

FOREST DEPENDENCE: A STUDY AT JANGAL MAHAL OF WEST BENGAL

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Abstract: *Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia of Indian state of West Bengal is popularly known as Jangal Mahal. Historically, the area is forest surrounded. Dispersed villages within the area depend significantly on forest for their living. In this study, on the basis of a sample survey, features of forest dependence of inhabitants has been tried to be identified. Moreover, considering incidence of qualitative degradation of forestry, efforts are also made here to focus on the nature and causes of change in surrounding forestry.*

1. Introduction

Three western districts of the modern state of West Bengal were once covered by dense forest. This area was then known as Jungle Terry. Later, colonial rulers, established a full fledged district, named Jungle Mahal. Within forest, small dispersed human settlements had been there. These people were ruled mainly by aboriginal rulers. People mostly belonged to classes other than so called hindu upper castes. The district of Jangal Mahal was established in 1805 but officially abolished in 1833.¹ Since then upto present, officially, there is no district, no town or no village in West Bengal, named as Jungle Mahal. However, forest is still there along with its inhabitants. Incidentally, since beginning of this present century, Maoists started to use the area as their hideouts. With growing events of maoist insurgencies, the forbidden name of Jungle Mahal again surfaced as Jangal Mahal.

The area is mainly rural. Most of the villages within it are situated far from towns. As villages are generally surrounded by forests, inhabitants depend significantly on forestry. A survey had been conducted in the area by me to highlight features of forest dependence in the area. For the purpose 300 households were chosen randomly across three districts of Jangal Mahal. 100 were chosen from each of the three districts. The specific sample design was like the following.

- Population: Households residing in Paschim Medinipur, Bankura and Purulia
- 2 blocks from each district were chosen randomly: Total Blocks = 6
- 2 villages were chosen randomly from each block: Total villages = 12
- 25 households were chosen randomly from each village: Total Household = 300
- Total Sample size = 300

The survey was intended to focus on following objectives

- I. Examining villagers' dependence on surrounding forestry
- II. Examining nature of change in forestry
- III. Identification of possible causes of such change

2. Dependence on Forestry



Picture 1: Reserve Forest, location: Joypur range, Bankura; Source: snapped by researcher

¹ O'Malley, L. S. S. Bengal District Gazetteer, Bankura, 1995 reprint, Government of West Bengal.

In these difficult situations forest is used by them as source of means of living in terms of food, fuel, work (collection of Kendu leaves) and for many other purposes. Here we may think of a basket of cropped grain along with collected forest material as their real income in a year. In this context shortage of real income out of cultivation is at least partially supplemented by forest resources. Some of the households also take migration as alternative source to compensate low agricultural income. Around 21% have reported that some of their family members use to migrate to earn. They bring home money income in each season ranging from Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 30,000.

Natural vegetation of this area comprise of trees like Sal, Segoon, Mahuya, Piyasal and other similar trees. These trees insert roots deep beneath earth. Existence of such trees helps to maintain moisture balance of the area. Over the years however dense forest cover of the area comprising of these trees has been steadily depleting with growing deforestation.

Depletion of forestry is not however a new phenomenon. Before the emergence of British the greater area surrounding chhotanagpur plateau was with dense forest cover. Regional princely rulers of Singbhum, Maanbhum, Dhalbhum, Birbhum, Mallabhum and a few others ruled the forest territory. Officially they were under control of either Afgans or Moguls but they enjoyed almost independence within their territory. Central rulers also avoided the area due to its impassable character. Common residents had limited opportunity for cultivation. Hence they depend more on forest than cultivation for their requirements. There was almost no official restriction imposed on jungle men to roam into forest. It was during British rule and also after independence inhabitants of the area were subjected to restrictions to use forest. Local users were denied access to forestry and state guided plundering of woods was started at an enormous scale. During early British rule they actually acted as plunderer of natural resources. Acre after acre of forest cover was abolished to build railway tracks. Large scale eviction was also taken place with the enactment of Indian Forest Protection Act of 1865, 1878 and 1927. Tradition continues and in 1980 independent India passed Forest Conservation Act.

In my survey 252 households out of 300 are found who neighbour forest. As well living standard of these households is greatly affected by forest. Surveyed villages of Paschim Medinipur and Purulia and partly of Bankura had forest cover. Among them 77% has responded that they get significant benefits from neighbouring forestry. A small section said, no such benefits are availed by them.

