

# A Brief Analysis-How the Impact of Covid-19 on Tribal Communities

Dr. BASAVARAJA. H.  
, M.A. .Ph.D.

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE  
GOVERNMENT ARTS COLLEGE [AUTONOMOUS] CHITHRADURGA

## ABSTRACT

*The tribal people also practice Hunting and gathering. In addition animal husbandry and crop cultivation are also undertaken. Hence a specific territorial affiliation and integration obtains. A major factor in community is the tie of blood relationship between the members. They have faith in their having descended from a common real or mythical ancestor and hence believe in blood relationship with other members. Kinship bonds play an important role in tribal organization. Descent groups such as lineages and clans are generally well developed. India is home to **104 million tribal people in India**, concentrated in 10 different states. Spread across 705 tribes, they account for 8.6% of the country's population. Tribal people rank the lowest in various health, educational, societal indicators. Tribal and other forest-dwelling communities are inevitably getting affected by COVID-19 and the lockdown. The COVID-19 hotspots identified by the government include 19 scheduled districts, while positive cases have been reported from other tribal areas as well. The lockdown measures have had a drastic effect on a large population of poor and marginalized communities as it has caused a loss of livelihoods, physical hardships, lack of food and shelter, and economic distress. Tribals and other forest-dwelling communities have been adversely affected by COVID-19 and lockdown measures, according to a joint preliminary assessment report by **Community Forest Rights Learning and Advocacy (CFR-LA)**, All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM) and other rights groups. Earlier this week, the report was sent to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. The "high levels of social deprivation and exclusion" has led to a prevalence of diseases and conditions like **malnutrition, malaria, leprosy, tuberculosis (TB)** and other diseases. "Absence of healthcare facilities can severely limit the capacities to deal with any major COVID-19 outbreak in tribal areas posing a serious threat to the tribal population.*

**Key words-Tribal, Indigenous, Forest Rights, Tribal Affairs, Lockdown, Health and Nutrition, Gramasabha.**

## INTRODUCTION

### Tribal Society

A tribe is a large group of people that is distinguished from other groups mainly through its higher population density and its greater sedentary lifestyle.

The tribal people also practice Hunting and gathering. In addition animal husbandry and crop cultivation are also undertaken. Hence a specific territorial affiliation and integration obtains.

The tribe inhabits and remains within a definite and common topography. In the absence of a common topography the tribe would also lose its other characteristic features as community functions, language and culture etc.

The members of the tribe possess consciousness of mutual unity as the psychological element is an essential characteristic of the tribe.

The members of a tribe speak a common language as it generates a sense of communal unity among them. It sets them apart from other tribes. Each tribe is thus conscious of its homogenous ethnic identity.

The members of the tribe generally marry into their own group but in the changing socio-economic environment they are marrying outside their tribes as well.

A major factor in community is the tie of blood relationship between the members. They have faith in their having descended from a common real or mythical ancestor and hence believe in blood relationship with other members. Kinship bonds play an important role in tribal organization. Descent groups such as lineages and clans are generally well developed.

Each descent group often owns property jointly and corporately. Each descent group is usually exogamous. The enforcement of tribal endogamy (the rule which stipulates that a member of the tribe or any other group for that matter should marry another member from within that particular tribe itself) helps to maintain tribal identity.

The recognition of leadership is often present although there may not be a well-developed hierarchical political system. For protecting the members, political organization within a tribe is established and all authority of administration is vested in one person or group of persons.

A tribal committee is formed to render assistance in the form of advice to the tribal chief. They usually look after the wellbeing of the members.

A tribe's cohesion and integrity may come under threat from within as well as from outside. During such times authority and leadership become crucial in maintaining intra-tribal harmony and in directing inter-tribal warfare.

Each tribe's tradition and lore are distinct with its characteristic habits, customs, art, religious beliefs and so on.

Each tribe has its own political organization that maintains harmony and avoids notes of discord among its members. They usually negotiate with the political power of the state.

The tribal political and social organization is based on religion because social and political laws become inviolable once they are granted religious sanctity and recognition.

The authority of common religion is an important characteristic of the tribe. Life-cycle ceremonies and rituals are often given prime importance among the tribal people.

A tribe is constituted of many clans with laws of mutual reciprocity among its members. Some of the striking features that are present in many tribes are the presence of groupings such as age groups, dormitories, and secret societies and totemic groups.

