



Forest and Livelihood in Jhargram: A Sociological Analysis of Tribal Families’ Dependence on Forest Resources

Dr. Joheb Islam

Assistant Professor in Sociology, West Bengal Education Service, Rani Indira Debi Government Girls’
College, Email: su.joheb@gmail.com

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16811352>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Accepted: 24-07-2025

Published: 10-08-2025

Keywords:

*Forest and Livelihood,
Tribes, Forest Resources,
and Issues Concerning
Tribes.*

ABSTRACT

People know a lot about the Jhargram district in West Bengal, India, because of its natural beauty, large forests, and many different tribal cultures. For millennia, the forests have been an important component of the lives and livelihoods of native families. Forests are more than just places to get food, shelter, fuel, and medicine. They are also the heart of their social, cultural, and spiritual identity. The goal of this study article is to give a full sociological look at how tribal families in Jhargram depend on forest resources. The research examines the topographical and ecological backdrop of the region, the forest-dependent livelihoods of indigenous groups, and their cultural and spiritual connections to the forest. It also looks at how forest laws and policies, vulnerable livelihoods, conflicts between people and wildlife, and different development projects affect people. The aim of this project is to produce a data-driven and analytical report that can be utilised by policymakers, scholars, and local stakeholders. The study aims to elucidate the problems and opportunities for sustainable development in forest-dependent societies by critically examining the link between forests and tribal life.



1.1 The geographical and ecological setting of Jhargram

On April 4, 2017, Jhargram became the 22nd district of West Bengal when it split off from the old Paschim Medinipur district. Jhargram is known for its wild, forested areas and the Belpahari hills. It is located between the Kankrajhor forest to the north and the Subarnarekha River to the south. It is part of the Chhotanagpur plateau, which slowly drops down into lush lateritic lowlands. The average height of the district is 81 meters (265 feet). Kankrajhor is around 300 meters high, and Baro Pahar, the highest peak, is 370 meters high.

According to the 2011 Census, Jhargram had a population of 1,136,548 and covered an area of 3,037.64 square kilometres. The demographic composition is mostly rural, with 96.52% of the inhabitants living in rural regions. The weather is usually hot and humid, with summer highs of 46°C in May and June and winter lows of 4°C. The district is officially known to be prone to drought.

This classification, however, shows a paradox: although the area gets a lot of rain each year (around 1,400 mm, mostly in July and August), the lateritic soil doesn't hold water well and there aren't any good methods for managing water, so there is always a lack of water. This lack of resources makes it very hard for farmers to grow crops, which is how many tribal families make a living. Because of this, forest resources are a necessary backup for both food and money, which makes the people even more dependent on the forest and shows how fragile their livelihoods are.

Jhargram's natural beauty and potential for tourism can help the economy, but they can also hurt forest ecosystems. The traditional way of life for tribal populations is in danger because of the growth of tourism-related infrastructure, more people living in wildlife areas, and environmental imbalances. For these groups, the degradation of the ecosystem means not only losing resources for making a living but also losing cultural and spiritual practices that are based on living in the forest. If the benefits of tourism are not shared fairly and maintained in a way that lasts, these kinds of changes could make indigenous groups that depend on forests even more isolated.

1.2 Finding Tribal Communities and the Historical Background of Forest-Based Livelihoods

A large number of people who live in Jhargram are members of Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Scheduled Castes (SC). According to the 2011 Census, Scheduled Tribes make up 29.37% of the district's



population, and Scheduled Castes make up 20.11%. The Santhal, Lodha, Sabar, Munda, Bhumij, and Mahato are some of the most well-known tribal clans.

The Lodha and Sabar are officially recognised as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) and have historically relied on the gathering of forest resources for their sustenance.

Historically, many tribal societies have viewed the forest not only as a resource but as the essence of their life, influencing their identity, cultural customs, and spiritual beliefs. People typically think of forests as sacred and give them names like "mother" or "father." This deep-seated respect creates a mutually beneficial interaction between the communities and the natural world, one that affects both their daily lives and their views on the universe.

Because there are so many tribes living in the forest and they have strong cultural and spiritual ties to it, forest conservation measures should be looked at from a social and cultural point of view, not just an ecological or economic one. Any policy that ignores this connection could seriously harm the lives of tribal people and violate their basic rights.

During the colonial period, there was a big change in how woods were managed. They were turned into goods that were mostly seen as ways to make money. This meant that tribes couldn't get to forest areas as easily, which messed with traditional ways of making a living that depended on forests. This historical marginalisation set the stage for a long-running confrontation between current forest policy and the methods of life of indigenous people.

