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COVID-19 lockdown deals blow to Rajasthan's tendu leaf economy

Demand for tendu patta has been declining over the years, mainly due to decreasing consumption of bidis

By [Rajat Kumar](#) | 05 May 2020



The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) lockdown has dealt a blow to tendu leaf collectors in the villages of Rajasthan's Dungarpur district, with traders shying away from buying tendu leaves. Lakhs of people — tribal households, small traders and hamaals (labourers) — are at risk of losing their livelihoods in the state.

A reliable source of income

Collection and sale of minor forest produce (MFP) is major source of income for forest dwellers in India and tendu patta (leaves of *Diospyros melonoxylon*) is a major MFP for tribals in Rajasthan.

Tendu leaves are used to make bidis, which are locally made cigarettes with tobacco wrapped inside a tendu leaf. The ash from offcuts of leaves is used to make tooth powder.

Tendu Patta is widely grown in Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. Rajasthan accounts for 6.5 per cent of overall trade. It is one of the major sources of local livelihoods for tribals.

Supply chain

Tendu patta, also known as Tembru in Rajasthan, is generally grown in dry mixed deciduous forests of Aravalli ranges. Majority of production happens in tribal-dominated districts of Banswara, Dungarpur, Pratapgarh, Chittorgarh, Udaipur, Jhalawar and Baran.

Cities like Kota, Bundi, Bhilwara, Sirohi, Pali, Alwar, and Dholpur share a small part of the production as well.

These regions are further divided into clusters of six zones — Kota, Udaipur, Ajmer, Jodhpur, Jaipur and Bharatpur. A total of 168 units are running in the six zones with 1,300 collection centres. A forest range has one unit with three-four collection centres in each unit.

People collect semi-mature leaves from the forest and sell them to traders at collection centres, known as Phads. All family members are involved in this process. While two members collect leaves, others make bundles of 50 leaves. The bundles are then sold at Phads.

One family earns between Rs 200 and Rs 500 a day. The collection process goes on for a month. Thus, on average, one family earns about Rs 5,000 to 10,000 a month. The state forest department then calls for bidding of tenders six months before collection of tendu patta. During this period, leaves are collected and payment is made.

Traders hire expert labourers for processing leaves. They process the leaves at the centres and pack it into sacks (of jute bags) having 1,000 bundles. One bora costs about Rs 750. The process is intensive and needs special care. Around 5.6 lakh boras are produced every year in Rajasthan.

After the leaves are processed, hamaals load and unload sacks to godowns and markets. The tendu is purchased by bidi-making industries. Major such markets are in Tonk, Kota and Pratapgarh in Rajasthan, and in Telangana, Tamil Nadu and Karnataka.

Declining demand

The demand for tendu patta has been declining over the years. The main reason is the decreasing consumption of bidis and cigarettes replacing them, most notably among the young adult population.

The collection units of tendu patta have reduced to 167 in 2018 from 226 in 1994 in Rajasthan. However, the price increased during this period from Rs 250 to Rs 750 per sack.

At risk

According to Kamendra Singh of Aadiwasi Tendu Patta Sahakari Samiti in Kotra, good rainfall may lead to bumper production of tendu leaves in Madhya Pradesh (MP) and Chhattisgarh.

There is generally more demand for leaves from MP and Chhattisgarh, as the leaves are big in size and and three-four bidis can be made from one leaf; in Rajasthan, one-two bidis can be made from a leaf.

At least 40 per cent units in Rajasthan did not get any tender. Due to non-availability of buyers, there is direct threat on the livelihood of the stakeholders involved in the tendu patta supply chain — the collectors (mostly tribals), processing labourers and hamaals involved in transportation.

Further, due to the unavailability of labourers, many traders backed out despite filling the tenders.

“Collection will be difficult this year. Skilled labourers are not available. Barddana (jute sacks) are brought from Jaipur and Kolkata and due to lockdown, we cannot get them. Thus, small traders will not go for collection of Tendu this year,” said Arif, a tendu leaf collector from Chittaurgarh.

“Only three out of nine units got tenders in Dungarpur. Also, the tendered units are at risks as the traders may back out from purchasing tendu patta. The district forest department officials do not know how to deal with the situation,” said Madhulika, a social activist.

Meanwhile, the lockdown has increased the dependency on MFP.

“People from Kotra and other parts of southern Rajasthan engage in agricultural activities for three-four months, collect forest produce for two months and then migrate to cities or nearby towns during the rest of the year for work. However, this year, people came back to their villages,” Sarfaraz from Adivasi Vikas Manch said. Tendu patta contributes to about 10 per cent of the annual income of tribal households earned in about a month.

“We use this money for buying seeds and fertilisers for sowing kharif crops. But this year, we will use it for buying essential commodities. Also, we are afraid that traders may not buy the leaves,” said Narayan Baranda, a local from Nareli village.

Around 270,000 people are at the risk of losing income because of lack of buyers of tendu patta this year in Rajasthan, according to Samarthak Samiti, a non-profit that works for MFP collectors in Rajasthan.

Road ahead

It is important that the government take urgent measures to support collectors and other stakeholders involved in the Tendu Patta supply chain.

The central government has already directed through its policies in 2013 that MFP be purchased at Minimum Support Price. The forest department can facilitate this process. Further, forest department and the tribal area development department should immediately buy Tendu Patta this year.

Further, NREGA funds and gram panchayats funds can be utilised to provide wages to locals for collecting leaves. Small traders should get permission to buy leaves without any royalty. Relaxation in taxes must be provided.

The traders must be contacted immediately and transportation facilities and equipment must be provided to teams. For this, the Tribal Area Development department can form a committee and ensure effective functioning of supply chain.

Source: <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/covid-19-lockdown-deals-blow-to-rajasthan-s-tendu-leaf-economy-70901>