India is home to **104 million tribal people in India**, concentrated in 10 different states. Spread across 705 tribes, they account for 8.6% of the country's population. Tribal people rank the lowest in various healths, educational, societal indicators.

According to the policy brief titled '**Tribal Health in India – Bridging the gap and a roadmap for future** and published jointly by the **Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India (2018)**, the tribal in India are facing a triple burden of diseases.

Malnutrition, nutritional deficiencies and communicable diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis are widespread among many tribal communities. With rapid urbanization, environmental distress and changing lifestyles, there has been a rise in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases such as cancer, diabetes and hypertension. Besides, an instance of addiction of tobacco and mental illnesses is also increasing.

Tribal and other forest-dwelling communities are inevitably getting affected by COVID-19 and the lockdown. The COVID-19 hotspots identified by the government include 19 scheduled districts, while positive cases have been reported from other tribal areas as well.

The lockdown measures have had a drastic effect on a large population of poor and marginalized communities as it has caused a loss of livelihoods, physical hardships, lack of food and shelter, and economic distress.

There are reports from across the country of severe hardships being faced by tribal workers, including shortage or lack of supply of ration to these communities, combined with a loss of income.

Unfortunately, the lack of a targeted healthcare plan in place for the tribal to combat COVID-19 emergency raises serious concerns about spreading of the virus in tribal communities.

A group of tribal and forest rights activists and experts have submitted a preliminary assessment report to the Centre, recommending a course of action to address the needs of the communities amid the pandemic.

Tribals and other forest-dwelling communities have been adversely affected by COVID-19 and lockdown measures, according to a joint preliminary assessment report by **Community Forest Rights Learning and Advocacy (CFR-LA)**, All India Forum of Forest Movements (AIFFM) and other rights groups. Earlier this week, the report was sent to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs.

The report, titled 'Impact of COVID-19 outbreak and lockdown measures on tribal and other forest dwellers', comprises concerns shared by tribal communities. It has been compiled from information gathered by activists working on the ground and tribal rights networks from across the country.

"There is a lack of healthcare facilities in tribal areas and the lack of an institutional mechanism to address the loss of livelihood from **minor forest produces (MFP)** by tribal and forest dwellers,"

The restrictions on movement of tribal and pastoral communities and "recent changes in environmental policies affecting tribal rights are among the major concerns discussed in the report," he added. Dash said that

among tribal, the particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) are even more vulnerable as they are located in areas that have poor administrative and infrastructural facilities.

#### **LACK OF ACCESS TO HEALTH FACILITIES**

The “high levels of social deprivation and exclusion” has led to a prevalence of diseases and conditions like **malnutrition, malaria, leprosy, tuberculosis (TB)** and other diseases. “Absence of healthcare facilities can severely limit the capacities to deal with any major COVID-19 outbreak in tribal areas posing a serious threat to the tribal population.

As is well known by now, COVID-19 impacts people with compromised health conditions and low immunity,”

#### **LOSS OF LIVELIHOOD FROM MINOR FOREST PRODUCE (MFP)**

Almost 60% of annual collection of minor forest produce (MFP) or **Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP)** takes place between April and June. However, since the period has coincided with the lockdown this year, the report pointed out how the move was affecting the livelihoods of the communities.

Furthermore, the report highlighted problems being faced by PVTGs, issues faced by nomadic and pastoral communities, those arising due to forest land diversions, restrictions on the movement of tribes and problems related to non recognition of forest rights and tenurial insecurity.

The analysis that the lockdown has had an impact on the conduct of **Gram Sabhas in violation of the Forest Rights Act**, with instances of forest land diversion being reported. “The local tribes have been resisting such diversion of forests as it would cause destruction of their ancestral forests, displacement and loss of livelihoods.

It is a matter of concern that the union environmental ministry has been clearing forest diversion proposals at this time and has issued new guidelines relaxing forest and environmental clearance norms for mining by new lessees when people are in lockdown and cannot come out even to resist,” the report noted.

The Centre and the tribal affairs ministry had not come up with a response plan for members of the community whose population is about 300 million.

“If the government does not come up with a special plan to address the tribals’ issues amid the pandemic, the problems they face will only increase and persist,” he added.

The analysis mentioned that responses by the ministry and the state governments have been ineffective, and recommended a set of actions to be taken.

