

BRANDING AND MARKETING OF MAHUA (MADHUCA LONGIFOLIA): OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN BASTAR DISTRICT, CHHATTISGARH

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Abstract

For tribal people, mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*), which is indigenous to the Bastar district's woodlands, is significant from an ecological, cultural, and economic standpoint. Despite its potential in the food, beverage, pharmaceutical, and cosmetics industries, its commercialization is still restricted because of inadequate infrastructure, bad branding, and legislative obstacles. This study explores Mahua's marketing potential in Bastar, pointing out obstacles and chances for aggressive and sustained branding. Low consumer awareness, a lack of uniformity, and insufficient market connections are revealed by the study, which used a mixed-method approach that included surveys, stakeholder interviews, and secondary data. Recommendations include geographical indication (GI) tagging, digital marketing, and cooperative-based branding to enhance the socio-economic status of local communities while promoting sustainable forest livelihoods.

Keywords: Mahua, Bastar, Branding, Tribal Economy, Sustainable Marketing, Non-Timber Forest Products (NTFPs)

I. Introduction

Mahua tree (*Madhuka Longifolia*) is a high-value and culturally important tree species that occurs in the forests of central India, specifically in Chhattisgarh's Bastar district. The tree provides a critical building block for the tribal people, which have been depending on its constituents for generations. The Mahua's ecological, economic, and cultural value cannot be estimated, particularly in Bastar, where it's a critical ingredient in maintaining the livelihoods of the local people. From its scented flowers, which are employed in the manufacturing of traditional beverages, scents and sweets, to seeds that give oil, Mahua is a valuable product that can be an asset in the betterment of the socio-economic status of the region.

As Mahua and its products are beneficial, their marketing and branding potential has not been achieved to a great extent. Although Mahua is used very intensely in the traditional setting, it is

restricted in its availability in the market, and its commercial potential has not been adequately grabbed. It is also expected that this study would evaluate the existing branding and marketing position of Mahua in Bastar, examine obstacles to its advancement, and suggest ways of improving its commercial acceptability.

Mahua tree contributes largely to the local culture and life of Bastar tribal people. Flowers were used traditionally for manufacturing Mahua liquor, part of local ritual ceremonies, festival rituals, etc. The tree also serves as an adequate food material in terms of Mahua flower sweets, locally consumed. Aside from being a source of food, the tree is also a source of oil from seeds, which is used for various purposes from cooking to medicine. Ecologically, Mahua trees provide forest diversity and the environmental equilibrium of the area. Economically, the tree provides scope for sustainable income generation from the sale of Mahua flowers, oil, and other by-products. This is shown in table 1. The opportunities are, however, restricted because of the absence of systematic promotion, infrastructure, branding and good strategies.

Table1 : Medicinal Properties

| Medicinal properties | Type of extract | Remarks | References |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|---|--|
| Hepatoprotective activity | Methanolic | Methanolic extract of flower showed potential protective effect by lowering the levels of SGOT, SGPT, ALP and total bilirubin by increasing serum level of total proteins and albumins. | Umadevi et al., (2011) Patel et al., (2014) Sinha et al., (2017) |
| Antihelmenthic activity | Both methanolic and ethanolic | Among both extracts methanolic extract of flower demonstrated best anti helmenthic activity against Indian earth worm. | Katiyar et al., (2011) Yadav et al., (2012) (a) Sinha et al., (2017) |
| Antibacterial activity | Both aqueous and methanolic | Aqueous extract showed more antibacterial activity than methanolic one | Verma et al., (2010) Patel et al., (2014) Yadav et |

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|----------------------|----------------------------|---|---|
| | | for Bacillus subtilis and Klebsiella pneumonia | al., (2012) Sinha et al., (2017) |
| Analgesic activity | Both aqueous and alcoholic | Analgesic effect was studied through tail flick, hot plate and chemical graded doses on mouse which shows analgesic effect as per dose value. | Chandra, (2001) Saluja et al., (2015) Yadav et al., (2012) (a) Ekka and Ekka, (2014) Verma et al., (2014) Sinha et al., (2017) |
| Antioxidant activity | | As concentration of flower extract and ascorbic acid increases, the ferric reducing antioxidant power increases. | Indu and Annika, (2014) |
| Anticancer activity | | Cell viability was found to decrease as the concentration of floral extract increases and cytotoxic effect was found to increase. | Indu and Annika, (2014) |

