

Documentation of Traditional  
Knowledge Systems of various  
Tribes in India

# LIVELIHOOD KNOWLEDGE FOR UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM



A Study Report on:

# **LIVELIHOOD KNOWLEDGE FOR UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM**

For Project Titled:

## **Documentation of Traditional Knowledge Systems of various Tribes in India**

Submitted by:



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Study Report:

# Livelihood Knowledge for Undergraduate Curriculum

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## **1. Introduction**

Livelihood is the most basic need for humans since it is crucial for the sustenance of life and the reduction of vulnerabilities. Rural India has diverse livelihood opportunities based on their surroundings. The livelihood of tribals in India is based on their surroundings. The natural resources in their surroundings are pertinent for the sustenance of indigenous people. Agriculture comprises the majority of the livelihood opportunities available to the traditional people in India. Indigenous people popularly known as tribes have been involved in practising diverse livelihood opportunities based on the traditional knowledge of their ancestors. Apart from shifting cultivation, they are involved in crafts, basket making, gathering and selling of NTFP and also fishing, horticulture etc. The symbiotic relationship of traditional Indian societies with their environment enables them to work to live sustainably and have thorough knowledge about the environment.

## **2. How were tribal earliest social ecologists?**

The Indian tribes were among the earliest social ecologists due to their proximity and dependence on the environment. Their livelihood was interlinked with nature and the forest resources which they used for consumption. Initially, the tribal people could easily rely on shifting agriculture due to the abundance of produce but the need to domesticate animals arose with time and there was also a need to keep the forest resources intact for maintaining the competitive advantage of tribes. Things were going fine until the waves of human population entered their territory and began to take their resources and destroy their lands for the furtherance of industrialization. The Britishers came with their so-called sophisticated policies as well as technologies to take away the land of tribals and displace them. The tribals reacted to their intrusion with revolts and rebellion. For the tribal, land and territory is a sacred issue that should not be meddled with. Their prudence towards their ecology can still be seen in their regions, as they are ecologically more diverse with rare plants and resources that can be utilised for livelihood.

## **3. Nature of Occupations and working day patterns**

Tribals are mostly associated with farming, hunting and gathering, signifying their connection to their environment as well as their land. Earlier the practice of shifting cultivation was prevalent but the tribals have adopted settled cultivation with time which further deepened their reliance on land. Rearing of cattle and chickens is also a lucrative occupation of the tribes and they are rather fond of their cattle. Fishing is also done for leisure but it is not the main occupation and some of it is done for sacrificial purposes as well. Tribes that have rich forest produce and resources make use of them and make baskets and mats for selling them in markets. On the other hand, tribes that live on less fertile lands have started finding jobs in industries, they work in factories as coolie labourers and masons. All sorts of jobs in the city from rickshaw pulling to working as domestic help are done by these tribes to earn a daily wage. Though the wages they get in return are minimal. Livelihood is harder for the particularly vulnerable tribal groups as their plight has been ignored by the government at various levels.

They have faced displacement and still their right to livelihood is unsure. Most tribals start working in fields early in the day, they take rest in the afternoon and after that work continues till late evening. There seems to be no concept of off days or vacations among tribals, this shows their hard-working nature despite the exploitation they face.

## **4. Basis of Tribal Livelihood**

### **Tribal livelihood based on Agriculture**

The dependency on surrounding for sustenance leads to agriculture being the foremost economic activity of the tribals. Various methods are used for farming and crops are sown seasonally and then harvested when the time comes. These crops are then either consumed or sold to make a living. As the region inhabited by the tribals is mostly fertile it is an occupation that they can engage in for years. With time most tribals have taken to settled cultivation.

### **Tribal Livelihood based on Minor Forest Produce**

Rich and resourceful forests provide a lot of materials that can be collected and marketed for making a living, these are bamboo, wood, grass, medicinal plants and other forest products which can be used in various ways to make a living. The supply of raw materials is an occupation that can prove to be extremely lucrative with the shift towards ayurvedic medicine.

