

Mahua: A Resilient Backbone for Tribal Livelihoods

Balaji Vikram*, Priya Awasthi*, Purnima Singh Sikarwar** and
Dharmendra Kumar Gautam***

Introduction

Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*) a valuable non-timber forest product, holds a multitude of uses, but its presence is predominantly limited to remote tribal areas of India. Mahua stands as a dependable source of livelihood for tribal communities. Its significance extends beyond being a non-timber forest product, as it plays a crucial role in sustaining the economic well-being of these communities. For generations, tribes have relied on Mahua for various purposes, including its diverse uses in food, medicine and craftsmanship.

India is a really amazing place with lots of different people, cultures, languages and seasons. This diversity is one of a kind and can't be found anywhere else in the world. Even if we just try to understand the basics of this diversity in things like art, culture, people and languages, it would take a whole lifetime. What makes this diversity even more special is how the plants and animals in the country also have a big impact on this varied landscape.

About 10.4% of India's whole population, which is a big number - 110 million people, are from tribal groups. The government now understands how important it is to take care of these people. There's a big part of India called Central India, with places like Madhya Pradesh, some of Maharashtra and Chhattisgarh. Lots of different tribes live there. They mostly live in the big forest areas of India and are like a really important part of the environment, depending on the forests to live. The tribes' survival totally relies on what the forest gives them and they're like best friends with the forest, helping each other.

In Central India, there's a tree called the Mahua tree, also known as the "Honey tree" in other places. This tree is super important. For these tribes to live well, they need these trees around. Every day, starting early in the morning and sometimes without shoes, the tribes, including men, women, kids and old folks, go all over the forest hills of the Satpura ranges. They work hard to collect

Balaji Vikram*, Priya Awasthi*, Purnima Singh Sikarwar and Dharmendra Kumar Gautam*****

*Department of Post Harvest Technology, Banda Agriculture and Technology University, Banda-211001 (U.P.) India.

**Assistant Professor, Department of Horticulture, AKS University, Satna (M.P.)

*** Research Scholer Department of Fruit Science, Acharya Narendra Deva University of Agriculture and Technology, Kumarganj, Ayodhya, 224229 (U.P.) India.

Mahua leaves and fruits, which are yellowish or amber in color. They put them in big baskets made from woven materials and carry them carefully on their heads.

The collection and processing of Mahua provide employment opportunities and income for tribal populations, particularly during the flowering season. The collection of mahua flowers, which typically occurs during the months of February and March each year, has faced challenges due to lack of awareness among villagers regarding the diverse range of uses beyond local alcohol production. This limited understanding has also impacted the income of village residents, as they previously relied on collecting and selling mahua flowers to traders during the lean agricultural season to meet their modest household needs. The flowers are harvested and their extract is used to produce a range of products such as edible oils, syrups and alcoholic beverages. The sale and trade of these Mahua-based products contribute directly to the economic sustenance of tribal households. Moreover, Mahua cultivation and management often involve community-led initiatives, strengthening social cohesion and fostering collective responsibility. The knowledge and skills associated with Mahua processing are passed down through generations, ensuring the preservation of cultural traditions and

enhancing the sense of identity within tribal communities.

The majestic Mahua tree has graced for centuries, serving as an irreplaceable lifeline for the tribal economy. Its contributions to the well-being of the indigenous communities are so vast that it is challenging to fully acknowledge its invaluable role. While often associated with its use in homemade liquor, Mahua has also found its place in a wide array of recipes, both simple and intricate.

The Mahua tree is an abundant source of diverse products, encompassing vegetable butter, medicinal extracts, syrups, purees and liquor. Remarkably, in a series of pioneering endeavors, the Agricultural and Processed Foods Export Development Authority successfully shipped a consignment of dehydrated Mahua flowers from Chhattisgarh to Paris, France in 2021, introducing India's renowned "Kacchi sharab" (country liquor) to global audiences for the very first time.

Notably, this year witnessed significant milestones in the recognition and acceptance of Mahua-related products. Madhya Pradesh declared Mahua as heritage liquor, while neighboring Maharashtra took a groundbreaking step by amending the "Bombay Mahua Flower Rules 1950," thereby legalizing the collection, sale and transport of Mahua flowers. Furthermore, the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation, in

collaboration with IIT-Delhi, recently ventured into producing "Mahua Nutra," a health beverage crafted by blending fermented Mahua flowers with pomegranate and guava juices in Jharkhand. Additionally, they unveiled "Mahua cookies," which blend millet flour, in Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar Jharkhand, Odisha and Maharashtra.

These significant developments signify a remarkable and positive shift in government priorities, attitudes and policies towards an indigenous tribal product that was once perceived as a "dangerous blight" requiring eradication. The government's stance on Mahua has undergone a complete transformation, shifting from an outright ban to a celebration of India's country liquor, exemplifying a newfound appreciation for this unique cultural heritage.