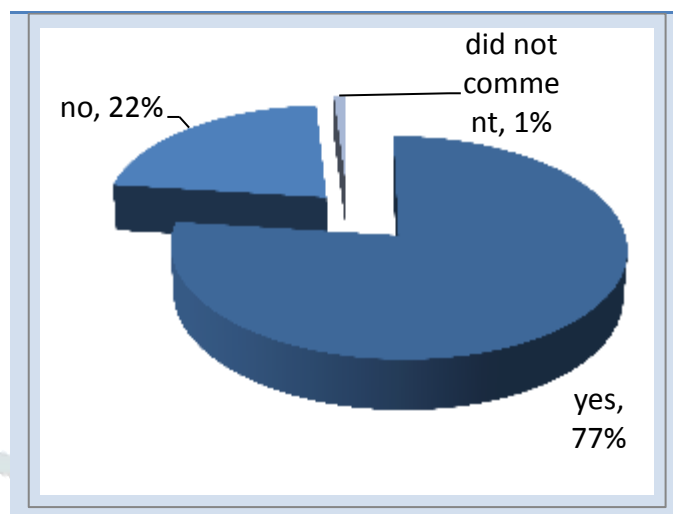


Figure 1: Forestry & Jangal Mahal: Is the families of Jangal Mahal benefitted from surrounding forest?; Source: Survey findings

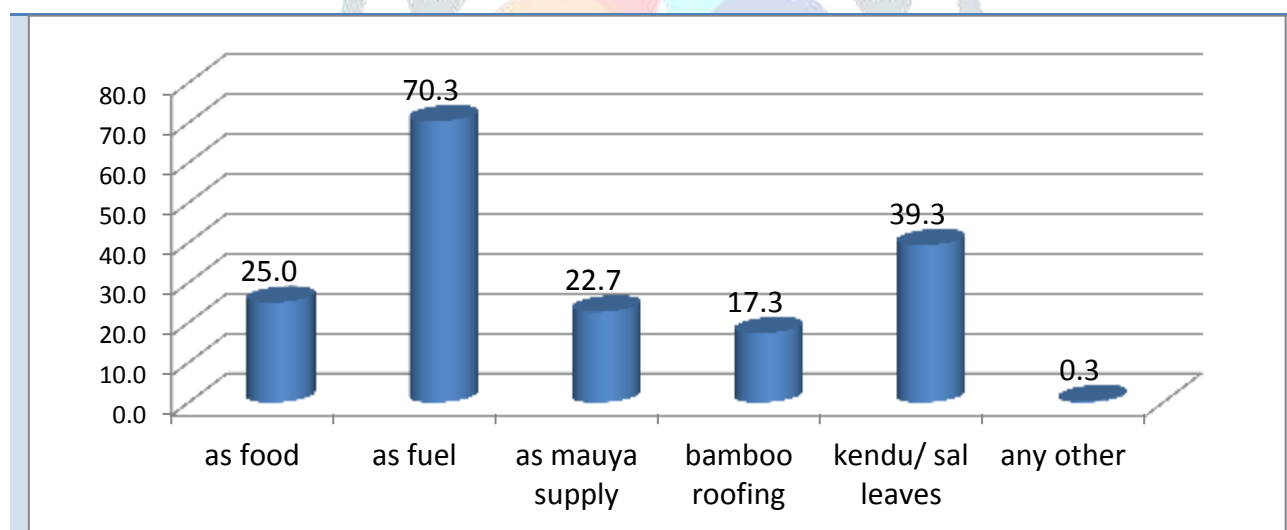


Figure 2: Nature of Benefits of jungle (Percentage on surveyed households); Source: Survey findings