The indigenous view of the forest as a holy, life-giving being is very different from the extractive and utilitarian views of colonial and post-colonial forestry systems. This ideological mismatch persists at the core of current discussions regarding tribal rights and forest governance in India.

1.3 Goals and Importance of the Study

This study is directed by the following principal objectives:

To investigate the degree and characteristics of tribal reliance on forest resources in the Jhargram district. To investigate the socio-cultural and spiritual aspects of tribal communities' connection to the forest. To look at how forest laws, environmental regulations, and development projects affect the lives of indigenous people who depend on forests for their livelihoods. To determine the principal obstacles



encountered by indigenous populations in maintaining their forest-dependent livelihoods, encompassing challenges such as land alienation, displacement, and human-wildlife conflict. To evaluate the function of state institutions, local governance entities, and civil society in responding to the issues faced by tribal forest inhabitants.

The importance of this research is in its sociological perspective, which transcends ecological or economic frameworks to comprehend the intricate relationships between tribal populations and forest ecosystems. As India seeks economic growth and environmental sustainability, it is essential that policies consider the rights, perspectives, and knowledge systems of indigenous groups. This study seeks to enhance informed policymaking by offering empirical insights into the conditions of forest-dependent communities.

It also wants to make the voices of marginalised communities louder and push for forest governance models that include everyone and balance environmental protection with social justice.

1.4 Methodology

This study is qualitative and utilises a mix of ethnographic fieldwork, comprehensive interviews, and document analysis. The core data was gathered through engagements with tribal households living in the villages next to the forest in the Jhargram district. Community elders, those who collect forest products, women who do forest-related work at home, and local leaders were some of the key informants.

Purposive sampling was utilised to identify communities characterised by a significant concentration of tribal residents and a clear reliance on forest resources. Field visits took place from [insert specified months or year], during which participant observation and semi-structured interviews were undertaken. These interactions offered intricate understandings of quotidian routines, belief frameworks, and subsistence patterns linked to forest living.

Along with primary data, the study used secondary sources such as government publications, census data, forest department records, and academic literature that was relevant. A thematic analysis methodology was employed to analyse the qualitative data, facilitating the recognition of persistent patterns and fundamental challenges encountered by forest-dependent tribal households.

We paid close attention to ethical issues. All participants gave their informed consent, and steps were taken to protect their privacy and respect cultural sensitivity. The project aimed to accurately portray



community perspectives, enabling indigenous voices to influence the narrative and evaluate policy solutions.

2.1 Forest and Culture: Beliefs and Rituals

There is a deep and lasting cultural and spiritual connection between tribal tribes and forests in Jhargram. For these groups, the forest is not just a place to get food; it is also a holy place with religious and symbolic meaning. People typically think of trees, hills, rivers, and animals as signs of gods or spirits of their ancestors. This way of looking at the world makes people feel respect and responsibility for the natural world.

The rhythms of the forest are strongly linked to traditional festivals, rituals, and ceremonies. People celebrate events like Sarhul, Karma, and Bandna based on the seasons, the cycles of farming, and the availability of forest goods. Sal leaves; flowers, fruits, and sacred groves from the forest are very important during these ceremonies. People execute rituals to show respect for forest spirits, ask for protection from natural disasters, and make sure the community is healthy.

The worship of village gods, which typically takes place in forests or under sacred trees, shows how the spiritual and ecological worlds are interwoven. Ojhas (folk healers) and deoris (priests) are examples of ritual professionals who use forest plants and traditional knowledge passed down through generations to connect the human and spirit worlds. These belief systems help shape conservation ethics that put a high value on using resources in a way that doesn't harm the environment, protecting biodiversity, and taking responsibility as a group.

Modernisation and the expansion of dominant religious practices, on the other hand, have caused some native rites and belief systems to fade away. Urbanisation, deforestation, and the intrusion of economic interests into sacred areas pose additional threats to the cultural sovereignty of tribal people. When rituals are turned into products or moved, the spiritual connection to the forest may be weakened.

To safeguard these cultural traditions, we need to conserve the environment and also recognise indigenous cosmologies as important to how the forest is run. Including traditional ecological knowledge in forest management and policy frameworks can help development that is both culturally sensitive and good for the environment.



