

A Field Worker's Diary - Part 29

Hazaribagh is a small town situated on the National Highway no. 33 on the way from Ranchi to Jamshedpur. I had to stay for 2 days at a village near Hazaribagh. As there was no hotel facility in the village, I stayed in the house of a villager who worked as a carpenter.

In the early morning of my 2nd day there, I and the two daughters of my host went to see the forest adjacent to the village. I saw these kids there. They were collecting the flowers that had fallen from the tree into a basket. It must have been around 6 in the morning. Even at that early hour, I could see that there were a lot of flowers in the basket. I enquired them as to what kind of flowers were they and since what



time they had been collecting them. They answered that they were mahua flowers (we call them with vippapulu here) and that they had been collecting since the last one hour.

The mahua tree is like a *kalpavriksha* for the tribals in that area. From the beginning of the Chaitra month (generally in March/April), these tribals start collecting the flowers. Almost all the elders and children from every household start for the forest early in the morning and collect mahua flowers till the afternoon. They even collect dried or withered flowers. They say that when you take them home and put them in water, they come back to life and become fresh.

They not only eat this flower, but also use it as cattle feed, they informed me. Mainly, mahua flower is used by them to brew the country liquor (ಘಾಡ). Although they start collecting mahua flowers from March itself to eat and to sell it at the shandy, they told me that they don't start brewing the drink until just before the rainy season starts.

Approximately, 1 kilo of mahua flowers fetches them around 7 to 8 rupees. Or, they also follow the barter system, where-in they exchange one basket full of flowers for another basket of vegetables.

In those seasons, eating boiled mahua is very common here. The locals told me that the syrup made from mahua is really tasty when eaten with *rotis*, and that they also love the



mahua *laddus*. To the single and vulnerable women here who have no other means of sustaining themselves, mahua collection is their main livelihood for 2-3 months from the Chaitra month.

While coming back from the forest, we went to the government school nearby. There were only four students and the teacher in the classroom. The teacher

told that most of the children don't come in until 11 or 12 in the afternoon in the mahua season as they go to the forest for flower collection with their families. The four children in the classroom also sang a song on mahua *laddus*. As per the village custom, even though the forest there was full of those trees, each family had been allocated some trees and they collected the flowers from only those trees.

Though I had gone to the area for another work altogether, it was truly a great experience for me to get to know and understand how interconnected the lives of the tribes here were with a tree, and how their way of life changes according to the flowering season.

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