Ambience is certainly an immeasurable benefit. Everywhere brown tree trunks and green cover certainly brings peaceful clean atmosphere to village folks. Cool breeze starts blowing in afternoon helps to shed over day's sunny difficulties. Apart from these feelings forest provides various types of material benefits also. Collection of dry sticks helps to reduce cooking expenses. Shal leaves are used to produce plates. In urban areas during family occasions or during social festivals these plates are widely used. During survey information collected about nature of benefits availing from forestry. Multiple responses were there. From the figure we can see that villagers mostly use forest materials to meet their fuel needs. In these remote parts LPG facilities are scarce. In the surveyed blocks there was neither HP gas nor Indane gas distributors. For daily requirement they use 'kola'², cow dung cake, dried sticks and leaves. Principal component is certainly sticks and leaves. Apart from fuel need around 39% households collect kendu and shal leaves to earn money. Biri prepared from Kendu leaves or plates prepared by sewing shal leaves are sold to market. Biri is produced by the system of contract production. Local biri companies are the buyers of this product. Shal plates are however partially sold directly in local village hats or sometimes to agents. Whatever money is earned from these two sources is meant lot to them.

Unfortunately, according to residents, this beneficial resource, that is, forestry has been changing its character gradually.

² Kola is a kind of fuel ball. It is made using coal dust, cow dung and waste hay.

3. Change in Forestry

Villagers, living near the jungle, are observing noticeable change in forestry over recent years. They were asked about the nature of change. Accordingly they responded. It is quite natural that responses are not mutually exclusive. In various occasions a single individual has noticed and mentioned more than one type of change. Most of the respondents noticed that there has been decreased density of forest compared to past. Lesser birds are seen chirping and there has been considerable change in tree variety.

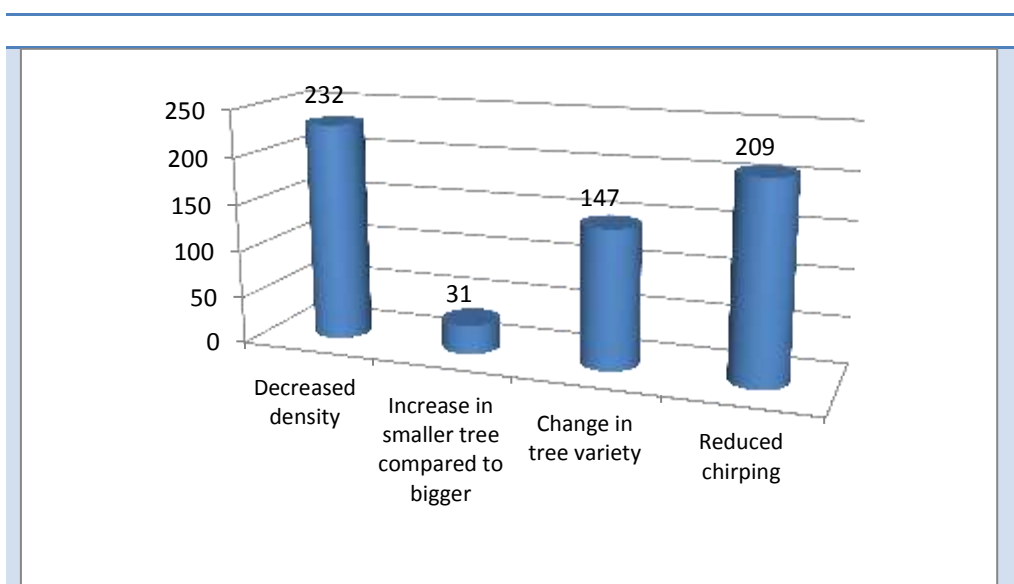


Figure 3: Nature of change in forestry; Source: Survey response

4. Causes of Change in Forestry

In academic sphere there has been continuous debate and discussions on identification of causes of growing forest depletion. I think it is the inhabitants, by virtue of their close belonging, are the keenest observer of incidences that are responsible for rapid depletion of forestry. 248 households out of 300 have responded when they are asked about cause of such depletion. Like the 'nature of change' their responses in this case also are certainly not mutually exclusive. In various occasions a single individual has noticed and mentioned more than one factor as responsible for the depletion. Most of them identified theft of wood as the most important factor behind loss of density of forest. It is a serious problem. There have been various forest conservation laws that are operational. Moreover there is the scheme of joint forest management. Still it has been difficult to resist theft. Villagers themselves are also responsible for depletion. In their own account 171 of them has reported collection of wood for fuel purposes as responsible for the problem. The figure is quite concerning but if we analyse their situation then it may be inferred that they simply cannot help collecting woods from jungle. In urban areas most of the families use LPG as cooking fuel. Nowadays practice of using other electronic cooking gadgets is also increasing. Rural inhabitants of developed regions are also inclining towards such practices. But in remote villages of Jangal Mahal such modern facilities are not available. In most of the cases villagers lack affordability and in some cases LPG dealers show lack of willingness to deliver cylinders to remote places. Few instances are found where some villagers have connection of 'Bharat Gas' and they have to carry both empty and filled in cylinders themselves. Under such conditions inhabitants find it convenient to cook using wood. 211 households out of 300 collect wood from the jungle for fuel purpose. Financially weaker households sell a portion of their collection to others who do not collect themselves. Often we can see aged men, women

