

FOREST LIVELIHOODS IN HIMACHAL PRADESH

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ABSTRACT

In Himachal Pradesh, forest livelihoods are a significant yet evolving aspect of rural life. Historically, forests have provided fuelwood, fodder, grazing, timber for domestic use, medicinal plants, wild food, grasses, fibres, fruits, and other non-timber forest products (NTFPs) to rural households. Subsistence farming, household consumption, livestock rearing, and additional income have all been supported by these resources. However, forest livelihood systems of Himachal Pradesh differ from one another. Altitude, vegetation, accessibility, market connectedness, agricultural methods, and the extent to which rural households are integrated into non-farm work all influence their character. This paper examines forest livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh from a geographical perspective, focusing specifically on the ways in which rural households obtain livelihood benefits from forest resources. The study uses secondary information from the Government of Himachal Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, Forest Survey of India and relevant scholarly literature. Recent official information indicates that the state continues to have a substantial forest resource base, while forestry and logging generated an estimated ₹6,018 crore of gross value added at constant prices in 2025–26. The Forest Department reports that more than 600 locally occurring plant species are used for food, fruit, fibre, fodder, fuel, gums, oil and resin, demonstrating the breadth of forest-resource dependence. Medicinal plants represent another important livelihood resource, with approximately 800 species recognised as medicinal and around 165 species reported as being collected commercially. The paper argues that forest livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh are undergoing a transition from predominantly subsistence-oriented resource use towards diversified livelihood strategies. Nevertheless, forests continue to provide significant direct and indirect livelihood benefits, particularly through fodder, livestock, NTFPs, medicinal plants, fuel, household requirements and supplementary income. The study concludes that the future of forest livelihoods depends on improving the economic returns from forest resources, strengthening local value chains, ensuring sustainable harvesting and enhancing the participation and economic agency of forest-dependent communities.

Keywords: Forest livelihoods, Himachal Pradesh, forest dependence, NTFPs, medicinal plants, fodder, fuelwood, rural economy, livelihood diversification, Himalayan communities

1. INTRODUCTION

The interdependence between forests and human livelihoods is especially pronounced in mountainous areas, where the availability of agricultural land is constrained, settlements are widely dispersed, and rural households have historically relied on a diverse range of ecological resources. In Himachal Pradesh, forests have long constituted an important component of the livelihood systems of rural communities. Rather than being merely natural landscapes situated beyond human settlements, forests serve as a vital resource base that sustains household economic activities and everyday needs through

access to fuelwood, fodder, grazing areas, wild foods, medicinal plants, grasses, fibres, fruits, timber, and a variety of other forest-based products.

The livelihood importance of forests extends well beyond the commercial value of timber or their measurable contribution to Gross State Value Added. Even when rural households obtain limited direct monetary income from forest resources, they may remain highly dependent on forests for essential needs such as livestock fodder, household fuel, medicinal resources, and products that complement their food and consumption requirements. Thus, forest dependence should not be assessed solely in terms of income generation; rather, it needs to be understood in relation to the diverse and interconnected functions that forests perform within rural household livelihood systems.

The Himachal Pradesh Forest Department itself recognises this relationship. It reports that local communities use more than 600 plant species for food, fruits, fibre, fodder, fuel, gums, oil, resin and other purposes and states that these resources contribute substantially to rural livelihoods (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026a).

The contemporary economic importance of forestry remains substantial. According to the Economic Survey 2025–26, forestry and logging generated ₹6,018 crore of Gross State Value Added at constant 2011–12 prices in 2025–26, compared with ₹5,764 crore in 2024–25, representing real growth of 4.4% (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2026).

However, the present-day forest livelihood economy is considerably different from the traditional one. Improvements in road connectivity, electrification, LPG access, horticulture, tourism, education, government employment, wage labour and migration have diversified rural income sources. Consequently, many households no longer depend upon forests as their principal source of livelihood. This does not mean that forests have ceased to be important. Rather, the nature of forest dependence has changed.