### **Tribal Livelihood based on Shifting Agriculture**

The tribes practised shifting agriculture or jhumming as it was one of the oldest and most frequently used methods of cultivation among the tribals. Yet, it required them to move and with time and forest reservation laws the Indian tribes have shifted towards settled agriculture.

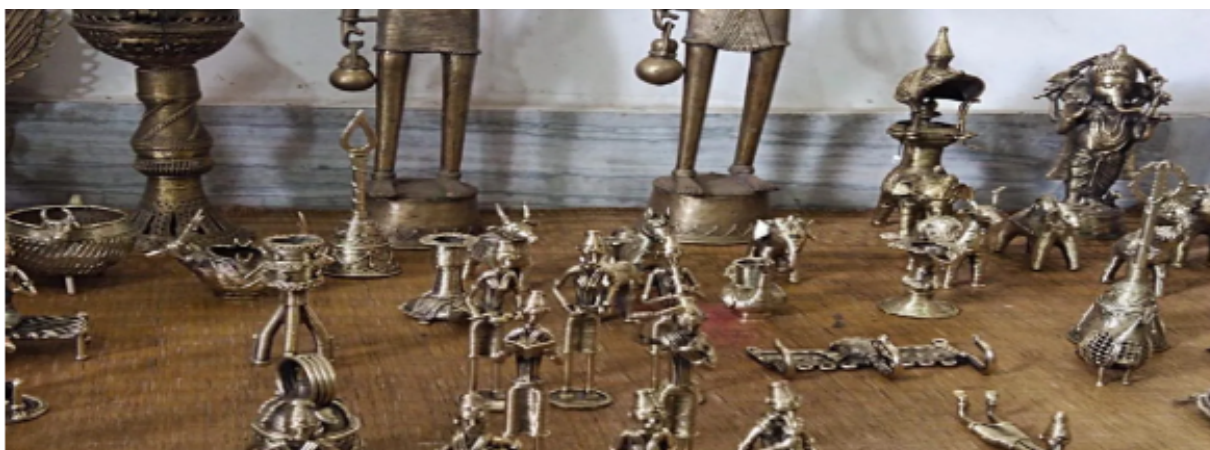
### **Tribal Livelihood based on Basket Weaving**



With abundance of natural resources at their behest, they are one of the finest weavers, the task of weaving is done mostly by women. They make baskets and mats and other fine crafts with the usage of forest produce. The products they make are then sold and this provides them livelihood.



### **Tribal Livelihood based on Coir Making and Metal Crafting**



Coir products like jewellery and toys are made by the tribals for selling which adds to their livelihood. Metal crafting is specially practised by tribes of Madhya Pradesh, Odisha and West Bengal. Gadwas, Gonds, Dhurwas earn their livelihood through Metal Crafting. A specific form of metal crafting art called ‘Dokra’ is done by them.

‘Dokra’ involves the usage of wax technique or hollow casting. A clay core is lined with wax and then coated with a mix of clay and hay. Wax is then melted and a cavity forms, the cavity is filled with molten alloy of copper and tin. When the molten metal solidifies, the outer clay shell is broken to reveal the metal craft. Inspiration for metal crafting comes from the environment, mythology and rituals.

### **Tribal Livelihood based on Pisciculture and Horticulture**

Horticulture like growing fruits and nuts is done by various tribes in India for earning and sustenance. Horticulture products are gathered and sold to nearby markets. Some special plants for medicinal purposes are also sold as NTFP products, thus enhancing and adding to tribal livelihood in a massive way.

