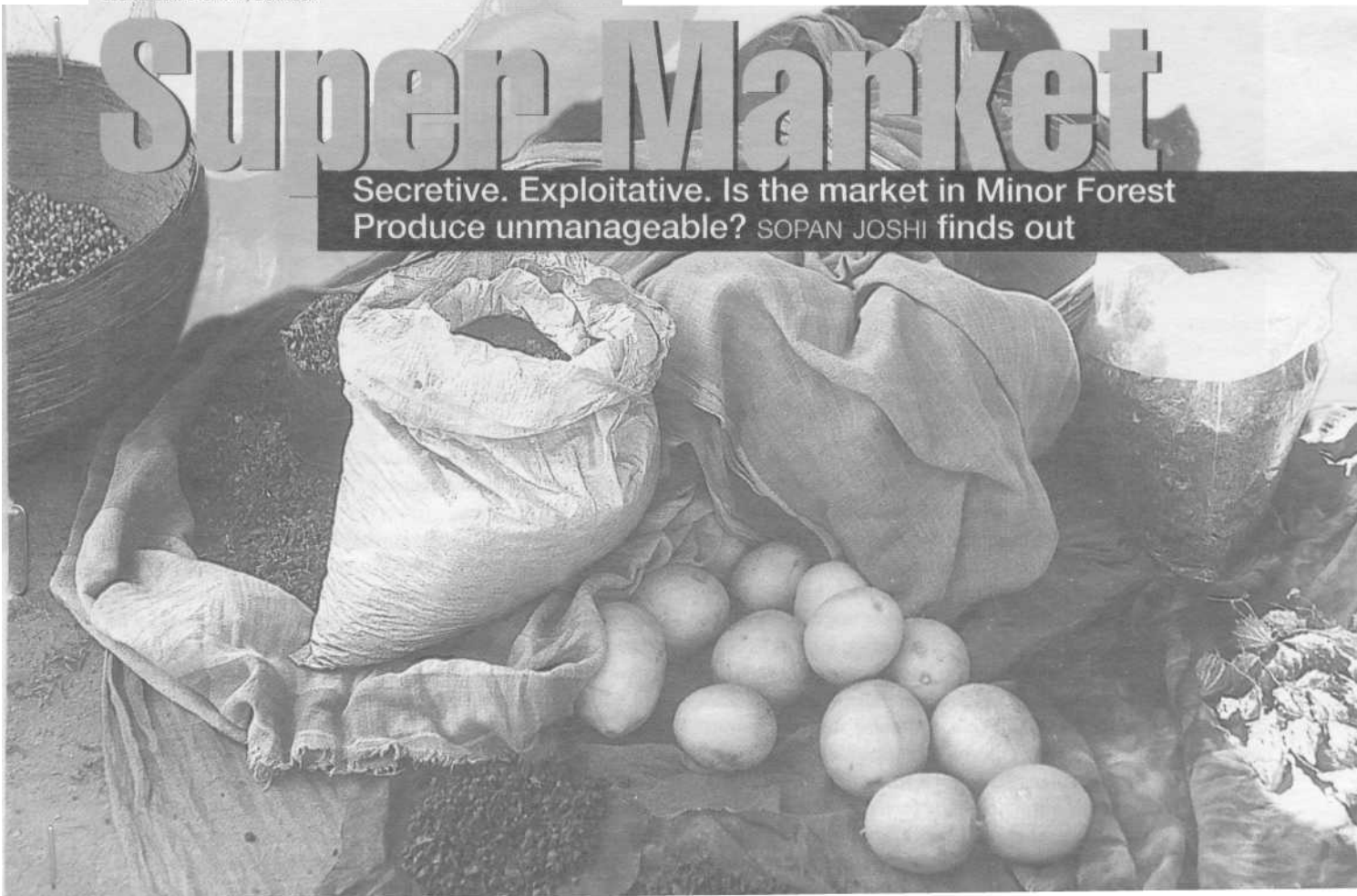


Source: Centre for MFP, Dehradun

- India has 16,000 recorded plant species. About 3,000 of these yield minor forest produce (MFP).
- Nearly 500 million people living in and around forests in India depend on MFP for sustenance and as a supplement to their income
- Studies in Orissa, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Bihar indicate that over 80 per cent of forest dwellers depend entirely on MFP; 17 per cent of landless people depend on the daily wage labour of collecting MFP; and 39 per cent of people are involved in MFP collection as a subsidiary occupation
- MFP-based small-scale enterprises provide up to 50 per cent of income for 20-30 per cent of the rural labour force in India
- 55 per cent of employment in the forestry sector is attributed to the MFP sub-sector
- Over 50 per cent of the revenues earned by the forest department comes from MFP. Growth of revenues from MFP have generally been 40 per cent higher than timber
- The share of total export earnings from MFP ranges from 56.5 per cent to 75 per cent of the total exports of forest produce including timber

# Super Market

Secretive. Exploitative. Is the market in Minor Forest Produce unmanageable? SOPAN JOSHI finds out