The Forest rights’ groups demanded the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to constitute a COVID Response Cell for tribal communities; to ensure and issue necessary guidelines or advisories to the states on measures to be taken for tribal and forest dwellers to deal with COVID-19 and the lockdown.

It mentioned that the ministry needed to ensure healthcare, food security, wage employment, strengthen MFP productivity, review forest diversions and ensure proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) among others

### **Key Issues of Tribal Communities**

#### **1. Lack of healthcare facilities, COVID-19 information and testing kits**

Lack of information and awareness among the tribal about the pandemic and required protective measures is a major issue in tribal areas. Tribal settlements are remotely located, making it particularly difficult for information to reach these areas.

The absence of healthcare facilities can severely limit the capacity to deal with a major COVID-19 outbreak in tribal areas, posing a serious threat to the tribal population.

It is a well-known fact that COVID-19 impacts people with compromised health conditions and low immunity. This further increases the risk of widespread infection to tribal population, many of whom are living in deprivation.

Allocation and monitoring of testing equipment in tribal areas is a major challenge, as testing is mostly limited in tribal areas.

#### **2. Food Insecurity, Loss of livelihood and Unemployment**

Food insecurity, accompanied by malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies, is a major cause of concern. Access to **Public Distribution System (PDS)** is poor as the tribal and OTFD (Other Tribal Forest Dwellers) reside remotely.

Even if they are able to reach their nearby PDS centers, they are denied their share of the food material as they are not registered under the PDS center, or don’t have ration cards or Aadhar cards.

However, the story doesn’t end here. The much publicized ‘Direct Benefit Transfer’ scheme of the government doesn’t cover this community. Most of the tribal people either don’t have a bank account or, due to their remote location, their bank accounts are not accessible to them, making the situation all the more difficult for them.

#### **3. Loss of livelihoods from Minor Forest Produce (MFP) and Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP)**

The MFP collection season begins from April and lasts upto June, accounting for 60% of the annual collection. Unfortunately, this time, it has coincided with the lockdown period, affecting collection and the sale of these products.

The analysis suggests that approximately 100 million forest dwellers and tribal depend on MFP for food, shelter, medicines and sustainable income.

Unfortunately, the lockdown will result in ripple effects on the general health of women forest dwellers and resilience of their family members who are actively involved in collection and sale of NTFP products including bamboo, cane, fodder, leaves, gums and waxes.

#### **4. Tenurial insecurity and non recognition of forest rights**

Due to a lack of awareness, education and resources, most of the tribal and forest dwellers don't have recorded legal rights over forest land and resources. The tenure security of tribal and forest dwellers is key to ensuring their livelihoods and food security.

**The Forest Rights Act** has the potential to secure forest rights of at least 20 crore tribal and other traditional forest dwellers over 40 million ha (50% of India's forest land), covering 177,000 villages.

There are now several examples of empowered Gram Sabhas with **Community\_Forest Resource (CFR)** rights under the Forest Right Act, who have improved the productivity of their respective CFRs and are sustainably managing them.

Many of these Gram Sabhas, working in the Vidharba region of Maharashtra, have generated higher revenue from the collection and sale of NTFPs, benefiting tribal collectors, while also retaining some funds for village development activities. These funds are now being utilized in a number of cases to deal with the situation created by the lockdown.

#### **CONCLUSION**

- A COVID-19 response plan for the tribal community must be designed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Comprehensive guidelines must be framed by the central and State governments to address the issues of this section of population. These guidelines must converge the benefits of PDS and Direct Benefit Transfer scheme for the tribal.
- With the help of mobile health units and vans, adequate testing and healthcare facilities must be ensured. COVID-19 care centres must be set up in tribal locations.
- Both the central and State governments must devise strategies to engage with forest produce traders to ensure purchase of MFPs. The tribal community collectors must connect with online buyers and sellers for their products.
- To prevent the violation of rights of tribal communities and forest dwellers, the environment ministry must withdraw the forest clearance decision and other such guidelines issued during the lockdown .
- Compensatory A forestation Fund Management and Planning Authority (CAMPA) should release funds to Gram Sabhas established with the tribal community for management of forest resources and livelihood activities to address the economic crisis due to COVID-19 lockdown. Post the lockdown, CAMPA should release job opportunities for tribal community members.
- Effective implementation needs of the Forest Right Act needs to be in place to ensure tenurial security and recognition of forest rights of tribal people.

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