

Kendu leaf: State faces problem of plenty

No storage space, 90,000 quintal rotting in different districts

The State Government's decision to enhance production of unprocessed kendu leaf has put the Forest Department in a fix. The decision, taken at a high-level meeting chaired by Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik on Tuesday aims at increased financial benefits for tribals families that are dependent on kendu leaf for livelihood. However, the Forest department is in a dilemma as how to achieve the target- - now 50,000 quintal - - double the actual production last year.

And the reasons to worry are far too many, a sluggish market, no storage space for unprocessed kendu leaf and of course, the monsoon. Purchasers are flocking to neighbouring states, Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh where they have comparative price advantage.

After the Government's directive on Tuesday the Forest department started issuing orders for commencement of the operations from Wednesday.

The entire process of brush cutting, plucking and bagging of kendu leaf (unprocessed) takes at least 65 days, which means the unprocessed kendu leaves will be ready only around May 20.

Meanwhile, forest officials point out that the department is looking at an enhancement of production by 16,000 quintal, which is risky considering the negative factors. "One pre-monsoon shower can render the entire exercise fruitless because of such last minute decisions," the department sources said. The vulnerability factor has doubled in the absence of storage space for unprocessed leaf.

A huge stock of unprocessed kendu leaf, around 90,000 quintal, is already rotting in different districts due to lack of storage space. Moreover, the quality of kendu leaf produced in Malkangiri district is below par and no purchaser is willing to travel that far. The areas where the target has been enhanced are the tribal district of Malkangiri and two divisions in Khariar and Nabarangpur.

As demand for kendu leaf has dropped over the years, kendu leaf trade in the State is staring at a crisis. While Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh account for 40 percent of kendu leaf production in India, Orissa's share is just 14 percent. While Orissa is the only state in India to

market processed kendu leaf, its neighbours have sort of hijacked the unprocessed leaf trade. Their advanced sale formula has clicked while it has not picked up in Orissa because of a price difference.

There are 19 kendu leaf divisions in Orissa of which around 16 are into processed production while the rest are into unprocessed leaves.

Source: Indian Express, 19-3-05