

PALAMAU, Dhanbad, Ranchi, Singbhum and Santhal Parganas are the six districts which constitute the tribal region in south Bihar. The major tribes are Munda, Oraon, Ho, Kharia and Santhal. The largest tribal population is in Ranchi district, where it is 64.39 of the total population.

These tribals are also called aboriginal because they are the original inhabitants of this country. They live either deep inside or in the vicinity of the forest area. Their social, economic, cultural, and religious practices are closely interwoven with the forest life cycle.

At present, Bihar has only 17.7 percent of land under forest, whereas national forest policy has suggested that the economy requires 33 percent of land to be under forest. In India, the amount of wood cut annually for burning as fuel is so great that it equals the country's annual consumption of oil, coal and electricity put together. Forest dwellers not only use wood to cook their own food, but also sell it as fuel, this being one of their few sources of cash income. They consume vast quantities of wood for constructing huts, shelters, bullock carts, ploughs, ploughshares, tools and agricultural implements.

The Daily Journey

Anybody passing through Ranchi railway station or important road crossings in the early hours of the morning would come across columns of women with loads of fuelwood on their heads, going to the market to sell wood either to middlemen or to consumers. These women are popularly known as headloaders. Three girl students, Manju Bara, Irish Ekka and Victoria Soreng, undertook a study of the working conditions of these women.

Every evening about 250 headloaders come from nearby villages to Ranchi by the Burdwan passenger train at about 7.30 p.m. The women bring bundles of fuelwood and also other forest products such as *donas* made from sal leaves, *datun*, vegetables. On one occasion we travelled with them from

Women Headloaders In Tribal Bihar

This article is condensed from reports by N. G. Basu, T. Bhaduri, V. Surin and Victoria Soreng. The reports were based on a survey conducted by Xavier Institute of Social Science, Ranchi.

Tatiailwai to Ranchi. They occupied the reserved and unreserved second class compartments in the trains. The train was packed with wood and headloaders. Women carrying babies experienced more inconvenience. It was the middle of summer, and the babies were crying from hunger and thirst. One 16 year old girl fainted due to lack of air.

As the train neared Ranchi the women got busy preparing to unload the wood. Their minds and hearts were focused only on their wood. On reaching the railway station, they started counting the bundles. They were very cooperative to each other in unloading and counting the bundles. Then they spread out cloths on the platform and spent the night there. Some went off to sleep while others sat together, chatting or singing. They have to clear the platform at 5.30 a.m. Carrying their loads, they roam about the town. After selling the wood, they return to the station and go back home at 9.30 a.m. by the Burdwan passenger train.

Another group of about 60 women come to Ranchi in the morning by the Howrah and Kharagpur trains. Women also come by bus or truck from Jonha, Taimara and Gangahat. Some of them do not go to the forest to cut wood. They buy it from other women in the village at Re 1 or 1.50 a bundle, and sell it for Rs 2 or 2.50 a bundle in the town. Since they pay a bus fare of Rs 1.50 and a freight charge of 25 paise per bundle, their net income is not more than Rs 4 or 5 a day. This money, earned by the labour of eight

or ten hours, is spent on absolute necessities for their families.

Dependent On Forests

We also visited and surveyed seven villages in Bero block and three villages in Ormanjhi block, Ranchi district, to study the living conditions of these women. It was difficult to get the women to tell us their names because they realize that their occupation is considered illegal, and are afraid, having often been subjected to harassment. We conducted a house to house individual investigation in 170 households. In some villages we found that about half the households are engaged in headloading. In a majority of villages, more than 20 percent of households have headloading as their primary occupation. These households either have insufficient land or have upland and waste land where cultivation is hardly remunerative or certain. Most of these households belong to the scheduled tribes or backward communities.

A majority of the households have been engaged in this occupation only for the last five to 18 years. This shows that the occupation has its origin in recent years but is now attracting more people. About 20 percent of headloaders have headloading as a primary occupation but also perform day labour as a secondary occupation and cultivate their own land as a tertiary occupation. Another 50 percent are primarily engaged in cultivation, but engage in headloading as a secondary occupation. The headloader households depend heavily

on the forest, not only for the wood they cut and sell but also for their own food and other domestic necessities. They have to depend completely on forest food for three to four months of the year.

Cutting and selling of wood go through seasonal fluctuations. Two weeks before a tribal festival called *sarhul* and a fortnight after it, tribals generally do not enter the forest to gather wood and other products. However, when there is no alternative means of survival, economic compulsion does overrule this custom. During the rainy season, headloading goes through a lean period.

