

## **Justice for KL pluckers: An unending wait**

Kendu leaf is often called silver leaf of Orissa for reasons which none can dispute. It brings annual revenue of around 150 crores for the State exchequer and sustains livelihood of around 18 lakhs poor pluckers during critical lean season of the year. Thus is sometimes called '*bhatha handi*' (bowl of rice) for the poor. Orissa happens to be the second largest producer of KL producing around 4.5 lakh quintals of leaves annually. It enjoys the comparative advantage of being the only State which deals with processed leaves. It is claimed that the entire KL operation generates around 30 million person days within a period of 3-4 months. A plucker family earns around Rs.1000 – 1500 in a season per year which is a significant part of their annual cash income. The entire KL operation is managed by a separate wing of the State Forest Department (SFD) and a band of 16000 seasonal workers. While the KL wing of the SFD looks after the procurement, processing and storing functions, marketing is done by Orissa Forest Development Corporation (OFDC) on commission basis.

In 1973, the entire trade of KL was nationalized. One of the key objectives of the nationalization scheme was to protect the interest of the pluckers who are crucial to the entire KL trade. Around 35 years down the line, this aim remains as elusive as ever. Some of the key issues facing KL scenario are:

- a. The State refuses to recognize the plucker as owner of KL produce and treats them as piece rated wage earners. This situation continues inspite of legislations like PESA, NTFP resolution 2000, Orissa Gram Panchayat (Minor Forest Produce Administration) Rules 2002 and the recently enacted Forest Rights Act which completely talks of vesting of ownership to local communities over forest resources. Thus 'owners' have turned 'labourers' in this case. Hence the profits of trade are not shared with pluckers.
- b. There is no proper enumeration of KL pluckers. Government data speaks of 10 lakh registered pluckers which is not true as in many cases more than one family member are involved in plucking. Being unregistered, they continue to be deprived of beneficial schemes and risk cover measures adopted by the government.

- c. Late payment is a common phenomenon. Often this ranges from 3-6 months.
- d. In 2000, government constituted phadi level committees comprising of plucker representatives to supervise and monitor phadi level operations for ensuring accountability and transparency. This saw formation of ‘paper committees’ with pluckers having no knowledge about this development.
- e. Lack of transparency and accountability in KL operation results in gross inefficiency; leakages and misappropriation of funds. This adversely affects the entire production and marketing chain of KL causing loss to the exchequer.

The issue of Kendu leaf is very close to poor people’s heart that depends on it critically. This is high time that justice be done to them. In this backdrop, the following recommendations are made which the State government should immediately take note of and take suitable steps. These recommendations are being made as a result of an extensive research conducted by Kendu Patra Tolali Mancha in collaboration with Vasundhara, a Bhubaneswar based NGO.

KL pluckers should be recognized as owners of the produce and the ownership may be transferred to Gram Sabha through an amendment to NTFP resolution 2000. On this basis, the State should share profits of the trade directly with pluckers. Similar initiatives have been taken by governments of MP, Chhatisgarh and Andhra Pradesh which may be referred to.

1. Phadi level committees may be vested with complete powers to monitor and supervise phadi level operations. These committees may gradually be shaped into cooperatives which may deal in other NTFP produces in course of time. This would help in establishment of stake of pluckers who are actually fulcrum of the KL trade. In the entire scheme, the KL wing may

<p><i>How important these recommendations are?</i></p> <p>These recommendations if given and a positive consideration and suitable steps take would actually result in achieving objectives of policy of nationalization of KL trade which was to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i. Safeguard State revenue.</li> <li>ii. Improve KL quality.</li> <li>iii. Increase quantity of KL collection to reach the level of potential.</li> <li>iv. To prevent exploitation of KL pluckers.</li> </ul>
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play the role of facilitator and capacity builder while OFDC would continue to undertake the marketing function.

2. Plucker owned and managed Phadi level operation is expected to result in the following:
  - Efficient and smooth phadi level operations.
  - Decrease in operational costs over time.
  - Increase in proportion of quality leaves.
  - Steady increase in quantity of collection.
  - Check in illegal diversion of KL for Bidi rolling and other purposes.
  - Rise in government's revenue from KL and higher income for pluckers.
  
3. Proper enumeration of KL pluckers should be undertaken and names of all pluckers in a family be registered in the card as developed for NREGA purposes. Taking the ground reality into account, the minimum age for registration may be reduced to 14 years instead of current stipulation of 18 years which debars many pluckers to get registered. This would also be inconsonance with legislation on child labour.
  
4. The government must consider inviting representatives of Kendu Patra Tolali Mancha for having further dialogue on the matter.