### **Tribal Livelihood based on Community Tourism:**

Tourism is an industry that has a lot of potential especially in tribal regions owing to their location around natural beauty. The tribals are well aware of problems relating to community based tourism, and the outside influence that visitors have on their social culture. In order to conserve their identity and culture as well as earning livelihood, the tribals are practising eco-tourism so that their environment remains intact and earning also continues at the same time. Beautiful eco lodges can be found in tribal areas where visitors can enjoy the natural environment and diversity of culture, without harming their surroundings.

## **NTFP provides employment and economic opportunities to tribes**



NTFP or Non Timber Forest produce provides health, nutrition and livelihood opportunities to about 80% of the population in developing countries according to a 2017 WHO data. Significant economic opportunities are linked to the sale of NTFP. During times of tragedy NTFP provides safety nets to tribals. 40% of tribal revenue is generated through NTFP. Tribals of dry deciduous forest depend mainly on NTFP for livelihood and earning. Modernisation has led to market share reduction of NTFP. What is important to note is that sale and collection is not the main occupation of tribals but rather a part time or supplementary job.

## **5. Livelihoods of the Tribes**

### **5.1 Bhil**

#### **Agriculture**

The main dependency for livelihood among Bhils is for agriculture. This is their foremost economic activity. Earlier the Bhils used to practise ash cultivation, by burning forests and then spreading the ash, which was then watered and seeds were sown. The tradition behind this was that their High God Raje Pantha also practised a similar form of cultivation. Hoes, sickle, axes and wedges are used for agricultural purposes. Cereals, rice, wheat are the main crops that are cultivated by the Bhils. Their dependency on Agriculture has given them knowledge about crops diseases and pest infestation on crops. Cultivation on Hill slopes by cutting down trees and burning forests was also prevalent among Bhils who lived in hilly terrains. The forest laws don't allow such practices to continue now. Even though they toil hard on fields and cultivate agricultural produce, they are the ones who face hunger.

#### **Pastoral Activities**

Pastoral work when compared with agricultural work is less laborious. Bhil families own a pair of bullocks. Bhils are extremely fond and compassionate towards their cattle's specially cows that are a stable source of income which increase annually. Manhandling of cattle is refrained from in Bhil society and anyone doing so brings the fury of the cattle owner upon himself. Some Bhils also worship their cattle. Goats are reared by Bhil for milk as well as for food, they are sacrificed for their Gods as well. The grazing of cattle is done together by Goris or the boys.



### **Poultry Farming**

Fowls and chickens are reared by the Bhils for their meat and eggs. To purchase chicken is more costly than to rear one. Their offerings are made to the Gods. Bhils are extremely adept at curing diseases if their fowl or chickens happen to get them. Poultry also helps them to keep the pests away from their farm.

### **Fishing**

The Bhils love to fish. It is their most liked activity. Fishing nets and traps are used. Bhils prefer to catch fishes at night as they are busy during the day. The activity of fishing during the day is a communal one where large groups of women and children go out together to fish. The catch is not divided as everyone has their own catch for the day. This is called 'dorayo'.

### **Wage Earning**

Working in the fields of landlords is an economic activity pursued by some Bhils, they collect bidi leaves and also work as domestic help of the landlords. This isn't an extremely prevalent practice and the Bhils do not work for other Bhils. Trade is also a source of supplementary income and basket mats and other products made from weaving are sold.

## **5.2 Birhor**

### **Hunting Gathering**

Birhor's were originally hunter gatherers. They begin to hunt right after breakfast, there are two types of hunting: 'daily hunt' and 'hunting expedition' which is more of a 'tanda' activity. The hunting expedition continues for two to three days. Daily hunting is more common and nets are used to catch the animals. In communal hunting the animal caught is distributed equally, this is only done when the animal is caught for sale and not consumption. Hunting is mostly done by the men, and women are the gatherers who collect fruits and edible plants that can be consumed without any harm. Honey collection is done by both men and women together.

### **Agriculture**

Due to deforestation the Birhor's have shifted towards agriculture from hunting and gathering. They now lead a more settled life as agriculturalists.