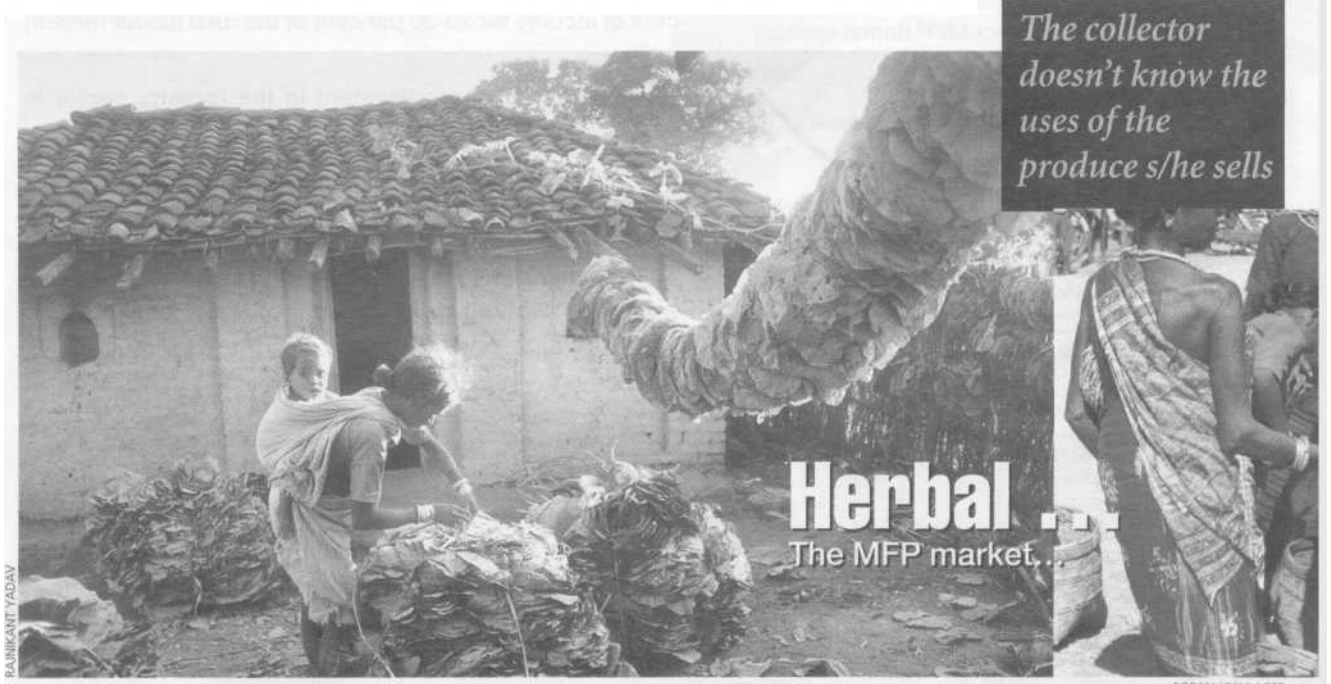


**F**orest produce Value addition' — perhaps a factory of ayurvedic drugs in Ghaziabad that needs *aonla* or a tannery in Kanpur that uses *harra* seeds to cure leather — occurs through a complex web of collectors/gatherers, retailers, wholesalers, exporters, suppliers and commission agents.

The people who roam the forest to collect MFP are the most neglected hub in the web — they live in poorly connected villages close to the forest. They can get income from the MFP market, huge even by conservative estimates. "But this market is unorganised and very secretive," says Arvind Boaz, a forest officer in Chhattisgarh. If you ask a person gathering the seeds of, say, sal in the forest, it is very unlikely that s/he would know it is used as emulsifier in chocolates. Unaware of the commer-

some forest produce." The yield of sal seeds can vary by four times from one year to the next, says A K Singh, executive director of the MFP Federation of Chhattisgarh. This varying demand means people who have the capacity to stock and wait for the right time and price — traders — rule the roost. Their grip begins in the weekly markets (*haats*).

The tribal-dominated Bastar district in Chhattisgarh is one of the richest areas for MFP. *Haats* are held in all major villages. If you land up on *haat* day, you will see tribals walking to the *haat* from all directions, carrying fresh collections in small sacks. Near the *haat* stand middle-aged men next to a cloth spread out on the ground, on which are neat mounds — seeds of *harra*, cocoons that yield the famous *kosa* silk of Bastar, or beeswax used to make bell



cial worth of what they collect, they sell it for a pittance — desperate for whatever little they can get, lacking the means to go and find a more lucrative market. Moreover, because they sell in small quantities, they never get a good price.

Traders and manufacturers, on the other hand, are mostly unaware of the forest from where their stock comes. In fact, a lot of what is sold in the market is illegal. "A Mumbai company sent us its brochure and offered to buy any MFP or MFP technology that we might have to offer," says P P Bhojvaid, head of the non-wood forest product division of the Forest Research Institute (FRI), Dehradun. "I checked the MFP mentioned in the brochure; 18 of the 20 names were included in the Red Data Book of the World Conservation Union."

The market being so cloudy, information is at a premium — current rates in local and national markets; stocks of a particular tuber or seed available in a particular area; the quality of stock in a particular season; which area produces good quality leaves of a particular plant. Such information is crucial; MFP yield is extremely variable — the forest is not a cultivated field. Says N C Saxena, former secretary to the Planning Commission: "If agricultural production varies by 25 per cent, production of MFP can vary by more than 100 per cent for

metal figurines. These men are *kochiyas* (middlemen), the agents of the traders.

The *kochiyas* speak the language of the tribals and in many cases shell out loans as advance payment for MFP. They hustle the tribals, cheating them on weights and rates — tribals mostly count in traditional scales and are unfamiliar with the metric measure. The tribals have to sell; they need the money to buy weekly supplies.