The central proposition of this paper is therefore that forest livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh are characterised by a transition from direct subsistence dependence towards diversified and complementary dependence. Forest resources continue to provide livelihood benefits, but these benefits increasingly interact with livestock, agriculture, horticulture, wage employment, tourism and other rural economic activities.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

1. To assess the nature, patterns, and spatial variations in forest-based livelihoods among rural communities across Himachal Pradesh.
2. To analyse the key forest resources and associated livelihood activities of rural communities, with particular emphasis on fuelwood, fodder, grazing, livestock rearing, non-timber forest products, medicinal plants, and other forest-based resources.

2. UNDERSTANDING FOREST LIVELIHOODS

A livelihood may broadly be understood as the capabilities, assets and activities through which individuals and households secure their means of living (Chambers & Conway, 1992). The significance of livelihood assets and strategies is essential for comprehending how rural economies function. From this viewpoint, forests represent a vital component of natural capital (Scoones, 1998).

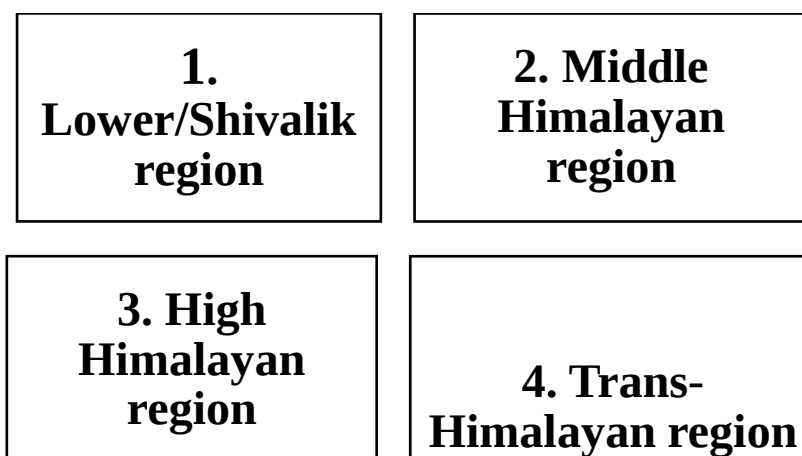
However, the term “forest livelihood” should not be restricted to households that sell forest products commercially. It encompasses several forms of livelihood dependence.

(i) Subsistence dependence

Rural households derive livelihood support from forests through a variety of direct and indirect uses. Forest resources are frequently collected for household consumption, including fuelwood, fodder, wild vegetables, fruits, medicinal herbs, grasses, and timber used for domestic purposes. Forests also provide grazing areas and feed resources that facilitate livestock rearing, with livestock subsequently contributing to household welfare through milk, meat, manure, and income from sales. In addition, some households generate cash earnings by collecting and marketing non-timber forest products (NTFPs) and medicinal plants. Employment opportunities are also created through forestry-related activities such as plantation work, nursery operations, forest protection, forest management, and other forest-based enterprises. For many rural families, forests therefore function as a complementary livelihood resource alongside their principal sources of income, including agriculture, horticulture, government and private services, tourism, and wage employment. This supplementary role of forests is particularly relevant to understanding the changing livelihood patterns of rural communities in contemporary Himachal Pradesh.

3. GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT OF FOREST LIVELIHOODS

Himachal Pradesh is characterised by considerable altitudinal and ecological variation. This produces corresponding differences in forest resources and livelihood practices. For the purpose of understanding forest livelihoods, the state can broadly be considered through four geographical settings:



These categories are not administrative divisions. They represent broad ecological contexts within which forest livelihood practices vary.

The lower hills have greater accessibility to markets and settlements and contain subtropical forests. The middle hills have extensive forest-agriculture-livestock relationships. The high hills contain extensive temperate and coniferous forests alongside horticulture, pastoralism and medicinal-plant collection. The Trans-Himalayan districts have relatively limited conventional forest cover but possess alpine and high-altitude resources important to pastoral and medicinal-plant-based livelihoods.

This geographical differentiation is fundamental: the forest livelihood of a household depends not simply on the existence of forest but on what resources are available in that particular ecological setting.

4. FORESTS AS A HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOOD RESOURCE

(i) Fuelwood

Fuelwood has historically constituted a vital forest resource for rural households, particularly before the expansion of commercial energy sources. Forests provided much of the fuel required for cooking and domestic heating, thereby making fuelwood an essential component of household subsistence. Its collection also generated an indirect economic benefit by reducing the need to purchase commercial sources of energy. Thus, even in the absence of direct monetary returns, access to forest fuelwood contributed to household economic security by lowering expenditure.