We found a difference of life style between headloaders of Bero and Kuchu. In Bero women get up early in the morning at about 4 a.m. and set out to cut wood in the forest. They return in the afternoon, and go to sell the wood the following day. The marketplaces are at Bero, Kuchu and Dih. In Kuchu the people are relatively better off. There are only four or five households in Jirabar who depend on headloading as a primary source of livelihood. The people sell only wood and keep the other forest products for their own consumption. Most of them also cultivate and sell vegetables. In this area, both men and women bring wood from the forest. In Kuchu women get up at about 4 a.m. and go to sell the wood at Barja, Chanday or Kanke which are at a distance of about six kilometres. They come back around noon, have lunch and go to the forest around 1.30 p.m. They cut wood there and return home around 6 p.m. Thus they are busy all day long in cutting and selling wood. We could find them at home only at noon and in the late evening.

Women's Work

We found that a majority of the headloaders are women. If a man is unemployed he may go along with the women to the forest to cut wood. But men hardly ever go on their own or in groups to cut wood, while women often go in groups to the forest. Why is this so? Maybe because women are responsible for feeding the family. They

need firewood to cook and some food to give the children. If there is no money where are they to get rice, oil and salt? Also, relatively more employment is available to men as day labourers. Women, day labourers are paid less than men, for doing the same work. According to tribal tradition and practice, women

forest guards.

While pursuing this occupation, women are exploited and harassed by all sorts of people. At each stage of their journey from the village to the market, they have to bribe various people at a regular rate ranging from 10 to 25 paise per bundle. The railway staff on the



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have better marketing, accounting and bargaining capacity than men. Women can wait for hours to get a better bargain while men get impatient in a few minutes' time. Women cannot always depend on men to feed the family. Even if the men earn some money, they are quite likely to spend it all on drink. Headloading thus provides an independent cash income to the women even though the returns are very meagre for so many hours of strenuous toil.

The headloaders generally work in a group whether in the forest or in the market. Though illiterate and apparently docile, they realize their group strength. When in a group, they are not afraid of

train, and at the station, and the police constables, get a share of these payments. In certain villages a "kautilya tax" system is practised. Each headloader household pays Rs 2.50 a week to the village headman, who distributes the money to the proper points, so as to ensure a carefree collection of fuelwood from the forests.

The women said that up to about eight years ago, they could collect wood for consumption and for sale within an easy distance, but now they have to trek a distance of eight to 10 kilometres every day. Previously the distance was such that they could make two trips a day to the forest but now even to make one trip

a day they have to start from home before dawn. They have to be up before 2 a.m. so as to finish the domestic work before setting out.

The long distances also mean that women cannot go to the market every day. Usually, one group of women goes to the market every second or third day. Households which have four or more women, can manage in a way that two of them go to collect wood while the other two go to the market to sell the previous day's collection. However, there are few such households.

Most of the women headloaders are in the age group of 25 to 40. A majority of male headloaders are below 15 and above 40, that is, men who do not easily find work as day labourers resort to this occupation.

When women headloaders return home in the evening, they cook the night meal and keep a portion of the cooked rice and one vegetable for the next midday meal. If this is not possible, the children themselves boil some rice in the morning, if there is any rice in the house. Children below the age of three are left in the care of children between five and 10, or with men or old women.

Suggested Remedies

It is time we realized that while the care of forests is a matter of grave concern, this care cannot be at the cost of those whose livelihood depends on the forests. The women, in the course of the interviews, showed awareness of the fact that denudation of the forests dries up their own source of livelihood, but they pointed out that even if they use the forest discriminately, the forest contractors are sure to continue cutting it indiscriminately. Therefore, they felt that they would rather grab as much as they can before the contractors destroy it completely. Much of the tribal unrest today, especially in Singhbhum, relates to this issue of the control of forests rather than to control of cultivable land.

Women's involvement in social forestry appears to be a necessary condition for the success of any forest development programme. A large number



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of women are employed as day labour by the forest department. Yet it appears as if forest management is the sacrosanct task of men alone. At present there is no place for women in the entire forest hierarchy.

Another measure which could help is legalization of firewood collection. Women are paying bribes at present. Instead, they could pay a small royalty to the government, and then collect fuelwood from specifically demarcated

areas in the forest. They would then themselves protect the forest, since they would feel that it is being preserved for their use. Better transport facilities could be organized for the women to go to market. They could also be encouraged to grow quick growing fuelwood trees and fodder close to their dwelling places. This would be another facet of community forestry, and would help save the rich reserve forests from denudation. □