What the *kochiya* cheats is what he earns. He sells his proceeds to the local trader, who typically belongs to communities prominent in commerce. If a particular MFP is used locally, this trader stocks it till the price rises in the off-season. For example, they buy *mahua* flowers (used to make the famous *mahua* liquor) during spring for Rs 5 per kg from the tribals and sell it back to them in winter for Rs 10 per kg. In the case of produce that goes out of the regional market, they act as wholesale suppliers to stockists and commission agents in towns and cities. They are also the ones who can 'manage' a transport permit from the forest department, making them invaluable. Traders in big cities do not have the local presence to obtain these permits, but they are the ones who are connected across the country.

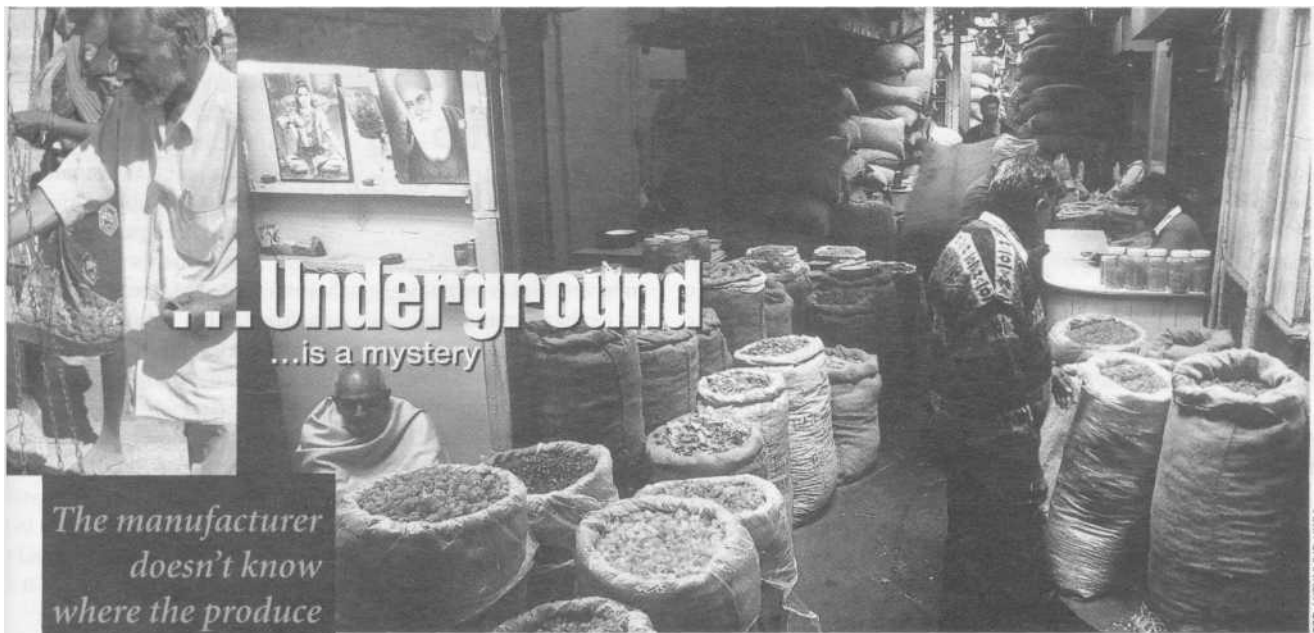
Dhamtari, 70 km south of Chhattisgarh's capital Raipur, is arguably India's biggest MFP market, especially when it comes to medicinal herbs, which Boaz says comprises an estimated 75 per cent of the MFP trade. Station Road in Dhamtari is the hub of the medicinal plant trade, and there are several shops in a small area, including that of Satyanarayan Rathi, reputed to be the biggest trader of medicinal herbs.

Other important trade centres include Jagdalpur in Bastar, Katni in Madhya Pradesh, Saharanpur in Uttar Pradesh (which handles supplies from the forest-rich state Uttaranchal), and Khari Baoli in Old Delhi's Chandni Chowk. A bulk of the export market is handled from Mumbai. But the traders in these places guard all information like their life depends on it. They operate from small shops that are front offices — the godowns are hidden from the public eye. These wholesalers have the pulse of the national market and have contacts in the industries that use MFP. They operate on small margins in price, and they make their money by selling in bulk. But why do manufacturers play into the hands of these

herbal only for name's sake." Rajiv Maheshwari, one of the largest herb traders in Delhi's Khari Baoli, says the market for herbal products is very fickle and depends mainly on advertisements: "Most of the herbs sold here are to make so-called aphrodisiacs and tonics like *chyavanprash*."

Business insiders say that the real potential lies in exports. "But there are 15 'alternative' systems of medicine that record exports higher than those of Ayurved. The Chinese government protects its herbal exporters the way the us protects its oil interests in the Gulf. The Indian governments organises seminars and asks traders and manufacturers to give fair prices to the collectors," says Sharma.

The regulations regarding MFP export are not very clear. According to the Union ministry of environment and forests, the Ex-Im Policy prohibits export of MFP in the form of raw materials (seeds, roots, leaves, barks and stems). But the National Medicinal Plants Board (under the Union ministry of health and family welfare's department of Indian systems of medicine), offers a conflicting view: India is losing millions in



The manufacturer  
doesn't know  
where the produce  
has come from

... Underground  
... is a mystery

traders? Why don't they buy from the collectors and growers?

"I have had herb growers and MFP collectors come to me and offer to sell me good quality herbs," says Paranjay Sharma, president of Baidyanath, one of India's largest Ayurvedic drug manufacturers. "They want the same rates as the traders, and they want down payment. Why should I jeopardise my relationship with the traders who supply on credit? Large companies typically pay 45 days after delivery — that, too, after quality checks and rejection of low-grade supplies. Besides, the trader supplies as and when I get orders from the distributors. The growers can't provide any of these services."

