

Empowering Tribal Producers: The Role of Direct Marketing in Expanding Market Access

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India has a rich diversity in its tribal communities, with about 200 different tribal communities across the country. The uniqueness of tribal art and craftsmanship is well perceived. In addition, these communities are also engaged in harvesting or cultivating unique produce: minor forest produce (MFP), non-timber forest produce (NTFP), organic crops, and heritage foods. An estimate for central India suggests that NTFP contributes an annual market value of around ₹30,000 crore, with central India supplying over 40% of this produce. In general, these goods reach consumers through long chains of intermediaries; thus, producers capture only a small fraction of value.

Direct marketing has significant potential to improve income stability for tribal farmers, who often face limited market access and dependence on middlemen. Direct sale models such as tribal haats, Van Dhan centres, farmer collectives, producer companies, and digital platforms enable farmers to receive fair prices and reduce exploitation. Aggregation through SHGs and FPOs would also help in overcoming the challenge of small individual surpluses. Facilities like collection centres, transport support, and transparent weighing and pricing further strengthen market participation of tribal producers.

Advantages of direct-sale model for tribal produce

- **Remunerative prices for the producers:** By reducing the number of intermediaries and shortening the marketing channel, the producers can obtain a larger share in the consumer price, which can translate into higher incomes and stronger livelihoods.
- **Branding and differentiation:** Tribal produce often has unique attributes such as origin, heritage, forest-fresh quality, and organic or wild-harvest qualities. Such attributes can be leveraged to fetch premium prices in the niche markets.
- **Alignment with changing consumer preferences:** There is increasing consumer interest in sustainable, ethically sourced, indigenous and natural products, making tribal produce potentially attractive as “experience” as well as “origin” goods.
- **Empowerment and local control:** Direct sales or producer-led marketing methods such as through the FPOs help in building capacities, local entrepreneurial networks and co-operatives and reduce exploitation by middlemen.
- **Local employment generation:** Local processing, packaging, and aggregation in tribal regions can generate employment, reduce migration pressures, and strengthen local economies.

Direct marketing of tribal produce: Success stories

Many initiatives by the government and e-commerce tie-ups are emerging to support tribal produce. Some of these success stories could provide some insights for future frameworks for supporting direct sale of tribal produce by the communities.

Tribes India Initiative by the TRIFED: the national body Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED) works to institutionalise trade of minor forest and tribal

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agricultural/forest produce. The TRIFED started the procurement and marketing of tribal art and craft items through its first retail outlet called TRIBES INDIA in New Delhi in 1999. As of today, this initiative has resulted in 110 retail outlets of tribal produce across India.

Branding initiative “Palash”: The Government of Jharkhand launched “Palash – Branding & Marketing for Rural & Tribal Women Entrepreneurs and Artisans’ Products”. Under this, tribal and rural women’s SHGs/artisans produce under a unified brand, with training, packaging, and entry into institutional markets. This initiative engages over 6.75 lakh rural/tribal women under 29 different product categories.

Value chain for organic spices in the North-eastern Hill Region: In the North-eastern Hill Region of India, Grassroot Syndicate Producers’ Company Ltd – a tribal-led producer company supported by institutional interventions (technical, processing, and training) – has built a value chain for organically produced spices such as turmeric, ginger, chilli and improved market access, incomes, and sustainability.

Minimum Support Price mechanism of Odisha: In Odisha, the Minimum Support Price mechanism & Forest Produce has allowed tribal women in village panchayats to aggregate tamarind and sell at remunerative prices.

Challenges and Constraints in direct marketing of tribal produce

Despite the advantages that direct marketing offers over the traditional methods of sale, there are several structural constraints impeding the effective direct sales of tribal produce:

- **Aggregation and scale of production:** Tribal producers typically produce small quantities scattered over many households. Aggregation of produce, ensuring consistent quality and meeting the consumer standards, poses a key challenge.
- **Infrastructure and logistics:** Many tribal regions are remote, with poor roads, storage facilities, cold chains (for perishables), and unreliable electricity, which increases cost and risk of spoilage.
- **Marketing and brand visibility:** Tribal products often struggle for visibility and differentiation.
- **Access to digital technology:** Marketing via e-commerce, packaging, certification, and brand development all require capacities that are often lacking among the tribal groups.
- **Quality standards and certification requirements:** Tribal producers face challenges in meeting the quality, packaging, traceability, and certification requirements of the buyers, especially from niche markets.
- **Market risk and demand mismatch:** The branded produce from the tribal commodities, though it has its own niche market, is not always certain given the expectation of a premium price and the risks of large-scale and consistent supplies.
- **Sustainability and ecological issues:** Overharvesting of forest resources, lack of sustainable harvesting practices, and regulatory issues can pose risk for long-term supply.

Thus, despite the economic advantages of direct marketing channels for tribal produce, both public-policy frameworks and private-sector supply chain strategies must be strengthened in terms of investments in infrastructure, aggregation, value addition, branding, market access, digital platforms and sustainable harvesting for realising the potential of the same.