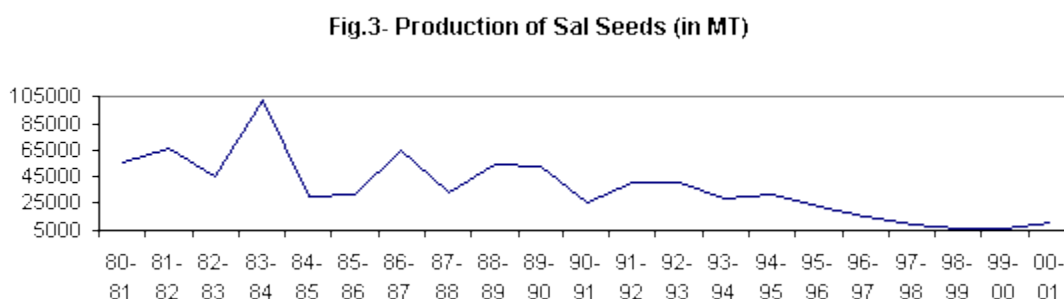


## Sal Leaf:

Sal leaf is a major source of income for forest dwellers in Orissa, especially in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Kandhamal, and Nayagarh. Primary level processing like cup and plate making provides livelihood security to hundreds and thousands of forest dwellers. It is believed in some quarters that commercial exploitation and unsustainable methods employed in collection of Sal leaves have largely been responsible for gradual but consistent depletion of Sal forests in Orissa.

### 4.1 Production and Pricing

Figure : Production of Sal leaf(in MTs)



### 4.2 Policy and its Impact

Sal leaf has been made a lease-banned item by the NTFP policy of March 2000 on grounds of sustainable forest management. The policy said that Sal leaf collection on a commercial basis affects forest health and needs to be left untouched. Only in exceptional situations, government corporations and field outfits of Forest Department basing on sound assessment of silvicultural availability could be allowed to procure Sal leaf. Though commercial exploitation of Sal leaf was banned, clandestine operations by local traders went on, sometimes even in connivance of local foresters. According to informal sources, average Sal leaf transaction per annum in Baripada and Karanjia forest divisions, both rich Sal forest areas, are astronomical, i.e. to the tune of Rs. 1000 Crores. Betanati block of Mayurbhanj district is the biggest congregation of small and big traders who control this trade to a large extent.

Immediately after the policy was made public in March, there were dissatisfaction and differences regarding restrictions on Sal leaf exploitation. Since livelihood clashed with sustainability of forests, a middle path arrangement in the form of controlled commercialisation was what concerned policy makers and development workers were looking for. Probably because of this, restrictions on Sal leaf collection and trade were withdrawn locally in forest divisions like Baripada, Karanjia, Keonjhar and Nayagarh where TDCC and OFDC were asked to procure Sal leaves through VSS. A Government order dated 4th October 2000 made this effective. It was understood that this change in the trade arrangement would be beneficial from two angles; firstly, it would protect the Sal leaf procurers in Sal rich areas, and would create monetary gains for the Government Corporations. In this arrangement the Government

Corporations were charged royalty on procurement basis that was fixed at 10% of collection price. No sooner did the GO made an impact and geared the Government Corporations into activity than came the other GO of 7th November which turned things upside down. Private parties were allowed to operate in the same four forest divisions along with TDCC and OFDC. With entry of private parties, royalty was reduced to 5% of collection price on the quantity procured and only a nominal Rs. 100/- was asked as registration fee with the concerned DFOs.

Ironically, a product that was restricted for commercial leasing on grounds of sustainability before 8 months was now made open for full-scale commercial exploitation. The Government however has not made it clear as to why Sal leaf trade was made open to commercial interest. It is apprehended, in retrospect, that Sal leaf had been deliberately kept in the lease barred section, lest it might get into GP's control causing colossal loss both to Government and private traders. Needless to say that vested interests both at the local traders' and leaders' level and policy makers' at State level are responsible for such reversal in objectives of forest management. In both the Government orders, procurement of Sal leaves has been made mandatory from degraded forests and through VSS. Procurement ceiling of 1.5 quintals per hectare per annum has also been fixed. But nothing was mentioned about collection and trade in non-VSS areas and good forest areas.

