

Impact of Forest Degradation and Community Forest Protection

on

Kabari Women

**Overview from Tangi-Ranpur Blocks
Khurda Forest Division in Orissa**

by

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Impact of Forest Degradation and Community Forest Protection on Kabari Women

The roles and responsibilities of men and women in Kabari community have undergone major changes over time with one of the major factors influencing change being changes in condition of forest. The analysis presented here is rudimentary based on discussions with Kabari men and women in villages in Tangi-Ranpur area and has not been corroborated with any in-depth exploration on the subject. These changes should be taken an indicative of the role forests plays in the lives of Kabari tribe and how degradation of forests has an impact on gender roles.

A phase wise analysis has been done relating forest degradation and the recent phenomena of forest protection with changing gender roles and the impact on role, responsibilities and livelihood of Kabari men and women.

Phase 1 Forest abundance and Balanced Gender Roles

In the initial phase when forests was abundant, Kabari people used to depend completely on forests for their survival. Majority of the forest products collected during that time was for direct consumption and only a few products were bartered for some essential things. During this time men and women went to the forest together. The forests were in close proximity. One person from the Kabari community recollected by saying, “*Tunga (edible forest roots) was even available near our “bada” (fence) from where forest started. We could collect Tunga, Karba, Pichuli etc. after lighting fire (on chullhas for cooking).*”

Women and men both collected several types of forest produces (see annexure - I) for the purpose of house hold consumption only. The men in the community used to gather herbal plants and roots to sell/ barter in the nearby villages. They also participated in hunting. As the men and women in the community remember they had never depended on outside for anything except (*lanka, luno and tela*) i.e. chilly, salt and oil.

Another important feature of this phase was that men and women in the community went to the forest together and there was no major distinction between their contribution to the sustenance of the family.

Phase 2 Forest Degradation: Changes in Gender Roles

This phase started with degradation of forests. Forests were no more an exclusive domain of the tribals. The secluded life of the Kabari had been broken open to the outside world.

The major change in this phase was that men and women went in different directions for earning livelihood. The men in the community took up labor work and stopped or reduced the time for going to the forests. The causes for such a change can be attributed to:

- i) requirement of cash,

ii) forest degradation resulting in loss/ reduction in availability of various forest produces upon which they could solely depend,

iii) less or no demand for the forest produces especially the herbal plants and roots in the locality.

In the initial period men took up labor work in the nearby areas and subsequently they went to other places in Orissa. This trend culminated in the male members of the community going out for “Dadan”¹ (seasonal migration) to far off places in all over India. While on “Dadan” they spend two to more than six months away from the family. The money they earn is basically for the purpose of meeting cash-based expenditures and large expenditures like marriage, rituals related to birth and death, house construction and expenditures on the same line. The relationship of the Kabari men with forest has been on the decrease since then.

With outmigration of men folk, women became concerned with the question of day to day survival of the family. With men being away from the family, the responsibilities of women multiplied manifold. They engaged themselves in arranging food for the family. And, for this purpose they grew more and more dependent on the already degrading forest. In this phase they started selling some forest produce in the local areas for being able to purchase the major food item, i.e. rice.

The newly acquired roles and responsibilities of the Kabari women got recognized by other members of the community and it became the responsibility of Kabari women to provide food for the family. And in the hand to mouth situation the women have no respite from the daily labour 365 days a year, year after year. { The woman member in VSS from Kabari Sahi in Kadamjhol village when asked why does she not raise the concerns of Kabari women in the VSS, said she is hardly able to attend the meetings, “ *my condition is no different (from other women affected adversely by forest protection), if I don't go to graze the cattle for a single day my family would go hungry that day : mu na jaye bhuli, jale nahin chuli.* }

The fact that one male member of the Kabari community proudly says, “ *they (our women) are males and we are females. Even if it rains for seven days our women would venture out to fetch food for the family,*” projects the responsibilities of a Kabari women and the way her roles have got recognized/ crystallized by other members of the community.