Sharma is worried about Ayurvedic medicines losing popularity: "Most manufacturers have recorded a dip in the sales of Ayurvedic drugs in the past year or two. The rise is in herbal cosmetics, and everybody knows most of these products are

forex because it exports only raw materials. Export of value-added products is difficult as most industrialised countries require certification of 'good sourcing practices' to ensure the quality of the products and that it has been harvested sustainably. As yet, there is no certification authority, "MFP is one of the most secretive part of India's export sector," says M P Shiva of the Centre for MFP, a non-governmental organisation in Dehradun, which has done a yeoman's service in documenting information on MFP.

One thing however is very clear, however — all these uncertainties make sure that the collectors of MFP can never get a fair deal. Governments haven't been totally blind to this. Beginning in the 1960s, several efforts have been made to regulate and nationalise at least some important items to ensure steady income to MFP collectors and take the MFP market out of the clutches of private operators. A few of these efforts attained some success, but mostly it is a tale of failures.



*amta* has changed to the bittersweet of *harra*, finally giving way to astringent *aonla*. I have had a taste of the forest, literally.

My guide Naresh Biswas asks Karelal to describe a few Baiga traditions of forest use. He does so, desultorily. At the time of delivery, the Baiga need the bark of the *kalla* tree. The tree is offered food and incense, followed by an incantation to the vegetation god. Thereafter, the bark is taken off with an axe — but only as much as comes off in one strike. The bark of the *tinsa* tree is used to treat headaches. But one has to hold one's breath, walk around the tree thrice, and then take out as much bark as comes off with one strike. Some trees require coconut offerings, others marijuana, and some others prefer liquor. If these customs are ignored, the medicinal agents fade away. Tife

## A trip, and a tip

The Baiga sport long hair; Karelal has cut his

Karelal lives in the forest colony of Auraghoghra near Mavai town in Dindori district, Madhya Pradesh. The courtyard of his house is a diverse exhibition of Baiga faith/local ecology. (Researchers estimate that the Baiga collect more MFP than any other forest-dwelling community in the world.) On the fence sits a cow's skull, warding off the evil eye. In a corner lies dried grass that will make the rough brooms called *chhindjhadu*. Two dogs, a hen and some chicken. Red flowers called *amta*, eaten as well as used to garnish food. Ramvati, Karelal's wife, offers some; it tastes sour. There is mushroom lying in the shade. Karelal pulls out a seed from a bag. This is *harra*; Karelal has a cold, *harra* helps.

I ask him to take us around the forest. He reluctantly consents. A little way from his house he points to some dry foliage, reaches under, and shows a creeper. With his pick, he pulls out its tuber. It is called *tin paniya* and is a tonic for general weakness. A few feet further, he digs out another tuber called *ravi kanda*, which alleviates indigestion. Then there is *van rai* (to treat asthma), *bai biding* (for arthritis), *muhmundi* (for swelling), *dudhiya* (which increases milk yield of cattle) and *phulbuhari* (the long, soft grass used for brooms sold in cities). In fifteen minutes he has shown me more plants and their uses than I care to note. I have been chewing. The sour taste of

inherent idea is ecological — that the source of benefits should not be exploited mindlessly. Such is the core of the Baiga ethos.

Here is their creation myth: Naga Baiga, the first human, refused to be the ruler of the world and recommended that it be given to his younger brother, the Gond. God was so pleased with such selflessness that he appointed Naga Baiga guardian of the earth. This required that he not tear into the earth with a plough. So, he was given the concession of *bewar* (shifting cultivation). "You will cut down trees and burn them and sow your seed in the ashes. But you will never become rich, for if you did you would forsake the earth, and then there would be no one to guard it and keep its 'nails' in place."

These 'nails' are the trees that hold the soil together. But today, the Baiga cannot keep it in place. The forest department does (it has also banned shifting cultivation). Baiga people were forced to 'settle down' and till the soil. As for Karelal, Baiga customs leave him impatient today. As we prepare to turn back to the village, he quietly asks for a tip. I comply.

### Karelal

What he earns, or doesn't

MFP collected	Market price (Rupees)					
	Local	Chhindwada*	Katni*	Dhamtari**	Raipur**	National
Bai Biding (15 Kg/year)	600	900	1,200	900	975	1,275
Van Jira (12 Kg/year)	180	480	NA	420	540	NA
Van Tulsi (60 Kg/year)	900	2,400	NA	2,100	2,700	NA
Musli (17 Kg/year)	680	NA	11,900	NA	1,700	23,800
Mahua (200 Kg/year)	600	1,000	750	1,000	900	NA

Source: Rates compiled by Naresh K Biswas of Nai Disha, Sijhora, Madhya Pradesh

### Auraghoghra forest colony

What the 18 families earn, or don't

MFP collected	Market price (Rupees)					
	Local	Chhindwada	Katni	Dhamtari	Raipur	National
Bai Biding (268 Kg/year)	10,720	16,080	21,440	16,080	17,420	22,780
Van Jira (142 Kg/year)	2,130	5,680	NA	4,970	6,390	NA
Van Tulsi (350 Kg/year)	5,250	14,000	NA	12,250	15,750	NA
Musli (346 Kg/year)	13,840	NA	2,42,200	NA	34,600	4,84,400
Mahua (1,525 Kg/year)	4,575	7,625	5,718	7,625	6,882	NA

\*Market in Madhya Pradesh; \*\*Market in Chhattisgarh; NA: not available

# The tendu leaf

## Makes/breaks governments

The *tendu* tree (*Diospyros melanoxylon*) is found widely across central India. Leaves plucked from its shrubs are used to wrap *bidi*, the poor man's cigarette. About 550 billion pieces of *bidi* (rolled by 10 million people) are sold every year in India, according to the All India Bidi Industry Federation. Moreover, gathering *tendu* is labour-intensive and employs millions of tribals during the lean month of May, when they have very little else to earn from.