### **Wage Labourers**

The Birhor are working as labourers, house helps, tractor drivers and also as part time agriculturalists to have their daily needs met. They are rickshaw pullers in towns and also work in other fields. The families move together, the man, wife and child in order to find livelihood and opportunities in other cities.

### **Begging**

The activity of begging is rampant within the Birhor tribes, mostly women and children go to nearby towns and villages to beg. The prevalence of begging within the tribe can be called an economic activity that is part of their livelihood. With passing time more people from the tribe are finding it attractive and are joining in.

## 5.3 Kol

The Kols practise diverse livelihood activities for their survival, this ranges for working as masons, to trade, cutting wood, working a brick layers, cutting down stones for laying roads, rickshaw pullers etc. Most Kols work in factories rather than farms. For all the work they contribute to their wages are relatively low symbolising exploitation. Though they do not bother much about their exploitation even when they are being burdened due to it. The attitude is “why should one labour when there is food in the house”. This attribute is testament to their graciousness, they work hard, yet are not bothered about less wages till their stomachs are full

### Labourers

Most of the Kols engage in labour rather than other activities like agriculture, hunting or fishing. They are the one of the few tribes who find it easier to adjust to a city life, working in factories and other industries. The agricultural land is not very fertile in the region where Kol lives and thus they shift to cities and engage more in the industrial sector. Wages are mostly paid in kings though at times money is also given. The money is not sufficient for livelihood.

### Livestock

The Kols also own cattle along with chicken, though keeping swine, horse and donkey is not the norm and in no Kol home would one see either of the three. Grazing of cattle is also unprofitable at times specially when the cattle graze on prohibited territory ie; reserve forest area. A fine has to be paid for the grazing then.

### Trade

Dependency on sale of wood and leaves within Kol tribe is found in almost all regions occupied by them. They engage in cutting down woods which are sold at a nearby market. The leaves are used for making the bidis. From such sales enough income is generated for sustenance. Selling eggs in local bazaars is also done for earning income.

## 5.4 Rajaur

### Agriculture

For the Rajuars, agriculture is their foremost occupation. Earlier they used to practise shifting agriculture but with time they have gotten used to settlements and prefer settled agriculture. Rice is grown annually, along with other cereals and pulses. ‘Sabai’ , a cash crop grown by the Rajuars is considered economically fruitful and gives good returns. Vegetables are grown in their own kitchen gardens, some of which are sold in nearby markets, otherwise consumed.

### Animal Domestication

Cattles like cows, buffalos, bullocks are reared by their milk as well as for farming purposes. Along with-it certain birds are also kept for their eggs. Dogs are domesticated for the security of homes. Sheeps and goats are reared as animals for sacrifice. The more animal one has the more well to do he is considered. These animals are also sold in markets for earning.

### **Hunting and Gathering**

Forest produce is frequently collected by the Rajuars for consumption but for selling these products in markets as well. Mangoes, leaves, bamboo, blackberries, mushrooms and edible roots are gathered for selling in the market. For leisure hunting and fishing are practised.

### **Daily wage labourers**

With changing times many Rajuars men and women are becoming part of the industrialised world, working in factories and other public and private sectors if they happen to be educated for earning their daily wage. Paddy as flattened rice is also a business carried out by Rajuars for daily wage which is sold in nearby villages through door-to-door marketing.

## **5.5 Kadars**

### **Gatherers**

The main opportunity for the livelihood of Kadar comes from the forest, where they dwell, they tend to survive only on resources they collect from their surroundings. For their livelihood the Kadars do not destroy the forest, this is a misconception. With such limited opportunity for livelihood and their dependence for it on their surrounding it is imperative that the Kadars do not want to be removed and displaced elsewhere. This also calls for attention from the respective authorities responsible for upliftment of livelihood of the Kadars which has been ignored so far. If anything, the ongoing dam projects and forest reservation laws have hit them hard. They need to be educated and incorporated within the ambit of opportunities for jobs and better avenues for livelihood. Only then can they live a comfortable life with diverse opportunities for livelihood.

