



How is Covid-19 affecting the weekly local markets in Koraput, India?

Weekly local markets in tribal areas of India are known as *haats*. They are the nerve centre of community life and a significant source of income for people. The *haats* provide an insight into village economies and the social and cultural lives of these communities. Apart from selling local produce, they offer space for people to discuss and debate, celebrate festivals and enjoy recreational activities. People walk or travel several kilometres to reach *haats* that are held in various places on different days of the week. Rice, flowers, vegetables, forest produce, ornaments, pottery, honey, and much more can be purchased at the weekly *haats*. The present Covid-19 lockdown in India has closed down the *haats*, which is impacting tribal communities in many ways.

According to a community volunteer working in Boipariguda block, around 150-200 *haats* are usually held in Koraput district each week. Products foraged from forests are sold at Ramgiri and Boipariguda *haats*, whereas at Kunduli haat vegetables are for sale. Onkadelli haat is a colourful affair, visited by the Bonda and Gadaba community who live in the remotest part of the district. Traders from the nearby states of Andhra Pradesh and Chhattisgarh come to the *haats* to buy vegetables and other produce and sell on elsewhere.



A haat in Koraput in January 2020, before the Covid-19 lockdown

The importance of foraged items

Collection and sale of produce foraged from forests is one of the main sources of livelihood and income generation for tribal people, especially women.

A wide range of foraged items are sold in the *haats*, including wild honey, tamarind, mango, many varieties of leaves and seeds and mahua flowers. Tamarind seeds may fetch 20 rupees per kg, whilst karanja seeds may fetch 70 rupees per kg if the seed covers have been removed. Kendu leaves are bought by traders in a stack of 100 leaves at a price of 200 rupees. The labour-intensive collection of foraged items yields an important source of cash income for tribal and landless communities, as well as providing subsistence resources for nutrition, shelter and medicine during the lean dry seasons. It is predominantly women who collect, process and sell these items, which ensures food security for their families and gives them some financial and social empowerment.

How will lockdown affect these areas?

In the current Covid-19 pandemic, tribal communities are facing hardship because the lockdown has coincided with the foraging season (see Table 1). According to Chittaranjan Pani, a leading expert on the Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) economy in India “10 million people in Odisha and nearly 275 million people across the country collect NTFPs like tendu leaves, tree borne oil seeds, mohua flowers, siali and sal leaves” during this period. The cash earned during these months is critical during the monsoon season when employment dries up.

The lockdown will impact livelihoods, income and food security of the tribal and landless communities. According to Mr Pani, “the earnings from forest products in this 3-4 months period contributes to 60 to 80% of their annual income.”

How is lockdown affecting haats today?

According to Manas Mohanty, a community volunteer in Boipariguda block, all weekly haats are currently suspended. The areas near the village centres are strictly adhering to the lockdown because many migrant labourers have returned from nearby states and there is strict monitoring of movement and gatherings as preventive measures. Some places are still running small haats for a few hours, only selling vegetables. Some traders are going to the villages to buy produce directly, and people are selling at half the usual cost to make some money while they still can. In the interior of Koraput, people are still foraging in forests, but they are unable to sell in haats, so most are just collecting, drying and storing. Some produce will be used for subsistence and some will be stored for sale at a later date.

Table 1: Main collection months for various non-timber forest produce

	March	April	May	June
Mahua flower	[Orange bar]			
Broom grass	[Blue bar]			
Sal leaf		[Green bar]		
Kendu leaf		[Yellow bar]		
Sal seed		[Blue bar]		
Siali leaf			[Green bar]	
Mahua seed			[Purple bar]	
Chironji		[Orange bar]		
Tamarind		[Red bar]		
Karanj seed		[Grey bar]		
Honey			[Brown bar]	



A deserted haat during Covid-19 lockdown

What can be done to help sustainable food systems at this time?

The Van Dhan Scheme was launched in 2018 and should play an important role in improving tribal incomes through value addition of non-timber forest produce (NTFP). The scheme is implemented through the Ministry of Tribal Affairs and TRIFED (Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited). Locally, agricultural centres called Kendras are supposed to be implementing the scheme through local self-help groups (SHGs). 156 Van Dhan Kendras have been proposed in Odisha and one centre at Kuchinda in Sambalpur district is currently functional.

As the Van Dhan Kendra in Koraput is not operational at present, the Government of Odisha has made various decisions related to NTFP collection and sale. As of 20th April, people engaged with the collection of foraged items are allowed to continue collecting, harvesting, processing, transporting and selling to authorized agencies during the lockdown, as long as hygiene rules and social distancing are adhered to. The Odisha Forest Development Corporation Ltd. (OFDC) is trying to collect the produce through its forest volunteers and staff engaged in the area at guaranteed prices. It is hoped that such operations can be scaled up and further exemptions from the lockdown granted to people who collect non timber forest produce to ensure tribal communities can be sustained during this time of crisis.

This blog was written on 21 April 2020 by Nizni Hans, Manas Mohanty and Shubhasree Shankar from Kalinga Institute of Social Sciences, India, and Hannah Gray, GRTA Project Officer from University of East Anglia, UK.

The CHIRAG Project is funded by the UEA's Global Research Translation Award (GRTA), a £1.36 million project to help tackle health, nutrition, education and environment issues in developing countries. The funding comes from the UK government's Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), which seeks to fast-track promising research findings into real-world solutions. The Project Partners are PRADAN, Kalinga Institute for Social Sciences and Gram Vaani.

[Click here to return to the Sustainable Food Systems webpage](#)