The growing availability of LPG and electricity has reduced the reliance of rural households on fuelwood for cooking; however, biomass continues to remain important in many rural and high-altitude areas, especially for space heating during colder months. The livelihood value of fuelwood should therefore be assessed beyond its potential market price or contribution to cash income. It also represents avoided household expenditure, since households that collect fuelwood themselves can reduce their spending on purchased energy. Although such collection may not involve a recorded monetary transaction, the resource nevertheless provides a tangible economic benefit to the household.

5. FODDER AND LIVESTOCK: THE FOREST-LIVELIHOOD CONNECTION

Among the most important but frequently underestimated forest-livelihood relationships in Himachal Pradesh is the connection between forests and livestock. Forest areas provide grasses, leaves, shrubs, tree fodder, grazing opportunities, and seasonal forage. These resources support livestock, which in turn provides milk, meat, manure, household nutrition, agricultural inputs, and supplementary cash income. Thus, the livelihood relationship can be represented as:



The economic importance of this relationship is reinforced by the livestock sector of the state. The Economic Survey 2025–26 estimates livestock GSVA at ₹3,235 crores at constant prices in 2025–26, with real growth of 6.9% (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2026).

Therefore, forests contribute to rural livelihoods even when no forest product is directly sold. This is one of the most important arguments that a study of forest livelihoods should make: forest dependence cannot be measured only through forest-product income.

6. GRAZING AS A FOREST LIVELIHOOD

Grazing represents another traditional forest livelihood practice. In mountain communities, livestock ownership has historically been connected with access to forest and pasture resources. Seasonal movement between different elevations allows households to use vegetation according to its seasonal availability. This relationship remains particularly important in high-altitude areas. However, the nature of grazing has changed. Improved roads, stall feeding, declining traditional livestock systems and migration have modified traditional pastoral practices.

Consequently, contemporary forest-livelihood policy must not simply ask whether grazing should continue. It should ask:

How can grazing remain economically useful while maintaining the productivity of the resource base?

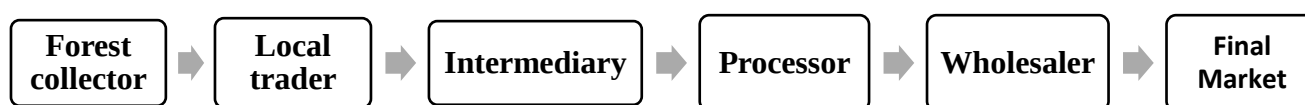
This points towards rotational grazing, fodder development, silvipastoral systems and improved livestock productivity.

7. NON-TIMBER FOREST PRODUCTS AND LIVELIHOODS

NTFPs are perhaps the most direct link between forests and supplementary cash income. They include medicinal plants, wild fruits, edible plants, mushrooms, honey, grasses, fibres, gums, resins, aromatic plants, and other minor forest products. The Himachal Pradesh Forest Department specifically identifies medicinal and aromatic plants, grasses, fibres, tans and dyes, gums and resins among the NTFPs requiring sustainable management and livelihood-oriented development (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026c).

The significance of NTFPs is that they permit households to obtain economic value from forests without relying exclusively upon timber. However, the economic position of collectors is often weak. The raw material may be collected from forests at considerable labour cost but sold to intermediaries at relatively low prices.

This produces a value-chain problem:



The greatest opportunity for livelihood improvement therefore lies not necessarily in increasing collection but in enabling communities to capture a greater share of the existing value.

8. MEDICINAL PLANTS AS FOREST LIVELIHOODS

Medicinal plants deserve separate attention because Himachal Pradesh possesses substantial medicinal-plant diversity. The Forest Department reports approximately 3,500 plant species in the state, of which around 800 are attributed medicinal value, while approximately 165 species are collected commercially (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026b).