## **5.6 Raji**

### **Daily Wage Workers**

Most of the people of the Raji tribe are now opting for permanent settlement and the fact that daily wage labour contributes towards 50.46% of total income of the tribe shows a huge shift towards permanent settlement.

### **Gatherers**

Raji moves from one place to another and survives on a transhumance pattern of living. 27.78% of the income of the Raji tribe comes from forest products. Some of these products are consumed while others are made baskets and wooden utensils and other articles which are kept outside the doors of people belonging to nearby villages during night. The next night products are replaced by villagers through food grains, sugar, salt and other essential household products.

### **Agriculture**

Crops like wheat, paddy, maize, bhat, gahat, jau, mustard are produced by the Raji tribe. Vegetables grown by the Raji tribe are potatoes, radish, onion, torai, pumpkin and tomatoes. Fruits like pears, plum, lemon malta and papaya are also produced. Despite large agricultural production activities agriculture contributes only 12.55% to Raji livelihood, this is because Raji



are particularly vulnerable tribal groups that have no knowledge about fertilisers and pesticides or improved seeds leading to destruction of crops. Destruction of crops due to hail, late monsoon and wildlife is also a major problem

## **5.7 Khasi**

Khasi practise various activities for livelihood including wage labour, cutting and selling charcoal, though their major source of livelihood is gathering and selling NTFP.

### **Gatherers**

Khasis depend on forest for their livelihood in a major way. They gather resources like water, fodder, wood, fruits etc. 17.23% of livelihood of Khasis depends on gathering. Products from gathering are also sold as NTFP. Gathering is an activity done by women specifically. Women gather resources, process them and sell them.

### **Agriculture**

Shifting cultivation is practised by the Khasi tribe for sustenance. With time the Khasi are now adopting settled cultivation. Agriculture is an important source of livelihood for the Khasi tribe and 22.78% of Khasis practice agriculture for their livelihood.

### **Selling NTFP**

NTFP like bamboo, cinnamon, sandalwood, pepper, fruits, herbs and plants of high economic value are sold by the Khasis in nearby markets. The processing of NTFP is done by women. A huge source of their livelihood is selling NTFP which contribute to 37.79% of their total livelihood.

## **5.8 Gond**

### **Hunters and Gatherers**

Hunting and gathering is a traditional source of livelihood for the Gonds. Men go hunting and also collect the forest produce. Gond men hunt for sustenance but they do not sell their hunts. Hunting is extremely popular within the Gond tribe. Gonds gather honey, tendu patta, mahua flower, leafy vegetables, tora, chironji, tendu fruit. Most of the products that are gathered are consumed by the locals leaving very little for the Gonds to sustain on. Forests provide Gonds with other resources which are gathered like wood, water, shelter, medicine, food.

### **Agriculture**

Agriculture is the second most significant activity practised by the Gonds for their livelihood. Shifting agriculture that has been banned is still practised by the Gonds. What is important to note is that Gonds grow only paddy, which is then sold in nearby markets. Forest based agricultural handicraft for eg, making baskets, ropes etc is also done for livelihood.

### **Fishing**

Fishing is an activity that is enjoyed by Gonds thoroughly. The entire family goes out for fishing. The catch is then consumed as well as sold in nearby markets adding to their livelihood

## 5.9 Dhodia

Dhodias are an educated tribe that take advantage of government schemes. They send their kids to school. Though girls leave school after higher secondary and get married. Getting educated has helped them take advantage of various other avenues of livelihood. Thus, Dhodia livelihood is diverse and dependent on various activities such as agriculture, as well as white collar jobs.

