

Status of Health Security of the Forest Dwellers of Assam

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Abstract

Forests, the important renewable resource on the earth have gradually been transformed to a non renewable resource mainly by the individuals in the urge of a better life. Generally the socio economic impacts of forests are pushed backward by its ecological effects. As a result of this a special group and their lifestyle also remains in periphery. Their ineffectiveness in organization of the demands for protection of the specific forests based culture has left them in a situation where on the one hand they are not getting the modern facilities which the government guarantees them and on the other hand they are unable to practice their traditional ways of lives. Medicinal plants constitute important NTFPs on which life of the people living in the adjacent areas of forests depend to a great extent. With the depletion of the plants with medicinal values, status of health of those people has come under severe threats. The present study is an attempt to examine the role of medicinal plants in the lives of the fringe villagers of Kaziranga and Manas National Park of Assam, two important World Heritage sites of the state.

Keywords: Forests, medicinal plants, deforestation, fringe village, NTFPs.

Ecological services of forests towards human being are known to all. But the socio economic services have always remained in periphery.¹ Now what does the socio-economic service of forests include? Is it the contribution of the forests towards the generation of the GDP or anything else? Here, by this implication has been made to the role played by forest in maintenance of life, livelihood and culture of some specific groups who are traditionally dependent on it. But as we have discussed this culture of the forests dwellers have come under severe threats from two sides. First, is the severe trend of deforestation and second one is governmental efforts towards conservation in the name of declaration of some areas as protected areas and consequent restriction on the entry of the people into the forests through various piece of legislation. The general question which may come here is how such a beautiful measure like protected area can emerge as a threat to the security of the people, is there any cost of these system of protection? But a look at these both from practical and Human Security perspective reveals that costs can range from displacement of local communities to crop damage by

wildlife and sometimes include restricted access to resources.² It is true that nature of the costs depends on the nature of the management of the protected areas. Strictly protected areas with top-down management structure can result in more livelihood costs and cause conflicts between local communities and protected area management.³ The tragedy with this system of conservation which generally remains invisible is that whilst these areas provide ecosystem services at the global, national and local scale but the cost are mainly incurred by the local people who do not have other option except to depend on forests for their sustenance.⁴

Medicinal plants found in the forests are an important source for curing diseases of the rural people in general and for the forests dwellers in particular. Earlier when modern medical facilities and centers were not available to the villagers they had no other option except to depend on forests for support or to cure various types of diseases. Although, it could not make the people totally secure from diseases but was an easy way of curing at least some diseases. With the development of transport and communication system this practices has come down to a great extent. Hence, dependency of the people over forests for plants with medicinal values has drastically come down. But, still there are people who many a times depend on forests for medicinal plants. Hence, role of forests in strengthening health security of the people cannot be ruled out. Thus, food, health, economic security of the people is dependent on forests to a great extent. It appears very difficult to imagine a situation where security of a section of people in 21st century depends on forests but this does not mean withering away this section of the society. If security means free from threat then the people living in the fringe areas of forests are in great threat to their food, income, health, culture etc. Due to depletion of the forests, they are under constant threats towards their life, livelihood, health, culture etc.

Data Base and Methodology

The study is mainly based on primary data. Kaziranga and Manas National Park of Assam are two important World Heritage Site of the state. There are around 210 (60 in Manas and 150 in Kaziranga) fringe villages in and around the Parks. Out of these villages 12 villages were selected purposively keeping in mind the proximity of the villages to the forests. Data were collected by using semi-structured questionnaire. Altogether 782 respondents were interviewed for the study.

Analysis of the Findings

Figure 1 very significantly reflects that most of the people (44.37%) have abandoned the practice of collection of medicinal plants for curing diseases. Only 25.32% admitted that they to a great extent collect medicinal plants from the forests. Most of them are traditional practitioner (*Kbiraj or ojha*). 30.31% admitted that they to some extent collect plants with medicinal values from the forests. In other words, most of them are compelled to leave this practice and have been left with no other

option except going to the health centers. But the problem is that no health centre was found in the sampled villages.