Since day to day sustenance of the family has become women's responsibility, they have no respite. The men go out for “dadan” for a few months and after that when they come back they recuperate from the hardships that they undergo. Even women feel concerned and express that “*poor things do very hard work when they are away and need to rest*”.

Phase 3 Forest degradation

Due to rapid degradation of forests, the forest started receding away from their habitation and forest products became increasingly scarce. This resulted in more hardship to the women of Kabari community as they had already developed economic dependence on forest for meeting the livelihood

¹Dadan : Seasonal migration for menial labour outside the State. Generally the trader/ middlemen who “trade in labour”, take the labour with them after fixing a rate for the entire period of work (five-six months) and the fixed amount is paid in advance while food, clothing and transportation from the village to place of work and back is provided for during the tenure of work/ job. Generally the amount paid is Rs. 300 per month only. The term is now used loosely to define seasonal migration.

necessities of the family. Forests remained no more near their fences. They had to start going to far off places for the collection of forest produces. As a direct result of forest degradation the choice of forest produce became limited and these Kabari women shifted from NTFP to fuelwood, bamboo and lai (creepers). This phase also witnessed the shift from house hold consumption of forest produce to marketing of such produces; because forest produces became scarce and there was need for few specific products like, fuelwood, bamboo and lai² in the local markets. Apart from this, the requirement for cash for the purpose of day to day living became essential. During this time barter system had already taken its exit giving way to a cash-based economy - thus, the earlier situation of forest to direct house hold consumption resulted in forest to market to house hold consumption kind of situation. And, the addition of a new stage resulted in the Kabari women taking up extra hardship.

Phase 4 Forest protection by Communities

The hardship and toil of the Kabari women increased tremendously with the initiation of forest protection by individual village communities. At the first instance, these women were branded as the major destroyers of forests and, thus, forbidden to enter the forest with axe or any other instruments. This put a major blow on their single source of livelihood. Nevertheless, the Kabari women avowedly searched for and traveled more and more to far off places to bring fuelwood, bamboo and lai and, they also took equal pains to market them. These women sometimes, travel for 3 to 4 days in order to bring those products. Added to that, they are very often subjected to harassment by the protecting villages.

As the forest protection gathered momentum, the Kabari women have got further marginalised in terms of their access to the forest. According to Kabari women in Kadamjholia village now almost all forest are out of their reach especially for livelihood dependence for fuelwood and bamboo for sale, according to them all these forests now have “boards” (proclaiming protection of these forests by a village committee) stuck on them bringing them under the control of one village or the other.

Phase 5 Competition for Forest based Livelihood

The women in the community talk of a rather new kind of situation in the recent days. In their expression, “*modern Kabaris have come who bring their cycles and bullock carts and take split wood to the market. We are unable to compete with them because we carry wood on our heads.*” Modern Kabari implies people from other castes apart from Kabari who have adopted selling of firewood as their occupation. These even include Brahmin caste people.

This has adversely affected the livelihood of the Kabari community. It has resulted in competition in getting the scarce forest produce as well as for marketing the product. Due to involvement of more and more people the area for selling firewood, bamboo and climbers got restricted and people and sellers of different areas stopped allowing these Kabari women from selling the forest produces in their respective localities. Consequently, they have to sell at a lower price. What adds to their hardship is that now they have to go to far off places both for getting the products as well as for selling them.

²Lai: Creeper used as rope for tying purposes in house construction, fence making, binding of fishing net and for other similar purposes. There are two types of lai sold locally (classified as per use) i.e. Khalua lai used for fishing purposes and Pathua lai used for construction purposes.

Changes in Gender Roles: Increasing Imbalances and other implications

In the struggle for livelihood the women from Kabari community have come a long way. The Kabari men have turned their faces away from the forest towards urban centers for cash which they never sufficiently earn. With all the tricks of exploitation superbly applied to the concept of ‘Dadan’ the men get far below from what they actually deserve. After returning from Dadan, the men folk spend half the year doing nothing and dissipate their energies in playing cards, alcoholism and other male group activities. However during this time when they are at home for half the year they hardly do anything to share the burden of daily toil with the women. Very few in the community has taken up land on share cropping basis.