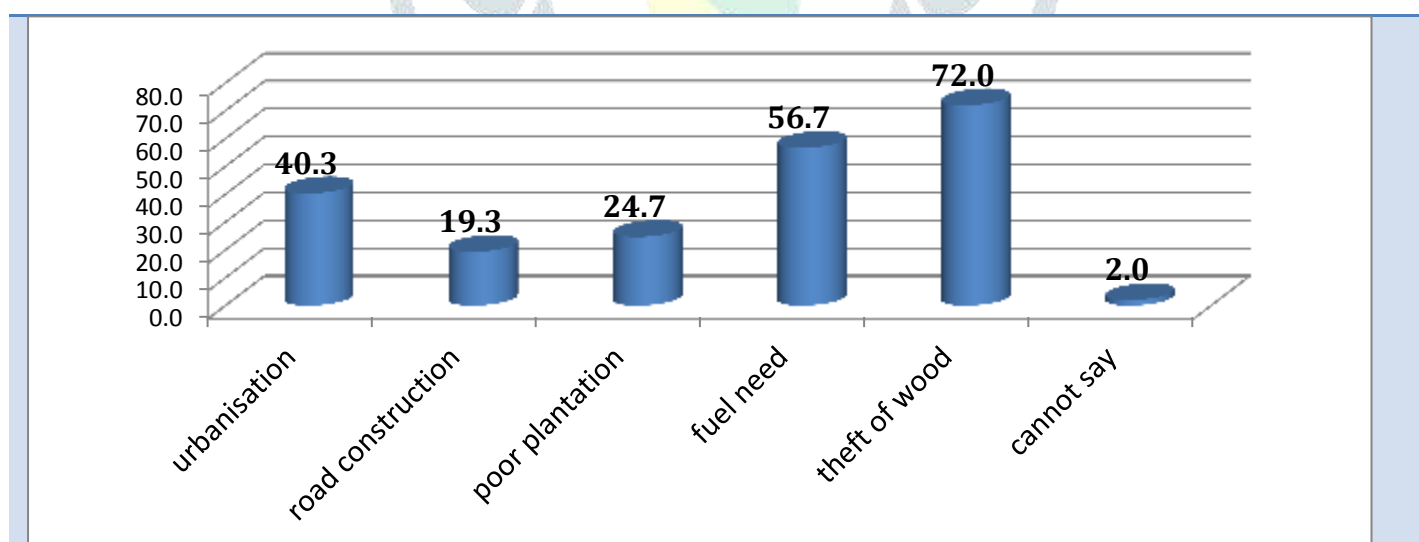


Figure 4: Causes of deterioration in forest quality (% households' opinion); Source: Survey findings

or children as carrying a large heap of dried wood in any parts of Jangal Mahal.

Apart from above mentioned factors some identified urbanization, lower rate of plantation and construction of public roads etc. as other various contributing factor behind loss of forestry. Extension of towns and villages are inevitable with growing population. In the past, beyond protected forests there existed surrounding areas where at least thin cover of forests are found but now a day for the sake of building houses and preparing cultivable lands such unofficial tree cover is declining rapidly.

5. Conclusion

To the villagers, use of forestry seems to work as a compensating factor. Natural scarcity of the region reduces real income of inhabitants. Agriculture fails to feed sufficiently during the year. Work opportunities in other sector are also insufficient. In this situation forestry provides food, fuel and other means to earn money. As it is depleting, compensation by the environment is also shrinking in real terms. In effect expenditure of households to run family is increasing. Three fourth of respondents have said that with changing nature of forestry, their family expenses has increased.

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