Table 2: Uses of the plant

| Sr. No | Uses | Key points | Remarks | References |
|------------------------------|----------------|---|--|---------------|
| Non-fermented flowers | | | | |
| 1 | As a sweetener | Mahua flower used as a sweetener in many dishes like halwa, meethi puri, barfi. | Due to presence of high amount of sugars (sucrose, fructose, arabinose, maltose, rhamnase. | Patel, (2010) |

| | | | | |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|--|---|
| 2 | Preparation of cake | It is made from mahua flowers rice or other cereals or root crops. | Pre-soaked rice and mahua flowers are mixed and grinded, paste is covered with Sal leaves and burned on fire to make cake. | Behera et al., (2016) |
| 3 | As a substitute for staple grains | It is generally used by poor tribal people. | Sundried flowers are boiled with seeds of tamarind and Sal and stored. | Amia and Ekkka, (2014) |
| 4 | As a cattle feed | Spent flowers (Flowers left after fermentation and distillation) are used. | Spent flowers are fed to cattle, reported improvement in cattle health and increase in milk production. | Sinha et al., (2017) |
| Fermented flowers | | | | |
| 5 | Preparation of “mahua daaru” | Produced from dried mahua flowers by tribal people, | Alcohol content of “mahua daaru” ranges from 20-40 (%). | Kumari et al., (2018) |
| 6 | “Mahuli” preparation | Traditionally made by local people of Orissa. | Alcohol content of “mahuli” is reported between 30-40 (%). | Kumari et al.(2018) Behera et al., (2016) |

Mahua (*Madhuca longifolia*) is a culturally and economically significant tree of Bastar district, Chhattisgarh. The Mahua tree is an important part of the life of tribal people, as they use its flowers and seeds for food, beverage, and medicine. Mahua tree has always been linked with tribal customs, rituals, and local livelihood, and thus it is a valuable non-timber forest product (NTFP). Yet, because of its deeply rooted importance, Mahua is still largely unbranded and under-marketed in conventional markets, thus restricting its economic value and sustainable development.

Increased demand for organic and traditional foodstuffs over the past few years has created new opportunities for Mahua-based products. Yet, lack of systematic branding and marketing initiatives

has prevented it from entering bigger regional and national markets. Most of the Mahua products, including dried flowers, alcohol, oil, and confectionery, are marketed informally without branding, quality control, or standard packaging. Low levels of consumer knowledge and low promotion discourage producers, especially indigenous communities, from benefiting from increasing demand for indigenous and natural products.

One of the main difficulties in marketing Mahua is the negative perception of its alcohol. Mahua alcohol has been traditionally consumed by tribal communities, but it has been negatively perceived by society as a whole. Owing to social and legal restrictions, Mahua liquor has found it difficult to get official sanction and acceptance in the formal market. On the contrary, other country-produced alcoholic drinks like Feni of Goa or Toddy in Kerala have been well branded and marketed as cultural and heritage products. Lack of such branding exercise on Mahua liquor has kept it from becoming more popular and commercially successful.

Mahua's value chain is also poorly developed, with no systematic procurement, processing, and distribution networks. Small farmers and collectors sell Mahua flowers and seeds at low value because they have poor access to higher value markets and value-added processing facilities. Insufficient processing infrastructure ensures that the majority of products obtained from Mahua remain at a primitive level, thus excluding them from high-value markets like herbal medicine, cosmetics, and health foods. With the right branding and value addition, Mahua can be sold as a superfood or green drink, as is being done with other foods like quinoa or aloe vera in the rest of the world.

The other critical point is the lack of policy favor and investment in Mahua. Although there are various government plans for Bastar that include conservation and harvesting minor forest products, not much is done on the lines of Geographical Indication (GI) tagging or certification and large-scale marketing of the Mahua crop. Lacking GI or organic certification currently diminishes its viability in national or overseas markets too. Mahua items would be able to increase consumer trust and value pricing if they received such certificates.

Mahua's marketing and branding must also alter public perceptions. Mahua-based products might carve out a niche market with a compelling narrative, appealing packaging, and strategic placement. Mahua can be positioned as a high-end product with tribal culture, sustainability, and health implications by learning from the success of branding development of similar indigenous products in India and around the world. The cooperation of food and beverage firms, social media marketing, and online marketing can increase the product's popularity and demand among urban customers.

This study looks at the best ways to brand and market Mahua in the Bastar district in an effort to close these gaps. The study will look at the current marketing landscape, identify gaps in customer

awareness and value addition, and develop new branding strategies. In order to create a lucrative and sustainable Mahua business, the study will look at the effectiveness of government policies, the potential of private sector investment, and community involvement.

The study intends to reveal Mahua's economic potential and improve the welfare of Bastar's tribal people with a focus on branding and promotion. Mahua may be positioned as a well-liked commodity in India and abroad with a strategic branding approach that guarantees its sustainable growth and cultural preservation.

II. Objective

- To analyze the existing applications and marketing of Mahua in Bastar.
- To assess challenges in branding and market access.
- To explore the potential of Mahua-based products in domestic and international markets.
- To propose strategies for sustainable and ethical Mahua branding.

III. Literature Review

Shiva et al. (2013) emphasize the economic significance of Mahua as a crucial NTFP that gives millions of tribal households in central India seasonal income in their study on forest-based livelihoods. Mahua's commercial significance is hampered by disorganized markets and a lack of institutional support, despite its abundance.