The Department also identifies several important medicinal products and reports that a substantial proportion of medicinal plants traded in the state are harvested from the wild (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026b). This makes medicinal plants an important forest-livelihood opportunity. The significance is particularly high in high-altitude districts, where medicinal and aromatic plants form part of traditional livelihood systems. However, the present system has two major weaknesses:

1. Low returns to primary collectors, and
2. Pressure on wild populations.

The Forest Department notes that local collectors sell herbs to local shopkeepers and that the trade remains insufficiently organised (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026b). Therefore, the

livelihood potential of medicinal plants depends upon scientific cultivation, sustainable wild harvesting, local processing, grading, storage, branding, market information and direct market access.

9. WILD FOOD AND SUBSISTENCE RESOURCES

Forest livelihoods are also supported through wild foods. These may include wild fruits, edible leaves, mushrooms, roots, seeds, nuts and other seasonal products. Such resources may have limited monetary value but can contribute to household food security. The importance of wild foods becomes particularly evident in periods when agricultural production is inadequate or household income is under pressure. The Forest Department's observation that more than 600 local plant species are used for food, fruit, fibre, fodder, fuel, gums, oil and resin illustrates the breadth of this relationship (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026a).

10. TIMBER AND HOUSEHOLD LIVELIHOODS

Timber occupies a distinctive position within forest livelihood system of Himachal Pradesh. For right-holders, timber has historically provided material for house construction, repair, agriculture structures, and other household requirements. The Timber Distribution system of Himachal Pradesh reflects this traditional relationship between forests and rural households. The Forest Department currently provides for timber distribution to eligible right-holders under the applicable policy framework (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026b).

The livelihood value of timber is therefore not necessarily equivalent to its commercial market price. For a rural household constructing or repairing a house, access to timber may represent a substantial saving.

11. FOREST LIVELIHOODS AND WOMEN'S WORK

Forest livelihoods are strongly connected to women's labour. Women have traditionally undertaken much of the work associated with collecting fuelwood, collecting fodder, gathering grass, caring for livestock, collecting NTFPs, processing forest products, and maintaining household energy and food supplies. This creates an important distinction between livelihood participation and livelihood control. Women may contribute substantial labour to a forest-based livelihood without controlling the income generated from forest products. Consequently, a livelihood-centred forest strategy should strengthen women's participation in NTFP cooperatives, self-help groups, processing enterprises, medicinal-plant cultivation, marketing, financial management and local forest institutions. The objective should be to transform women's role from primarily resource collectors to economic actors within forest value chains.

12. FOREST LIVELIHOODS ACROSS THE TWELVE DISTRICTS

The state-wide perspective requires attention to all twelve districts. However, districts should not be treated as internally homogeneous. The following classification represents the dominant forest-livelihood context, rather than an exclusive activity.

Table 1
Forest-Livelihood Context Across Himachal Pradesh

District	Dominant forest-livelihood relationships
Bilaspur	Fuelwood, fodder, grazing, livestock and NTFPs
Chamba	Fodder, livestock, grazing, medicinal plants and NTFPs
Hamirpur	Fuelwood, grass, fodder, livestock and supplementary forest products
Kangra	Fodder, livestock, fuelwood, grasses and NTFPs
Kinnaur	Medicinal plants, high-altitude NTFPs, pastoralism and forest-linked

	supplementary livelihoods
Kullu	Medicinal plants, NTFPs, livestock and forest-linked rural livelihoods
Lahaul-Spiti	Alpine resources, medicinal plants, pastoralism and seasonal resource use
Mandi	Fuelwood, fodder, livestock, NTFPs and forest-linked household production
Shimla	Fodder, livestock, NTFPs, medicinal plants and household forest resources
Sirmaur	Fuelwood, fodder, grass, livestock and NTFPs
Solan	Fodder, livestock, fuelwood, NTFPs and diversified rural livelihoods
Una	Fuelwood, fodder, grazing, livestock and supplementary NTFPs

This distribution demonstrates that forest livelihoods are not a single state-wide phenomenon. They consist of multiple livelihood systems connected by a common dependence upon forest resources.