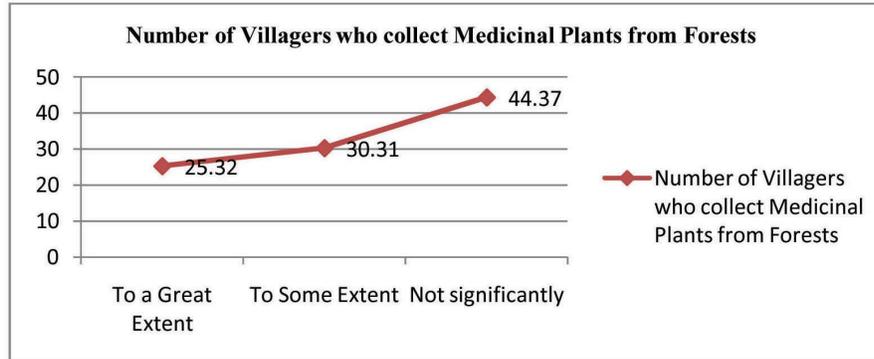


Fig. 1: Number of Villagers who collect Medicinal Plants from nearby Forests
Source: Field Survey

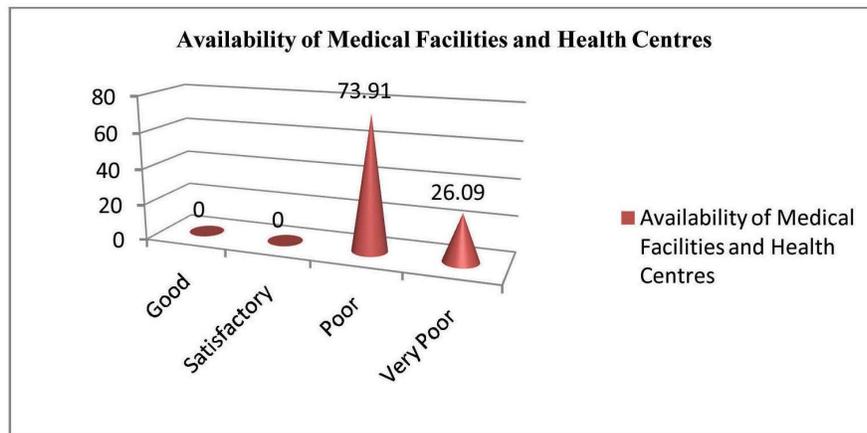


Fig. 2: Availability of Medical Facilities and Health Centers
Source: Field Survey

It was observed that there were no health centers in all the sampled villages. They have to travel 3-8 km to go to the hospitals or health centers. The difference between poor and very poor is that those who can go easily to the centers they consider it poor and those who cannot go they consider it very poor. This is because of the poor mode of transportation. The only vehicle that the villagers can take is the two wheeler either bicycle or motor bike. The situation is much more pathetic in the fringe villages of Kaziranga compared to the villages of Manas. This leads towards the increase of dependency of the forest dwellers on nearby forests for medicinal plants. The rural tribal people in India are traditionally much more dependent on forests for medicinal plants. But now development and spread

of modern medical facilities and institutions this trend has declined to some extent. But surprisingly it was observed during field survey that these facilities are yet to reach to the section that is deprived of every modern facility.

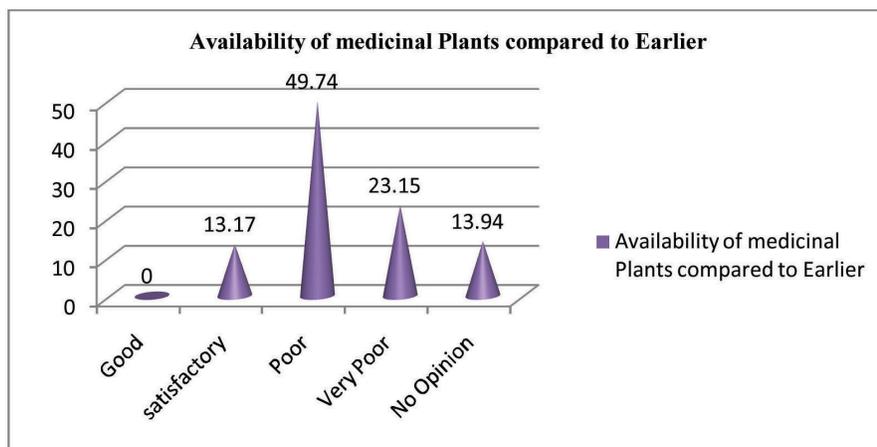


Fig. 3: Availability of Medicinal Plants compared to Earlier
Source: Field Survey

Regarding availability of the medicinal plants 49.74% of the respondents replied negatively and said that hardly a few items are found in the forests. For them the status or condition of the medicinal plants compared to earlier is poor. 23.15% consider it as very poor. While only 13.17% admit as satisfactory.

Here the data reveals that a large proportion of people (50.9%) believe that deforestation or depletion of various plants species constitute an important constraint towards getting of medicinal plants used by the rural people, who are deprived of the modern medical facilities of the present society. Again many informed that frequent presence of wild animals have emerged another constraint. This is again because of the clearance of forests areas that has destroyed the habitats and food source of the animals.