It was in the 1960s that governments realised the commercial value of *tendu*. Most of the land from which *tendu* was plucked belonged to the state governments. *Tendu* leaves were sold unplucked to contractors, who under-reported the collections. This resulted in revenue loss. The tribal people who collected these leaves also got precious little. Several states decided to change this and passed laws to 'nationalise' the *tendu* trade in the 1960s-1970s. The purpose: to ensure maximum revenue for the governments and better returns to the tribal collectors. The most crucial in this was Madhya Pradesh (MP), the largest state in India at that time. Before Chhattisgarh (CG) was created out of it in 2000, MP produced about 45 per cent of the country's total harvest of *tendu*. Now, it is about 25 per cent. The collection of leaves and rolling of *bidi* constitutes a sector worth an estimated Rs 2,000 crore in MP and CG.

When the MP government monopolised the *tendu* trade, the state was carved up into 1,826 collection units. Collection agents were appointed for each unit, responsible for getting the leaves plucked and delivered to the buyer. "The agents and buyers were from the same business interests and they misrepresented the collection and sale figures to cheat the government of royalty," says Ranu Bhogal, Bhopal-based forestry researcher. Loss of government revenue and collectors' wages continued unabated.

This changed in 1980, when the state government started charging lump sums

on rates based on 15-year averages. Government revenue increased, but the collectors were still underpaid. Tribals represented a large proportion of the state's population, and any move to benefit them was likely to garner political support. Arjun Singh, chief minister in 1984, saw this opportunity. He created the MP MFP (Trading & Development) Cooperative Federation Limited. The forest department was entrusted with the collection. The first two years saw the tribals' earnings rise, and Singh's political career rose in direct proportion. Nationalisation was a good means to further the Congress agenda and take the trade away from the contractors', by and large supporters of the Bharatiya Janata Party.

"The system worked well for the first two years. The MFP

## State monopoly

Revenue from nationalised MFP (Rs lakh)

MFP	Madhya Pradesh	Chhattisgarh
Tendu	22,390.59	11,666
Sal seeds	44.98	15.99
Harra	97.69	2.07
Classified Resins	392.27	0.25
Total	22,925.53	11,684.31

Source: MFP Federations of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh

Federation became a cash rich organisation. Then populism took over. The wages paid to the collectors began to be hiked before elections," says a senior official, in the MP administration at that time. Seeing such money happening, non-tribals got into the act. Soon, tractors started going into the forest to pull out entire plants. Although care was taken to appoint officers with good reputations to the MFP Federation, corruption in the forest department ensured that the federation started losing money. Other states started taking the *tendu* business

seriously. (Saxena points out that Orissa accounts for 13 per cent of total *tendu* leaf production in the country today and produces the best quality leaves; it accounts for 75-80 per cent of the total revenue from forest.) Having cornered the tribal vote, the state government set its eyes on the *bidi* workers — it hiked the minimum wage of the *bidi* workers, much to the chagrin of the *bidi* industry. The industry responded by moving out of MP to neighbouring states like Maharashtra.

The MFP Federation had been envisioned along the lines of a cooperative. In 1988, a three-tier cooperative structure for the *tendu* trade was established to promote people to take over the trade. In 1998, an executive order was passed in MP to implement the Provisions of Panchayats (Extension to Scheduled Areas) Act, 1996 (PESA). Under this, the net profit of the *tendu* trade was to be returned as bonus to the collectors, the 'owners' of MFP under PESA. NOW, 50 per cent of the net profit goes directly to the gatherers, 30 per cent to the primary cooperative societies (to be distributed in proportion to the leaves collected), and the remaining 20 per cent is used for the purpose of regenerating forests.

The nationalisation of *tendu* in MP was indeed a

Any move to benefit tribals is motivated by political capital



RANU PANDA

success in that it improved the economic lot of the primary gatherers. Orissa, by contrast, does not pass on the profits from the tendu trade to the gatherers. But even in MP, neither the cooperative structure nor the provisions of PESA were implemented truly. The MFP Federation became a cash cow, and the government didn't want to give up control over it. Till date, the administrative control of the cooperative structure is with the forest department, be it the primary societies at the village level, the district-level societies, or the state-level society. In fact, 18 years since its creation, the members of the state-level coordinating body are nominated, not elected.

"No village committee can handle a trade of more than Rs 200 crore. The nationalisation is merely to help people sell the produce. If the government gives up all control, market forces would take over, and things would revert to what they were in the 1960s," says K K Chakravarty, forest secretary of Chhattisgarh. But the fact is that nationalisation has created its own problems, such as a declining growth rate of the collection after a rise in the 1980s (see table: *Lessons of a leaf*).

The bad news for the *tendu* trade is that the *bidi* industry is declining. "*Bidi* is losing popularity to the tobacco *gutkha*. Our business is dying a slow death," says Ghanshyam Garg, president of the All India Tendu Patta Traders' Association (see graph: *Sunset industry*). The association itself has almost closed shop. As part of their future plan, the MFP federations of both MP and CG have started diversifying into other areas — the problem is that there is no other MFP that has a demand and market as stable as that of *tendu*. The leaf that launched a thousand political careers is losing importance.