2.2 Problems in Making a Living from the Forest

Tribal groups in Jhargram have always relied on forests for their livelihoods, but they now confront many problems that could make their forest-based livelihoods unsustainable. One of the most important problems is that conservation-focused forest governance and unclear land tenure systems are making it harder for people to get to forest resources. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, sought to acknowledge and safeguard the rights of forest inhabitants; nonetheless, its execution has been sporadic and incomplete, especially concerning Community Forest Resource rights.

Commercial activities like mining, logging, and tourism have taken over significant areas of land, displacing many people and harming ecologically sensitive areas. These changes often happen without the affected populations' free, prior, and informed permission, which goes against their legal and constitutional rights. Displacement not only damages livelihoods but also undermines social cohesiveness and cultural continuity.

Another big problem is the confrontation between people and animals, which has gotten worse in the last few years. As habitats become increasingly fragmented, elephants and wild boars are destroying crops more often, which makes tribal families less secure in terms of food and money. Compensation systems are typically slow, bureaucratic, and not enough, which makes communities even more vulnerable.

Climate change is another threat since it changes how much rain falls, makes water less available, and changes the seasonal growth of forest products. Weather patterns that change without warning can hurt both farming and forest foraging, which can make income unstable. Without other ways to make a living or social safety nets, many young people from tribes are forced to move to cities to do informal work. This slowly destroys indigenous knowledge systems.

Vulnerabilities depending on gender still exist. Women are important to forest-based businesses, yet they are often left out of decision-making groups like Gramme Sabhas and Forest Management Committees. Their contributions to environmental protection and household support are still not given enough credit in formal government systems.

These overlapping problems show how important it is to have a rights-based, democratic, and culturally sensitive way to manage forests. To safeguard both the environment and the livelihoods of tribes, it is



important to make sure that people have secure land rights, fair benefit-sharing, and conservation approaches that are driven by the community.

2.3 Policies of the government, rights to forests, and actions to improve development

The rules about forests and tribal rights in India have changed a lot, especially since the Forest Rights Act (FRA) was passed in 2006. This important law was meant to make up for past wrongs by giving forest-dwelling groups control over land, forest resources, and community governance.

But in Jhargram, the FRA has only been partially and unevenly put into place. Some households have been given Individual Forest Rights (IFRs), but not many communities have been given Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights, which let communities work together to manage and conserve forest regions. The implementation process has been long and often unclear because of bureaucratic delays, political inaction, and a lack of knowledge among local populations.

Developmental measures in the region, including afforestation programs, ecotourism ventures, and rural employment schemes, have yielded varied outcomes. Programs like MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act) and Van Dhan Yojana have made it possible for people to make money in the short term, but they don't always help people become more self-sufficient or increase community agency in the long term. In certain situations, efforts to plant trees have turned natural forests into monoculture plantations, which has hurt biodiversity and traditional feeding patterns.

Programs run by the Forest Department often use a top-down approach, which means that indigenous communities have little say in planning and decision-making. The lack of a strong way to include traditional ecological knowledge in official forest governance systems has made it much harder for indigenous people to manage their own resources. Because of this, people who live in forests are generally thought of as passive beneficiaries of the ecosystem instead of active guardians of it.

Furthermore, although national and state forest policies are placing more and more importance on conservation and climate resilience, these aims don't always match up with the real-life needs of people who depend on forests for their livelihoods. Some conservation efforts, such as making protected areas or wildlife corridors, have forced tribal families to move and limited their access to resources without giving them enough money or help to get back on their feet.



For developmental interventions to be truly inclusive and effective, governance must be based on rights and centred on the community. This means making sure that everyone can participate, that they are held accountable, and that they are given the tools they need to do so. Policies must prioritise ecological sustainability and social fairness, allowing indigenous groups to not only survive but thrive in their forest-based settings.

2.4 Conflict between people and animals and job insecurity

Human-wildlife conflict has become a significant danger to the livelihood security of forest-dependent tribal populations in Jhargram. The escalation of such conflict is intricately associated with habitat fragmentation, deforestation, and the proliferation of human settlements in proximity to or within forest boundaries. As wildlife areas get smaller, interactions between people and wild animals, especially elephants, wild boars, monkeys, and leopards, have become more common and harmful.

One of the biggest problems is that elephants and wild boars raid crops, which hurts a lot of farms. These kinds of losses are terrible for tribal families who rely on subsistence farming and don't have a lot of land. Not only do they make it hard to get enough food, but they also make households more reliant on scavenging in the wilderness or moving temporarily to find work. In other areas, recurring agricultural damage has put families in cycles of debt and worry.