13. REGIONAL DIFFERENTIATION OF FOREST LIVELIHOODS

Table 2

Ecological Regionalisation and Forest Livelihoods

Ecological setting	Principal forest-livelihood activities	Nature of dependence
Lower/Shivalik hills	Fuelwood, fodder, grazing, livestock, grasses, NTFPs	Mainly complementary
Middle hills	Fodder, livestock, fuelwood, NTFPs, medicinal plants	Strong complementary dependence
High hills	Medicinal plants, NTFPs, livestock, grazing, household forest products	Mixed subsistence-commercial
Trans-Himalayan region	Medicinal plants, alpine resources, pastoralism	Seasonal and specialised

The lower hills generally have greater market integration and alternative employment opportunities. Consequently, forest products increasingly supplement household incomes. The middle hills show perhaps the strongest forest–livestock–agriculture relationship. The high hills contain greater opportunities for specialised NTFPs and medicinal plants. The Trans-Himalayan region demonstrates that forest livelihoods cannot be separated completely from high-altitude pastoral and alpine resource systems.

14. FOREST LIVELIHOODS AND LIVELIHOOD DIVERSIFICATION

A major transformation in rural Himachal Pradesh has been the increasing diversification of livelihood strategies. Traditionally, rural households relied predominantly on a combination of agriculture, livestock rearing, and forest resources for their sustenance. However, contemporary households increasingly draw upon multiple sources of livelihood, including agriculture and horticulture, livestock, forest resources, wage employment, tourism, service-sector employment, and migration. This shift should not be viewed as evidence of the disappearance of forest-based livelihoods. Rather, forests have become an important component of increasingly diversified household livelihood portfolios. For instance, a household may derive its primary cash income from horticulture while continuing to obtain fodder from forests and using forest products to meet domestic needs. Similarly, a family with a member employed in an urban area may continue to collect medicinal plants on a seasonal basis, while a household engaged in tourism may maintain livestock that partly depends on forest-derived fodder. Thus, a reduction in exclusive dependence on forests does not necessarily indicate a corresponding decline in their overall livelihood significance; instead, it reflects the changing manner in which forest resources are integrated into broader and more diversified rural livelihood strategies.

15. ECONOMIC VALUE OF FOREST LIVELIHOODS

The official forestry GVA provides only one dimension of the economic importance of forests. The Economic Survey 2025–26 estimates forestry and logging GVA at ₹6,018 crore at constant prices in 2025–26, compared with ₹5,764 crore in 2024–25 (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2026). But this figure does not capture all household-level livelihood benefits. For example, a household that collects its own fodder, fuelwood, wild food, grass, or medicinal plants may receive substantial economic value without creating a conventional market transaction. The Forest Department has cited an assessment estimating direct consumptive benefits from forests in the form of timber distribution, fuel, fodder and minor forest produce at approximately ₹1,083 crores annually (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026b).

16. FOREST LIVELIHOODS, INSTITUTIONS AND LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Forest livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh are shaped not only by ecological conditions and the availability of forest resources but also by the institutional arrangements governing access, use, management and marketing. The same forest resource may therefore have different livelihood significance depending upon accessibility, local institutions, market connectivity, household assets and the applicable regulatory framework.

The legal framework is particularly relevant because forest dependence does not necessarily translate into secure or equal access. The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006 recognises specified forest rights connected with livelihood and community use, including rights relating to minor forest produce, grazing and community forest resources. Its significance for livelihood analysis lies in its attempt to recognise historically established relationships between forest-dwelling communities and forest resources. The Forest Rights Act should, however, be understood as one component of a broader institutional framework rather than as the sole determinant of forest livelihoods. Forest administration, Panchayati Raj institutions, Gram Sabhas, participatory forest-management arrangements, markets and livelihood-development programmes collectively influence the extent to which communities can derive sustainable economic benefits from forests.

A balanced forest-livelihood approach therefore requires reconciliation between conservation and livelihood objectives. The issue is not simply whether communities should have access to forests, but how access can be organised so that traditional and legally recognised livelihood practices remain economically useful while harvesting, grazing and collection remain ecologically sustainable. For forest-dependent communities, the important transition is from access to raw resources towards meaningful participation in the value chain. Legal and institutional support can facilitate collective marketing, local processing, community enterprises and participation in decision-making, thereby enabling communities to retain a greater proportion of the value generated by forest resources.