The Kabari women, apart from their daylong forest activities, have the sole responsibility of doing other house hold chores. They even go to places at 12-15 km distance for selling the produces after having covered the same amount of distance for their collection. As a result of this, the children tend to get neglected and the burden of household chores falls on girl-children. In families where there aren’t any old women to take care of the young children they are either left with neighbors or taken along to the forest.

There has also been an impact on the overall cultural pattern of the Kabari Community. There is a famous proverb in Oriya that says, “*there are thirteen festivals in twelve months.*” In the context of general caste any festival can be observed on house hold basis without going into the larger community. However, in the tribal culture, in general, and the Kabari culture, in particular, there is not even a single occasion/festival which can be observed on household basis, i.e. they do most of their things in groups. However, in the recent days, there is a serious threat to such cohesiveness of the Kabari community. With their males away from home for almost half of the year and the women immersed in gathering the means of livelihood there is hardly time or sprit for celebration of festivities. The cultural homogeneity of the Kabari community is at the verge of collapse.

With their bonds with the forest broken and growing proximity with the semi-urban and urban centers there has been tremendous changes in their food, clothes and overall living habits. During a conversation with a group of Kabari individuals they said, “*earlier we never ate vegetables because we did not know they exist. It was only what we collected from the forest sustained us. But, now things like potato, onion, ginger, garlic, tomato, brinjal, dal, fish have become a daily necessity.*” The non-availability of various forest products which constituted an important part of the family nutrition as well as change in dietary habits (following this non-availability) necessitates increased spending of cash on food items and has added to the burden of subsistence. With women being the main providers for the family such factors have added to the strain on them.

The multiple roles as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law in the family as well as the main bread earners put unprecedented pressure on the Kabari women. The recent developments of forest protection by most villages in the vicinity and stopping of access to these forests for livelihood purposes puts additional strain on them which they are struggling hard to cope up with.

IMPACT ON THE SOCIO-CULTURAL PATTERNS OF THE KABARI COMMUNITY

PHASE OF COMPETITION

- 1) Competition in getting the forest products.
- 2) Travelled far off places for both to get the product and sell them off.
- 3) Competition for the area of marketing - marketing area got restricted as others did not allow to sell in their areas.
- 4) Low price due to competition.

PHASE OF PROTECTION

- 1) Forests got further marginalised in terms of their access.
- 2) They resorted to clandestine cutting.
- 3) Harassment by the protecting villages.
- 4) Travelled more far off places for forest produces - at times, 3-4 days for fuelwood and especially Nai (crippers).
- 5) Shift from HH consumption to marketing of forest produce.
 - i) Limited produce.ii) Need for such products in the markets.
 - iii) Requirement of cash for daily livelihood.
 - iv) Non-availability which they used to depend upon .

PHASE OF DEGRADATION

- 1) Moved from their fence-side forest to the forests at far off places.
- 2) Choice of produce become limited.
- 3) Shift from MFP to Fuelwood, Bamboo and Nai.

Women's work got recognised and binding upon them.

FEMALE

**Responsibility of the livelihood of entire family - basically arrangement the family.*

**Female dependent on forest*
i) nearby forests.
ii) Forests within 25 kms.

**Question of 365 days*

No such binding that the men will go for became labour each day or each season.

MALE

**Responsibility of the cash-based large expenditures like, marriage, rituals related to birth and death, house construction or repairing.*

**Male dependent on labor*
i) locally.
ii) nearby or within Orissa.
iii) outside Orissa.

**Varies from 2-6 months.*

PHASE OF RESPONSIBILITY SHIFT

- 1) Forest degradation resulting in non-availability of products.
- 2) Less or no demand for such products like medicinals plants and roots.
- 3) Requirement for cash.

PHASE OF TOGETHERNESS

Men and Women went to the forest for collection of NTFP basically for the purpose of house hold consumption

(CHANGING ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF KABARI MEN and WOMEN)