These fights often cause physical pain or even death, in addition to economic losses. Some communities respond by taking revenge, which makes the situation between forest departments and local citizens even worse. The situation gets worse because there aren't any good ways to stop conflicts from happening, including early warning systems, safe fencing, or animal corridors

The government's plans to pay for damage caused by animals are typically slow to pay out, not enough money, and full of red tape. Filing claims is hard because it requires paperwork and proof that many indigenous members have trouble getting or understanding. Because of this, many families who were affected either get too little money or none at all.

Also, fear of wildlife invasions often makes it hard for people to move around, especially women and children who are collecting water, feed, and fuelwood from the forest. This makes people less productive every day and more vulnerable, which adds a gendered aspect to the situation.



To solve the problem of people and wildlife fighting, we need a complete plan that balances the requirements of people and wildlife. Wildlife management should include community-based activities to reduce damage, like village watch groups, habitat restoration, and participatory monitoring. Also, making sure that people get paid on time and in full, that infrastructure is supported, and that communities are educated can greatly lessen the socio-economic stress that these kinds of conflicts bring.

3.1 Tribal Rights and Sustainable Forest Management

In places like Jhargram, sustainable forest management can't be done in a meaningful way unless the rights of tribal populations who have lived with forest ecosystems for generations are recognised and included. These cultures have a lot of traditional ecological knowledge that is built into their daily lives, traditions, and customs. But state-centred forest management regimes have typically pushed these systems to the side in favour of bureaucratic control and making money.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) of 2006 is a law that tries to fix this problem by giving legal recognition to both Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) and Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights. The FRA has the capacity to change things for the better, but its inconsistent implementation has left many communities without secure tenure or real power to make decisions. The Forest Department often still has influence over forest governance, which makes communities subservient stakeholders instead of equal partners.

Sustainable forest management, in its real meaning, needs a bottom-up, participatory strategy that gives tribal groups the power to take care of the forest. This means not only giving communities legal rights but also making sure they have the institutional capacity, technical help, and money to manage forest areas in a way that is good for the environment. When done correctly, Joint Forest Management (JFM) and community forest management models show how local voices may be heard and how people can work together to take care of the forest.

Sustainable forest governance must also take into account fairness between generations and the preservation of culture. For tribal societies, managing the forest is not just about getting resources; it is also closely connected to spiritual traditions, commitments to ancestors, and the identity of the group. Policies that disregard these cultural aspects jeopardise the essential principles of sustainability by disrupting the social connections that link individuals to the forest



Also, tribal women, who are important for gathering non-timber forest products (NTFPs), protecting biodiversity, and keeping family economies going, need to be at the centre of decision-making processes

Forest governance is still not complete or fair without them. In summary, sustainable forest management and tribal rights are not opposing interests but complementary objectives. When tribal communities have solid rights and are seen as holders of knowledge, it leads to not only ecological sustainability but also social fairness and cultural resilience.

3.2 Suggestions for Policy and Practice

Based on the results of this study, the following suggestions are made to improve the lives of tribal groups in Jhargram that depend on forests and to encourage fair and inclusive forest governance that lasts:

Strengthen Implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 The government must speed up and make sure that both Individual Forest Rights (IFRs) and Community Forest Resource (CFR) rights are carried out in a clear way. It is especially important to recognise collective ownership and governance mechanisms in communities with a lot of indigenous people.

Encourage Forest Management by the Community

Gramme Sabhas should be given real decision-making power in participatory forest governance models like Joint Forest Management (JFM) and autonomous Community Forest Management (CFM). It is necessary to make the use of traditional ecological knowledge in forest planning a part of the system.

Value addition and market access can help people who live in forests make a living. For example, value chains for non-timber forest products (NTFPs) can help people who live in forests. Communities can become economically stronger through capacity-building initiatives, access to finance, fair pricing systems, and the creation of tribal cooperatives.

Take actions to stop and make up for human-animal conflict. Early warning systems, solar-powered fencing, and wildlife corridors are all examples of proactive measures that should be taken. Compensation systems should be easier to use, happen on time, and be based on the unique needs of the families that were affected.



Make sure that women are included in all decision-making bodies connected to managing forests and other natural resources. To make sure that indigenous women can actively participate and speak up in government systems, they should be given training in leadership and strengthening their skills.