Decision of opening Sal leaf for commercial exploitation seems whimsical and without sensible reason. If livelihood security was the concern then why limit operation only to degraded forests and VSS areas? It is as if in non-VSS areas and in good forest areas, dependence on Sal leaf is minimal. If it was to revive the Government corporations then why ask royalty to them and why not some more in terms of cash to primary collectors?

According to the Government orders, this entry of private traders in the Sal leaf trade is on an experimental basis for one year i.e. from 30.09.2000 to 01.10.2001. This implies that if this trade arrangement succeeds then this may proceed further or other products in the lease barred category might follow this arrangement. It is apprehended that the case of Sal leaf deregulation may not be an isolated one, it might have been the starting of a process of deregulation of all other lease-barred items with the objective keeping them away from purview of GPs. Apart from other operational hurdles, this arrangement in may lead to a situation of overlapping of authority as the new policy empowers GPs to play the supervisory role as regards procurement and trade of NTFP. This implies that in a revenue unit there will be different monitoring and supervising agencies for different products.

#### **Plight of Sal leaf pluckers: A case from Mayurbhanj**

'If I had any other option, I would never have gone for Sal leaf collection. My family is forced to sell Sal leaf plates as there is no other source of income', says Ratani Dei, 45 year old Santal woman from Jarala village in Karanjia block of Mayurbhanj district. For tribal women in Mayurbhanj collection and selling of Sal leaf cup and plates, though not remunerative and commensurate with labour, is a major source of income. She along with her family members spends more than 12 hours (6 in the morning to 6 in the evening) a day to collect one bag of Sal leaves that invariably contains 1000 - 1200 leaves. On the second day, they stitch the leaves and make plates and pali (pali is two leaves stitched and later on compressed to chautis or cups). About 6-7 leaves are required to stitch one plate that means that about 200 plates are stitched from one day's collection. On the third day, the plates are dried and made ready for binding and sale. Three days of hard labour fetches the entire family a mere sum of 10-12 rupees,

provided the Government declared rates (Rs 5/- per one chaki of 80 plates) are given. Interestingly, the Government rates are fixed for 80 plates but traders collect 100 plates for the same price.

Ratani Dei in her rustic innocence asks a fundamental question, 'can't Government rates for procurement of Sal leaf plates be raised a bit so that we are a little comfortable. We hear that local traders from Betanati and Karanjia are making a fortune by selling the Sal leaf plates to the next traders in the ladder at an exorbitant price, sometimes even 20 rupees per chaki. Though during the rainy season rates increase and go to the tune of 9-10 rupees per chaki, we are unable to fetch that price since we do not have space for storage. There are instances when properly dried plates have been stored for about one year, but if the colour changes from green to red which it does invariably, the trader starts grumbling and reduces the price.'

Immediately after entry of the private traders into Sal leaves trade, a public interest litigation was filed which challenged the GO of 7th November on grounds of sustainable forest management. It apprehended that commercial interest might lead to unsustainable means for collection of Sal leaves thus proving detrimental to forest health. Simultaneously, there was a demand for withdrawal of the 5% royalty that was supposed to be given by the private traders. Subsequently, private traders went to the High Court on a writ petition challenging the authority of the concerned DFO to levy royalty as well as authority of the concerned DFO to ask for trade and transit permit as Sal leaf plates and cups are not forest produces. In 1987, the Orissa High Court had ruled that trade and transit permit was not necessary, as the leaf ceased to be a forest produce after undergoing a manufacturing process. Considering the writ petition on grounds mentioned, the Orissa High Court has now given an interim stay on levy of 5% royalty and the trade and transit permit required to send consignments outside the state. This has contributed to chaos in Sal leaf procurement. Though primary gatherers might not suffer much in such a situation, the worst sufferer once again is the forest.

### 4.3 Important Trade Aspects

Fig.5 - Trade Channel of Sal Leaf plate