According to Mishra et al. (2018), Mahua flowers and seeds have significant economic potential for alcohol, confections, and oil; nevertheless, a sustainable Mahua-based economy cannot be developed due to a lack of branding and market exposure. They advocate for government assistance and collaborative marketing strategies.

Mahua is one of the most important forest-based livelihood species, according to the Indian Council of Forestry Research and Education (ICFRE, 2020). However, the lack of formal branding, certification, and organized value chains prevents Mahua from entering wider markets. The council recommends product diversity and GI marking.

Patil (2017) Patil's case study on Goa's Feni shows how government support, luxury packaging, and Geographical Indication (GI) labeling can turn traditional country liquors into high-end heritage brands. This serves as a model for Mahua branding.

Rao et al. (2021) Rao and associates describe the success of Araku Coffee, demonstrating how Andhra Pradesh's tribal communities worked with private companies and non-governmental organizations to build a natural worldwide brand. The study demonstrates how sustainability, ethical sourcing, and storytelling may improve domestic goods.

The social stigma attached to Mahua liquor, which is frequently perceived as a beverage for the poor, is examined in Singh et al. (2019). It highlights the need to reposition Mahua as a cultural heritage beverage, similar to how Feni and Toddy have been rebranded successfully in Goa and Kerala. Jain and Agarwal (2021) describe how certification and narrative were used to sell tribal honey from Jharkhand as an organic product. The same ideas can be used to market Mahua to health-conscious consumers.

In their discussion of market fragmentation in NTFP trading, Sharma et al. (2020) highlight how having several middlemen lowers tribal producers' revenues. In order to guarantee fair trade for Mahua collectors, the report suggests creating cooperatives and direct-to-market tactics.

Chatterjee (2020) Chatterjee talks on how Geographical Indication (GI) helps make local goods like Darjeeling tea and Basmati rice seem more credible and upscale. GI protection for Mahua would guarantee authenticity and differentiate the brand.

In their policy analysis, Mehta and Sharma (2022) contrast traditional liquor laws in various Indian states. They discover that government procurement assistance, tax breaks, and flexible excise regulations have all contributed to Feni and Toddy's expansion. They propose comparable frameworks for the commercialization of Mahua.

TRIFED (2022) According to the Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India, Mahua's current marketing is informal despite the company's substantial potential for value-added products (such as oil, chocolates, and herbal tonics). For Mahua products, TRIFED suggests export-focused branding and digital marketing.

According to Prasad et al.'s (2023) assessment of Van Dhan Vikas Kendras under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, the majority of programs concentrate on primary processing but do not include branding and marketing training. For Mahua-based businesses, the authors advocate incorporating value addition, digital literacy, and market connection components.

The examined literature constantly highlights that institutional and marketing shortcomings, rather than Mahua's resource basis, are what limit its economic potential. Indigenous product success is largely facilitated by GI tagging, sustainable storytelling, and community branding, as demonstrated by comparative success stories such as Araku Coffee, Feni, and tribal honey. Therefore, standardization, brand identification, cooperative marketing, and e-commerce integration for Mahua products should be the main topics of future study and regulation.

IV. Methodology

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were combined in a mixed-method research design. In addition to 20 stakeholder interviews, questionnaires of 120 respondents—including tribal collectors,

producers, and consumers—were used to gather primary data. Government publications, TRIFED, and earlier scholarly research were the sources of secondary data. Descriptive statistics were used to evaluate quantitative data, while thematic analysis was used to discover cultural, economic, and marketing patterns in qualitative data.

V. Result and Discussion

The results show that despite Mahua's cultural and economic significance, its market presence and awareness are minimal. Although 67% of respondents knew about Mahua, their understanding was restricted to its traditional applications. Approximately 44% of consumers regularly used Mahua items, while 52% did so occasionally, indicating a moderate level of interest. Although 43% of consumers rated the products as excellent, the lack of certification and subpar packaging undermined consumer confidence.

Inadequate branding infrastructure, low awareness, weak market connections, and the social stigma attached to Mahua liquor are the primary issues noted. Mahua can, however, be positioned as a high-end organic and cultural product for both domestic and foreign markets. Its customer reach and brand equity can be increased through e-commerce, storytelling, and sustainability certifications.

VI. Guidelines and Strategic Suggestions

- To guarantee authenticity and regional identity, use Geographical Indication (GI) labeling.
- Encourage fair-trade and cooperative branding to strengthen indigenous communities
- To increase visibility, support social media and digital marketing initiatives.
- Create a variety of Mahua items, such as cosmetics, confectionery, and herbal drinks
- Make excise laws simpler and provide Mahua processing facilities with incentives.

VII. Conclusion

Government, business, and community stakeholders must work together to turn Mahua from an underutilized forest resource to a premium eco-brand. The indigenous people of Bastar may make money while maintaining their cultural legacy through standardization, certification, and creative marketing. Mahua can become a long-lasting emblem of regional identity and rural prosperity by taking inspiration from successful indigenous branding projects like Araku Coffee and Feni.

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