### Agriculture

The Dhodias are primarily as well as traditionally agriculturalists, who are engaged in cultivation. Being educated they know and use chemical fertilisers and pesticides so that their crops are not infested in any way. This way they tend to manage to protect their crops from going waste and also save on the losses that would happen if the crops rot. Dhodias have irrigation wells and take double crops also.

### Fishing

When the environment does not support agriculture an alternate way to make livelihood for the Dhodias specially during the rainy season is fishing.

### Labourers

Dhodias work as labourers building roads, they also work in farms that belong to other people. They engage in agricultural labour to complete various agricultural operations on time. Many Dhodia people also go to gulf countries for labour work.

### White Collar Jobs

Many educated Dhodia men and women are engaged in white collar jobs for their livelihood. Signifying an upward mobility in the Dhodia tribe.

## 5.10 Muria

### Hunters and Gatherers

Murias are a tribe that depend highly on hunting and gathering for livelihood, but this has suffered due to internal displacement faced by them. Procurement of forest products like Mahua, honey, gum, tamarind, reeds are bartered by the Murias for food grains in local markets.

### Agriculture

Jhumming cultivation is practised by the Murias, traditionally they are peasant cultivators. Their main crop is cereal. Their agriculture activities were affected due to their displacement. Now, most Muria people have taken to wage labour for livelihood. When agriculture suffers, cattle rearing is undertaken by Murias.

### Daily Wage Labourers

Short term migration for wage labour is the main occupation of the Murias. Agriculture based wage labour and work in fields of other tribal and non-tribal communities for a mere wage of 100 rupees is done by Murias. Murias also work in eucalyptus and clove plantation for 2 months. They cut trees, peel logs, all this labour is done for 100 to 150 rupees.

## **MGNREGS**

MGNREGS is swiftly emerging as one of the potential sources of wage employment for the Muria people. NGOs have played a crucial role in this and an active litigation was undertaken by various NGOs. These NGOs helped Murias to get enrolled under the MGNREGS scheme and get job cards. This has a potential source of livelihood for the Murias.

The boom of Ayurveda medicines has led to an increase in demand for medicinal plants and herbs. Most of the wild medicinal plants are found in forest areas inhabited by the tribes. They have knowledge about these medicinal herbs and thus can add to supplying and fulfilling the demand of the ayurveda industry. This can also add to their income and become an opportunity for earning livelihood by becoming a part of the market economy. Though the shrinkage of forest needs to be dealt with in order for the sustenance of this livelihood opportunity.

## **6. How would we balance livelihood with sustainability in the era of Global Warming?**

Tribals with their traditional methods of livelihood are a boon in the dynamic world which is moving towards climate change. The entire world is adopting the rich cultural practices followed by the tribes since these tribes live in a symbiotic relationship with the environment and their ways of livelihood do not harm the environment in any way unlike the livelihood of the people of the urban areas. Tribals are more likely to practise methods of agriculture that do not harm the soil like crop rotation etc, they also do not waste water, conservation of forest resources is one of the major ways in which tribes contribute to sustainability. Tribals understand the problems of climate change and it is pertinent for the world to learn from the rich practices of the traditional people so as to ensure sustainable development and make a better world for the future generations. The various solutions of balancing livelihood with sustainability rests with the tribals as it is they who live in proximity to nature and hence have rather unique knowledge and techniques about how to earn livelihood without compromising sustainability. Their traditional knowledge can help to not only prevent climate changes but also adapt to it by using better techniques of development instead of merely exploiting nature.

## **7. Conclusion**

Livelihood for tribals has been difficult as they live in remote areas where opportunities are scarce. Tribals are beginning to adapt to certain modern types of livelihood, yet PVTG tribes continue to suffer for their livelihood more than other tribes. Their condition is worse as they lack knowledge about pesticides and fertilisers and conditions like floods also lead to destruction of their crops leaving very little for them to depend on for their livelihood. Other tribes that are educated on the other hand have taken help from government schemes and are doing white collar jobs. This disparity is a concern that needs further focus.



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