17. STRENGTHENING FOREST LIVELIHOODS

A forest-livelihood policy should not aim simply to increase the extraction of forest resources; rather, its objective should be to generate greater livelihood value from sustainably managed forest resources. This requires a comprehensive approach that strengthens the entire forest-based livelihood system. First, NTFP value chains need to be strengthened by ensuring that collectors have access to timely price information, collective marketing mechanisms, storage facilities, processing units, appropriate packaging, and direct buyers. Such measures can reduce dependence on intermediaries and enable forest-dependent communities to obtain a greater share of the final market value. Second, greater emphasis should be placed on local processing of forest products. The Forest Department itself notes

that processing can significantly enhance the value of forest produce, with examples including anardana, amla-based products, jams, squashes and related products (Himachal Pradesh Forest Department, 2026c). Third, medicinal-plant cultivation should be promoted as an alternative source of income that can simultaneously reduce excessive pressure on wild medicinal-plant populations. Fourth, women should be integrated into the higher-value stages of forest-based production, processing and marketing rather than being confined primarily to collection activities. Fifth, greater integration between forests and livestock can enhance rural livelihoods through fodder development and improved livestock productivity without proportionately increasing pressure on forest resources. Finally, community institutions should be strengthened so that local communities can collectively participate in the management of harvesting, processing and marketing activities. Such an institutional approach can improve both economic returns and the sustainability of forest resources. In this context, the Himachal Pradesh Forest Ecosystems Management and Livelihood Improvement Project, supported by JICA, specifically seeks to improve the livelihoods of forest- and pasture-dependent communities while enhancing forest and pasture productivity (Government of Himachal Pradesh, 2025). Thus, strengthening forest livelihoods requires a shift from a predominantly extraction-oriented approach towards an integrated model based on sustainable resource management, local value addition, community participation and equitable distribution of economic benefits.

CONCLUSION

Forest livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh represent a complex relationship between rural households and forest resources. They encompass much more than commercial forestry. They include the collection and use of fuelwood, fodder, grasses, wild foods, medicinal plants, NTFPs and household timber, as well as grazing, livestock production and employment connected with forest resources. The Forest Department's recognition that more than 600 local plant species contribute to food, fruit, fibre, fodder, fuel, gums, oil and resin demonstrates the extraordinary breadth of this livelihood relationship. Recent economic data also confirm that forestry remains a significant economic sector, with forestry and logging estimated to generate ₹6,018 crore of real GVA in 2025–26. Yet the most important finding is not the size of the forestry sector. It is the changing nature of household forest dependence.

Forest livelihoods in Himachal Pradesh are moving from a predominantly subsistence-oriented system towards a diversified livelihood system. Agriculture, horticulture, livestock, wage employment, tourism and services increasingly provide alternative sources of income. Nevertheless, forests continue to support households through fodder, fuel, NTFPs, medicinal plants, household requirements and supplementary income. The geographical character of this dependence is equally important. Lower-hill communities tend to have stronger fuelwood–fodder–livestock relationships; middle-hill communities exhibit integrated forest–agriculture–livestock systems; high-hill communities have greater opportunities for medicinal plants and specialised NTFPs; and Trans-Himalayan communities depend upon high-altitude and alpine resources alongside pastoral livelihoods. Therefore, there is no single forest-livelihood model for Himachal Pradesh.

The future strategy should recognise this geographical diversity while addressing a common problem: forest-dependent households often receive only a limited proportion of the economic value generated by forest resources. The most promising pathway is consequently not greater extraction but greater value addition. Forest livelihoods can become more secure when communities move from being merely collectors of raw resources to becoming participants in processing, marketing and enterprise development. Medicinal plants, NTFPs, wild foods, honey, fibres, grasses and other forest products can generate substantially greater livelihood benefits when organised into sustainable local value chains.

The central policy objective should therefore be:

to secure the livelihood value of forests while securing the forests on which those livelihoods depend.

In Himachal Pradesh, the long-term sustainability of forest-based livelihoods depends on maintaining an appropriate balance among access to forest resources, sustainable extraction practices, traditional and local knowledge, women's participation, community-based institutions, value addition, and effective market linkages. Strengthening these interconnected dimensions can enhance the economic benefits derived from forest resources while ensuring their continued conservation and regeneration. Such an integrated approach would enable forests to function not only as vital ecological assets but also as durable and reliable sources of livelihood security for rural communities across the state.

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