## Lessons of a leaf

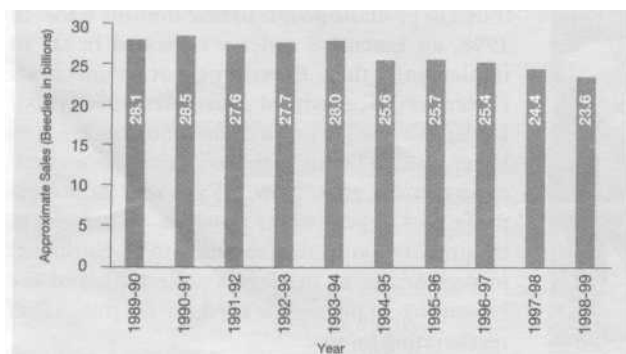
*Tendu* collection in Madhya Pradesh

Phase	Total period (years)	Collection per year (million standard bags)	Growth rate
1965-1980	15	2-3	+1.0
1981-1988	8	6-7	+5.93
1989-1996	8	4	-1.87

Source: Ram Prasad et al 1996, as cited in Ram Prasad 1999, *Non-wood Forest Products and Income Generation, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, Rome, March*, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/x2450e/x2450e0c.htm>

## Sunset industry

Ganesh Beedies, owner of the popular 501 *bidi* brand, accounts for 30 per cent of total sales in the organised sector. Sales have steadily declined



Source: Ganesh Beedies, Mangalore

## Why tendu trade hurts

Ask the naxals, too

Since 2001, the Chhattisgarh government has allowed private traders to directly purchase *tendu* leaf from Dantewada district in the state. Reason: collection had been steadily declining due to the influence of Naxalites in this region. Minor forest produce (MFP) is one of the main grounds of the Naxal-government conflict. A former collector of Bastar district, which earlier included Dantewada, describes this conflict: "When they started out, the Naxals were honest and the government machinery corrupt. Their fear made several government officers honest, but the power of the *tendu* trade corrupted the Naxals."

Naxals in the region prefer privatisation of the *tendu* trade. Traders don't mind paying protection money. Threats to officials led to some cases of the government refusing to buy *tendu* in areas with Naxal presence in the 1990s. This took away an important source of income from the tribals. Public pressure forced Naxals to relent, and the government's MFP Federation again started buying *tendu* leaves. In recent times, Naxals have come up with another way to hurt the government without hurting the people: they burn down the *tendu* stock after the government has bought it from the tribals, informs a senior government officer. The government doesn't have a response to this, so it now allows private traders to directly purchase *tendu* leaves in Dantewada.

## The Imli Andolan

### A policy failure

When it was launched, it was to be the model for forest-based rural development in tribal areas. Today, it is an example of what a government should not do. The Imli Andolan (Tamarind Campaign) was launched in February 1999 by the administration of the tribal-dominated Bastar district, which was then under Madhya Pradesh and is now in Chhattisgarh. The aim was to eliminate traders and middlemen from the trade of tamarind and other MFP. Self-help groups (SHGs) were created in villages through the panchayats and entrusted with collection, TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Ltd, an agency of the Union government's ministry of tribal welfare) agreed to buy and market all the produce.

The campaign was initiated by the then collector of Bastar, Pravir Krishn. He was moved when he caught a trader bartering salt for an MFP: "The salt bag was marked unfit for human and animal consumption. That was the worst form of exploitation I have ever seen," he told *Down To Earth* in 2000. The district administration estimated the tamarind trade to be worth Rs 1,000 crore in Bastar, of which tribals were losing about Rs 200 crore due to traders. Krishn and divisional forest officer (DFO) Sanjay Shukla then got together. "From my experience in Sarguja district and Shukla's experience in Mandla

district, we knew that marketing had to be in place, otherwise all schemes would fail. We tied up with TRIFED and told them to post a general-manager level officer at Bastar who had the power to take quick decisions based on the fluctuating market," Krishn said.

After the SHGS worked, more groups were created directly under the district panchayat, and these were called the Van Dhan Samitis (VDSS). TRIFED advanced funds to these *samitis* to purchase tamarind from villagers and sell it to the federation. The idea was to eliminate the profiteering middlemen. The district administration enforced the Krishi Upaj Mandi (Agricultural Produce Marketing) Act, which forbids traders from buying notified produces outside the marketing yards where the produce is auctioned. The weekly *haats* were monopolised by the SHGS. An SHG in Aasna village earned Rs 25,000 in just 15 days.

