

India: Transport Demands of a Forest Economy (IFRTD)

These case studies are being compiled to draw lessons from the experience of a wide range of organizations. They are considered as works in progress and will be updated periodically. Comments on the cases are welcomed, as are suggestions on additional cases which could be included in the series.

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DEMANDS OF A FOREST ECONOMY

This study analyses the transportation patterns and links with gender relations in the Santhal Parganas, in the south-eastern part of Bihar, Southern India. Dumka is its main town and market center of the area, which takes its name from the Santhal tribes who constitute a large proportion of the mainly rural population.

Dumka itself has no rail connection although all the major towns are well connected by buses. Bullock carts remain a main form of conveyance, though these are useless on the steep and rocky rural paths. Bicycles are slowly increasing in number, but as yet are entirely used by men, so women have no option but to walk almost everywhere.

The Santhals and Paharlas, who make up the groups studied here, are poor cultivators and gatherers who have been viewed by mainstream society as people to be employed as laborers in agriculture and construction, rather than as literate people. In the three villages studied, they earn an income from the forests, which in some areas is receding rapidly from the settlements.

According to Santhal law and tradition, women are perceived as 'objects' or 'property' to be transferred from the father to the husband. Women do not have any claim over property, neither can they inherit it. Deprived from inheriting land, and frequently rejected as a consequence of polygamy, they can be thrown out of a house without maintenance. Large numbers of Santhali women therefore lead unimaginably hard lives, with hardly any resources.

Agriculture along with the sale of forest products is the traditional mainstay of the Santhal economy, but the gradual decline in forest cover and lack of improvements in agriculture means that Santhals have been forced into wage labor, both local and migrant. Livelihoods today are often made up from a mixture of all three.

The study looks at three villages where the forest economy plays the major role. This means the collection of fuel-wood; poles for the construction industry; food items such as roots, berries, mangoes etc.; medicinal herbs and other products such as leaves which are made into leaf plates for sale. Shifting cultivation is also practiced under the forest canopy.

The forest economy is primarily a female one, with women responsible for the collection, processing and sale of produce. As forests dwindle they have to walk further and carry the produce home as headloads. The heavier products such as jackfruits and firewood are carried by men who take them to market.

A few villages have a single bus service each day, taking them one way to the market. Often these are crowded and therefore refuse to carry women with large and heavy loads. The majority of the villages are, however, hilly and inaccessible to buses, or even bullock carts. Motorbikes are rare, and there are only a few cycles in the villages, entirely under the control and use of men. The roads, which have not been maintained since built by the state in the 1940s or '50s are in a dreadful state, people preferring to walk in the fields next to them as they are softer on the feet' The limited focus of transport provisioning by the state

has been to link villages with towns to meet the needs of the market, rather than the needs of village women.

Jadopani village was studied, an interior tribal village of two hamlets, one high up near the jungle and one lower down the slopes. 'My study brought to light the intensity of women's daily transport burden: almost six to eight hours spent daily for the collection of water and firewood and other forest products, in addition to their work in the fields. There is a clear gender division of tasks, with all household maintenance falling into the women's domain. This includes housework and earning income for the purchase of food such as oil and spices. The men are responsible for the supply of grains to the family, and therefore for the household agriculture, in which they are assisted by women. They are also engaged in wage labor and the higher value forest products. Men's transport burdens are also high, as they have to travel further to market carrying heavier loads, but this is not a daily trip.

The scope of non-transport interventions in reducing women's transport burdens can clearly be seen when one compares the collection of drinking water in the upper and lower hamlets. In the lower one, this is a relatively easy task due to the presence of a hand-pump near the houses, and a stream close by. For women in the upper hamlet, the stream is about one kilometer away and this often dries up, so they must walk further on rocky ground, carrying pots of water on their heads.

In Maholo, the second village studied, the gender division of labor was found to be similar, but the terrain meant that men have recently begun to cycle to the more distant market at Pakuria and get a better price for their fuel-wood, which they also collect as well as the women. Men were found to be supporting the women to some extent by taking on some cooking and childcare responsibilities. Thus women have had their transport burdens eased to some extent by not going to market. Men also seem to spend the money earned on household necessities, but women have no access to the cash themselves because the men are doing the marketing. Any surplus the men spend on themselves.

Collecting water, fuelwood and forest products similarly takes many hours in the third study village of Pandhini Duma- The forest lies eight kilometers away, so journeys start very early in the morning for women and men, and they may not go every day. There is some migration for wage labor to West Bengal, and men with cycles collect coal from the open-cast mines which can be sold for a relatively good return locally or in the market centers. The cycles are again found to be an exclusively male asset. Because the women do not have transport, they collect fuelwood for domestic use and do not sell other forest products at the markets. Use of bicycles would help them enormously but has not even been discussed. A reliable source of drinking water would be of enormous assistance to them.

The author found that as in other agricultural societies, transport needs vary with the seasons, particularly between local transport needed for the collection of forest products, water etc. and the need to travel greater distances for wage-labor in the off-season.

It was also noted that the larger families with more women in them actually helped ease women's burden of transporting and other tasks; as there is clear demarcation between men's and women's duties, more females in a household could spread the load. Women in nuclear-type households had the heaviest burdens of work.

Transport interventions have been few, and the state has limited itself to the construction of roads and setting up bus routes, neither of which have helped the tribal women very much. Informal interventions such as the introduction of bicycles have not helped either, as they are under men's ownership and control. Although men with cycles have taken over taking forest produce to markets, and they do spend the income on household needs, women lose direct control of the income and so they are unable to save for emergencies or utilize any of it for personal expenses. They still have to undertake the collection of the products from the forest, where using a bicycle is impossible.

On the policy intervention level, the author feels that it may not be possible to address many of the women's transport needs with transport interventions alone.

Non-transport interventions, such as a reliable source of drinking water in the village, might well be of great assistance, as would longer term projects of protecting and regenerating the forests to prevent further

receding.

Access to markets is a serious problem for women. They have to headload their produce to the nearest markets, and return as soon as possible. Access to better (further) markets and safe ways of returning would mean the women could get better prices for their produce. One suggestion is to have special buses for women carrying loads on market days.

In conclusion, the author states that '...a combination of non-transport interventions for providing basic services such as water, health and education facilities in the villages themselves, along with innovative transport and organizational interventions to ease the transport burdens on the tribal populations, particularly women, without adversely affecting gender relations, are urgently required'.

(Source: "Demands of a Forest Economy" By Nitya Rao. Case study presented at the International Forum for Rural Transport and Development workshop in Sri Lanka. June 1999.)