Include Climate Resilience in Forest and Livelihood Planning Policy frameworks must deal with climate-related weaknesses by encouraging a variety of ways to make a living, agroforestry practices, and ways to save water. Communities on the edge of forests should also have access to early warning systems and training in how to prepare for disasters.

Prevent Displacement and Ensure Consent in Development Projects Infrastructure and tourist projects must follow the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) rule. Fair pay, rehabilitation, and talking to the community are all important parts of ethical development planning that can't be changed.

Encourage Cultural Recognition and Legal Protections

The law must recognise cultural traditions and spiritual ties to forests as important parts of tribal rights. Conservation laws should safeguard sacred trees, ancestral lands, and ritual sites from being damaged or taken over.

These suggestions show how important it is to have a comprehensive, justice-orientated framework that connects environmental issues with social issues. In forest areas like Jhargram, sustainable development needs more than just technological fixes. It also needs a deep respect for the experiences, knowledge systems, and goals of indigenous populations.

Conclusion

This study has endeavoured to provide a thorough sociological examination of the reliance of tribal families in Jhargram on forest resources. The results show that woods are not just places where these communities get their food; they are also important to their social structure, cultural identity, economic strength, and spiritual perspective. Generations of experiential knowledge, collective memory, and adaptive techniques have shaped the complex link between tribal life and forest ecosystems.

But this way of life based on the forest is becoming less stable because of current government policies, business encroachments, environmental damage, and climate-related uncertainty. The Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006, and other laws that protect tribal rights are essential legal recognition of these rights.



However, their limited use still leaves people that have always been the guardians of these ecosystems on the outside.

The difficulties that forest-dependent tribal families in Jhargram encounter are many and varied. They include uncertain land tenure, economic instability, cultural loss, and conflicts between people and animals. These problems can't be fixed by doing things alone. What is needed instead is a fundamental change in governance models that put the needs of the community first, protect people's rights, and protect the environment. These models should give more authority to local voices and share power more fairly.

A significant finding from this study is the necessity to transcend the perception of tribal groups as only passive beneficiaries or objects of governmental protection. Instead, they should be seen as active stewards of the environment whose knowledge, attitudes, and actions are necessary for long-term growth. It is not enough to just be fair to them; we must also include their ideas in policymaking, recognise their collective rights, and make sure they have a say in how things are run. These are all necessary for any future of forest protection to work.

The survival of Jhargram's forests is closely linked to the health and dignity of the people who live there. It is not only the right thing to do to protect this interdependence, but it is also the only way to make society more fair, strong, and welcoming.

- **Reference :**

- Blaikie, P., & Brookfield, H. (1987). *Land degradation and society*. Methuen.
- Chakraborty, A. (2010). Forest rights and sustainable livelihoods: Tribal dependence on forests in West Bengal. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 26(2), 45–56.
- Chambers, R., & Conway, G. (1992). Sustainable rural livelihoods: Practical concepts for the 21st century. *IDS Discussion Paper 296*.
- Chatterjee, S. (2013). Non-timber forest products and tribal livelihood security: A case study from Jhargram. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(12), 72–78.
- Dasgupta, P. (2011). Socio-economic conditions of tribal communities in Jhargram. *West Bengal Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(1), 101–120.
- Elwin, V. (1962). *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin*. Oxford University Press.



- Forest Rights Act. (2006). Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act. Government of India.
- Government of West Bengal. (2019). *District human development report: Jhargram*. Development and Planning Department.
- Jackson, C. (2005). Men, masculinities and forest use: Gendered livelihoods in tribal India. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 12(3), 281–299.
- Kumar, R., & Das, M. (2015). Market integration and tribal livelihoods: The case of tendu leaf trade. *Journal of Development Policy and Practice*, 1(2), 85–104.
- Nayak, P., & Pal, S. (2020). Fair trade interventions in tribal NTFP marketing: Lessons from West Bengal. *Asian Journal of Humanities and Social Studies*, 8(4), 33–46.
- Panda, S., & Swain, P. (2017). Shifting cultivation and livelihood vulnerability among tribals in India. *Environmental Sociology*, 3(1), 17–27.
- Poffenberger, M. (2006). Communities and forest management in India: Historical lessons and contemporary challenges. *Forest Policy and Economics*, 8(4), 438–458.
- Reddy, C. S., & Chakrabarti, S. (2014). Forest bureaucracy versus tribal rights: The politics of FRA implementation. *Journal of Indian Law & Society*, 6(1), 59–78.
- Scoones, I. (1998). Sustainable rural livelihoods: A framework for analysis. *IDS Working Paper* 72.