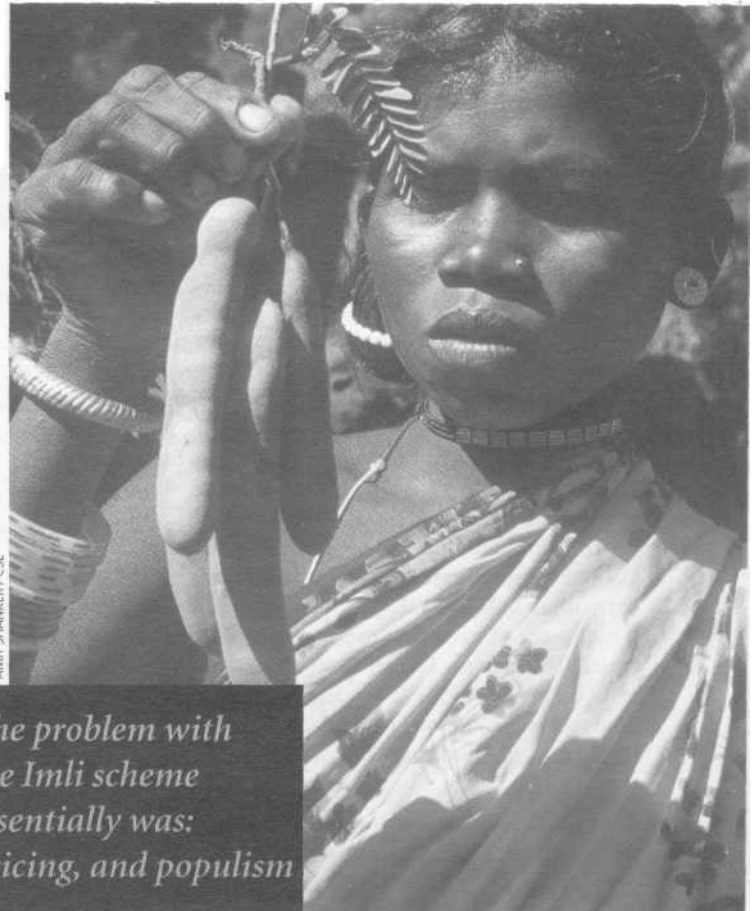
The media saluted the scheme as the model for tribal welfare. Ram Prasad, now principal chief conservator of forests in Madhya Pradesh, had added a word of caution. He had argued that the system depended too heavily on the district administration. After a first year of profit, market reality struck in 2000-01. TRIFED had bought more than it could sell. The scheme ended in May 2001. Krishn and Shukla were transferred and TRIFED left in the cold. The Cooperative Central Bank is now attempting to locate the key functionaries of the now defunct VDSS to collect its money.

Today, TRIFED has 10,000 tonnes of tamarind in cold storages — and losses in crores of rupees. Most of this is two-year-old stock. The bills of cold storage and transportation are piling up, with compounded interest. There is also some 300 tonnes of *harra*, but there is hope of a distress sale there. Every other day, TRIFED brings out tender notices in newspapers calling bids for the tamarind. Nobody applies. In February, the next crop of tamarind would start coming into the market, further reducing TRIFED'S chances of a distress sale.

Essentially, the problem was with pricing, and populism. An apex committee chaired by Krishn, with representatives from various departments, revised the rate at which *samitis* had to buy tamarind from the tribals. "Officers who didn't know rotten tamarind from quality stock were setting prices as if they knew the nitty-gritty of the MFP trade," says Kirit Doshi, senior journalist in Jagdalpur.

The prices set were much higher than the natural market rates. "You had people getting tamarind from neighbouring areas to sell it in Bastar because the rates were so high. It worked in the first year because the produce in the neighbouring areas wasn't that good. In the following years, there were bumper crops. They should have cut down the price to compensate. They didn't. The administration kept buying at rates of Rs 7 per kg when the market price was dropping below Rs 4 per kg," explains a trader in Jagdalpur.

A K Singh of Chhattisgarh's MFP Federation says the problem with a government scheme is that it can't be tailored to the market because the government can't cut down the price if the rate goes down. From 1998 to 2001, TRIFED had purchased tamarind worth Rs 50 crore. Traders bought tamarind from tribals in Orissa at Rs 2 a kg and sold it to TRIFED at Rs 6-8 per kg in 1999-2000. The market was aware that TRIFED was holding on to its stock. The more TRIFED waited for a better price,



*The problem with the Imli scheme essentially was: pricing, and populism*

the further the price dropped.

Today, the situation is back to pre-Andolan ways, TRIFED is trying to reclaim the money it loaned to the *samitis* and has reportedly sent legal notices to some. N C Saxena, former secretary to the Planning Commission, says TRIFED did not develop market linkages outside the district, as it sold most of its produce to the wholesalers operating within the district. It managed to reduce the role of village buyer but failed to break the hold of wholesalers, who control storage and contacts with the outside markets.

P C Dalei, revenue commissioner of Bastar division, describes how the scheme turned sour when there were cases of crowds turning violent against officers. He also points to complaints of corruption among the VDSS, which didn't purchase at the price they had been offered by TRIFED. M A Iqbal, a social activist in Jagdalpur, questions the wisdom of creating new *samitis* when there was already a cooperative structure in place to purchase *tendu* leaves. Doshi is very bitter about the media: "Journalists came in hordes to Jagdalpur at Pravir Krishn's invitation and wrote what they were told. They made traders look like villains without any appreciation of how a trader gathers market intelligence and knows when to get rid of stock, keeping the money rotating." A source at TRIFED refuses to blame traders for Imli Andolan's failure, saying that traders also suffered when the market crashed.