The intricacies of Mahua commerce are noteworthy and provide valuable insights for replicating similar models with other forest fruits found in India. In the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar Jharkhand, Odisha and Maharashtra, the entire Mahua produce is procured from tribal gatherers through the "Van Dhankendras" system. This procurement operates under a scheme with a uniquely specific name, the "Scheme for Marketing of Minor Forest Produce through Minimum Support Price and Value Chain Development." Interestingly, this scheme was

not prevalent a decade ago. The purchased Mahua is subsequently sold through auctions or to the government.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs oversees and determines the scheme and the specific Minimum Support Price (MSP), while the state forest department regulates the collection of Mahua flowers from the forest and issues necessary permissions. Additionally, the excise departments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar are involved in monitoring and regulating Mahua when it is fermented for its market value. Recognizing the potential of Mahua, several enterprising districts across India have started harnessing its benefits. States like Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Odisha and others have already begun promoting Mahua as both a liquor and a value-added food product.

Even though Mahua is seen as a special product in some government programs like "One District One Product" and the "PM Formalization of Micro Food Processing Enterprises" scheme, some governments don't really want to promote making alcohol from it. This has caused problems in places like Chhattisgarh where they wanted to develop things locally. But in other states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha and Maharashtra, things are different. The people who live in the forests there are happy because they are getting good things

from picking Mahua flowers for the first time. Now, the government is working with them and helping them sell what they collect for a good price, like they do with other crops.

Every morning, men, women and even kids carry baskets full of Mahua flowers and fruits on their heads and go to markets along the roads to sell them. They walk without shoes and it's quite a journey.

In the last two years, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the way people live and do business has changed. This has given new hope to the local people. Even in these tough times, the government went directly to the homes of tribal communities and gave them a lot of money. Because of this, the connection between the tribal people and the forests, where they used to get their money from, got stronger again. Before, a lot of tribal people had left these forests to go to cities in different states. This was because cities were growing quickly and seemed more attractive.

However, under the new dynamics of the Modi government, the situation has taken a positive turn, acting as a blessing in disguise for the hapless tribal population. There have been numerous instances where tribal men and women have earned substantial sums, reaching up to 3.5 lakhs of rupees per month equivalent to about four years' worth of wages as labourers by selling Mahua produce. These earnings far exceed what they would have

earned while working jobs unrelated to their traditional way of life in the cities. Mahua-producing states have established multiple procurement centres to directly purchase Mahua produce from the tribal communities. Many states have also collaborated with prominent traders to procure Mahua flowers at or above the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of Rs 35 per kilogram directly from the source. Additionally, various villages have received nets through the bank-funded "Green India Mission" and other initiatives, leading to better collection of high-quality Mahua produce. These improved collection methods have resulted in higher prices ranging from Rs 40 to 45 per kilogram.

Mahua, as a product, holds a rich historical significance, dating back to the British era. According to historian Vinita Damodaran's essay titled "Famine in Bengal - A Comparison of the 1770 famine in Bengal & the 1897 famine in Chota Nagpur," Mahua fruits were not only consumed as food but the fleshy corolla also served as a staple diet for the poor for several months of the year. During periods of droughts, famines and epidemics under colonial rule, Mahua played a crucial role in saving thousands from starvation. It was a lifeline for the people of this land. Sir Charles Watt, a Scottish botanist, quotes a former magistrate of Manghyar (now Munger) who stated that Mahua fruit, specifically in the

year 1873-74, prevented virtual decimation of the population.

Towards the end of the 19th century, colonial capitalism led to the depletion of food sources that forest communities depended on. The situation worsened when the colonialists classified Mahua as a dangerous intoxicant through the enactment of the "Mhowra Act of 1892." This move aimed to suppress the local liquor industry and monopolize the Indian markets for their imperial liquor brands. Turning to the culinary delights associated with Mahua, it is worth mentioning that this forest produce, when combined with yogurt, can be transformed into deep-fried purees known as "Kuldum." Additionally, it can be used to sweeten "Puran Polis," a traditional Indian dessert.

Conclusion:

Tribal people and the forests are like best friends who can't be separated. Mahua is really important for tribal communities because it helps them a lot economically and culturally. Even before they are born, there's a link between them and the mahua tree. Mahua is connected to every part of their culture, from when they are born to when they pass away and even during their marriages and funerals. The mahua tree is really useful because it gives them many things like syrups, purees, alcohol and medicines. Expectant mothers are provided with chutney made from mahua

flowers due to its nutritive value, rich in vitamins, proteins, minerals and fats. Mahua alcohol is important in many ceremonies and is a big part of weddings. It's part of their everyday life, used for food, medicine and drinks. For them, mahua is not just a tree. It's like a whole way of living that includes their traditions, how they get their food and their culture.