The respondents argue that if they would have got better medical facilities than depletion of species with medicinal values would not have become a threat to their health security. But what has happened is that on the one hand they are far from getting their facilities and on the other hand they are not getting the plants which they could find in plenty of earlier. Hence a large section (15.22%+44.76%+25.83%=85.81%) accept that depletion of medicinal plants has emerged as a threat to their health security.

Most of the people in the adjacent areas of the parks belong to communities like Bodo, Karbi, Mishing, Adivashi, Nepali, Bengali etc. It means the people are mixture

of a large number of communities. But, there exist one common thing which is known as *aranya culture*. All of them co exist with nature and worship or pray nature in one way or the other. For most of these people, their way of life or culture constitute the backbone of their economy.⁵ In most cases these, practices or culture are mostly protective towards the environment and biodiversity although these are blamed in a reverse way.⁶

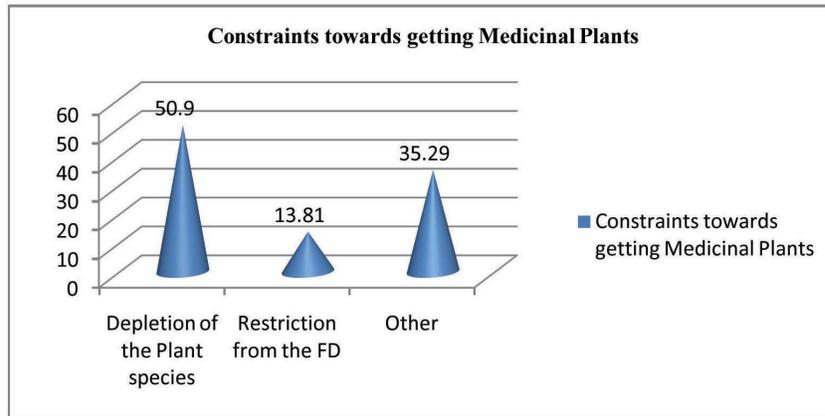


Fig. 4: Constraints towards getting medicinal plants
 Source: Field Survey

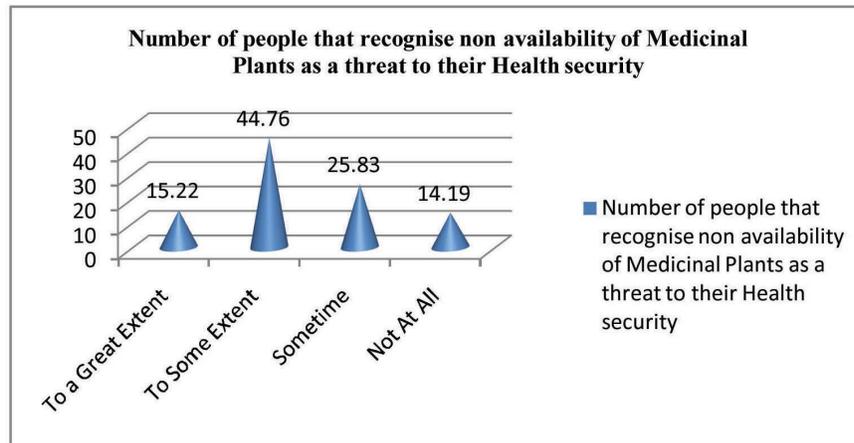


Fig. 5: Non-availability of medicinal plants as a threat to health status or security
 Source: Field Survey

Most important among the findings is that spread of modern medical technology and facilities has not been able to benefit the people of those areas. In most of the villages, no health centers were found. The people have to travel a lot to reach the medical centers exist around 4-10 km away from their places. Another important barrier in getting the modern facilities is the poor transportation system prevails in those areas. All these factors on one hand contribute towards the increase of dependency of the people on plants with medicinal values available in their surrounding forests and on the other hand depletion of the species leads towards growing insecurity of the same .

Endnotes

¹Fernandes, Walter (2004): Forest Issues, Forest Dwellers and Emerging Situations. paper presented at the National Seminar on Human Origins, Genome and People of India, New Delhi : Anthropological Survey of India.

²UNEP-WCMC: (2008) : The Cost and Benefits of Forest Protected Areas for Local Livelihoods: a Review of the current literature. Working Paper, UNEP. pp.1.

³Ibid

⁴Ibid.

⁵Shiva, Vandana.(1997): Ecology and the Politics of Survival-Conflicts over Natural Resources in India, Sage Publications, New Delhi.

⁶Ibid.