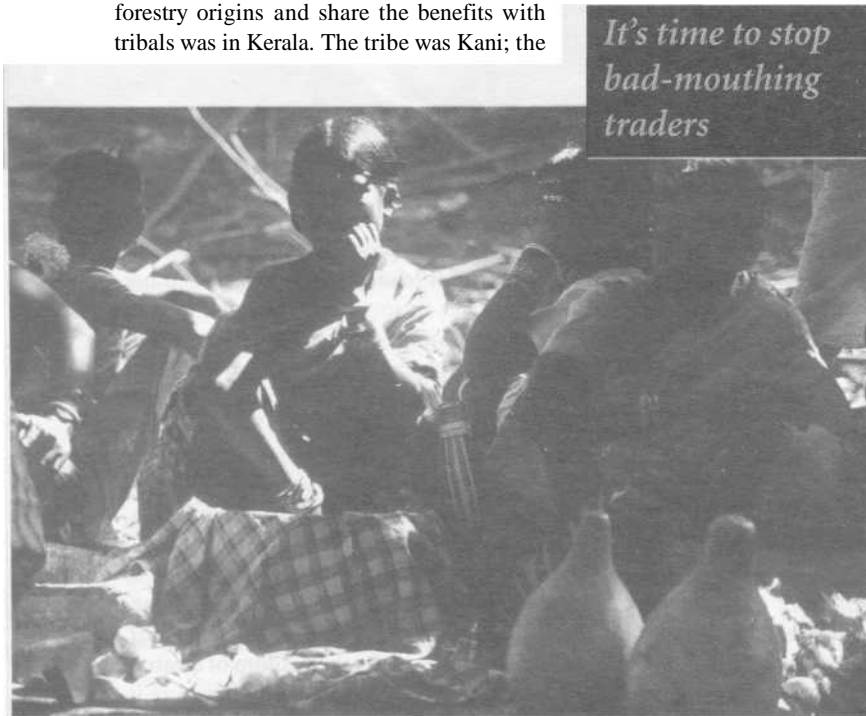
In celebration of the first anniversary of the Imli Andolan, a park was built in front of the TRIFED office within the collectorate premises at Jagdalpur, headquarters of Bastar district. Today, that park is a picture of neglect. In the middle of the park is a remarkably ugly cement tree with rusted iron vessels stuck to its branches, symbolising tamarind. The Mexican grass growing in the park is unkempt and the circular path has caved in at several places. The park looks like a surrealist sculptor's idea of a bad joke.

# Minority report

## Will the forest department rewrite it?

India's MFP sector is quite in the dark. Non-nationalised MFP items haven't been surveyed. "To manage a resource, you have to *know* what it is. I doubt if a working plan officer of a forest department can guarantee whether the species enlisted as MFP are present in the forest or no," says Bhojvaid of FRI. "Foresters all over the world have been trained only in management of timber, and not MFP. That's why it is difficult to get the contribution of MFP to the GDP of any region." The Indira Gandhi National Forest Academy in Dehradun put MFP in the curriculum only in 2001.

Absence of hard data means the forest department often issues blanket bans. To ban an MFP is to sign its death warrant, an open invitation for smugglers to take over. The first ingenious scheme to market a herbal product of forestry origins and share the benefits with tribals was in Kerala. The tribe was Kani; the



wonder herb was *arogyapacha*. The experiment didn't take off because the forest department didn't allow leaves cultivated by the Kani people inside the forest to be transported — it wasn't on their MFP list (see 'How to sell a wonder herb', *Down To Earth*, November 15, 1998).

No wonder the market is predominantly underground. Sensible forest officers — an overwhelmed minority — openly admit that forest service training doesn't prepare a person for marketing. Traders fear imported synthetic alternatives to MFP such as *harra*. This would strike at the very root of creating sustainable livelihood from forests. And poor people, driven to desperation by restrictions by foresters, are very likely to destroy the forests.

To be fair, there are some novel efforts, too. The MP MFP Federation is trying to sell herbal medicines in a recently ere-

ated shop called Sanjivani. Chhattisgarh has embarked on an ambitious project of creating a People's Protected Area in Bastar that precedes similar efforts throughout the state, PPA is about promoting sustainable harvest of MFP and making value-added products. The department would do well to culturally engage with the tribal people, instead of lecturing them on *in situ* conservation and *ex situ* cultivation. In Chhidgarh village of Bastar, the Adivasi Harijan Kalyan Samiti, an NGO, has shown success in organising women's groups to deal with, among other things, the MFP trade. Their success is rooted in an involvement with Gond culture that goes beyond the cliched 'local participation'. Foresters in Bastar are appreciative of this effort. Why not learn from it?

It is also time to stop bad-mouthing MFP traders. Herb traders are often criticised for exploiting tribals but they are in a business, according to Raipur-based herb expert Pankaj Oudhia: "I get the opportunities very frequently to meet and interact with these herb traders. They have rich traditional knowledge of medicinal uses of herbs in treating several common diseases." Oudhia has documented this knowledge. "It has become a fashion to decry the trader/money lender. When a poor person needs cash urgently at night, the government is never there. It is the local trader," says a forest officer. The National Medicinal Plants Board (NMPB) is holding consultations with, among others, traders and manufacturers. But the Herbs and Kirana Association of Delhi complains that these meetings are only for so-called experts to wax eloquent and present papers. Part of the board's agenda is to create an authority to certify value-added MFP products for exports.

How does one explain the ignorance of existing legal mechanisms, like PESA? No forester or bureaucrat has come out with a plausible plan to implement this legislation; most people don't even understand it. "Although the understanding of tradition embodied in PESA is rather simplistic, and historically naive, it can help people who are already organised," writes Nandini Sundar of the Institute of Economic Growth in Delhi. As yet, there are very few signs of preparing people to take up forestry.

The only solution that the governments have had to offer thus far is nationalisation. This hasn't worked in the long run, and among those who recognise its shortcomings is Ram Prasad, MP's principal chief conservator of forests. While private trade leads to exploitation, nationalised trade is plagued by the inefficiencies of the government, says N C Saxena. The best option, he reckons, would be for the government to announce minimum support price and mop up 30-40 per cent of the produce. As yet, there is no single-shot solution to organising the MFP market. V K Bahuguna, inspector general of forests with the MEF, talks of site-specific solutions. There are plenty of ideas. But will the forest department be open to them? If MFP is to play a crucial role in improving the lot of India's people and forests, the department needs to unlearn bureaucracy and re-learn business. Will it? •