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A Report on the COVID Lockdown Impact on Tribal Communities in India



A preliminary report, based on an ongoing assessment of issues being faced by tribal and other forest dwelling people because of COVID 19 and lockdown measures, is presented here along with some recommendations.

A. KEY ISSUES AND PROBLEMS OF TRIBALS AND FOREST COMMUNITIES:

Lack of information on COVID, access to health facilities, and testing kits:

Tribal settlements are remotely located making it particularly difficult for information to reach these

areas. The reverse migration from cities and urban areas also raises concern about spreading of the virus in tribal areas. The Tribal Health Report highlighted major lacunae in tribal healthcare such as severe shortage of healthcare professionals in tribal areas, lack of information and awareness etc. Providing testing facilities in tribal areas is a major challenge.

Issues of migrant workers-

There are reports[vi] of tribal migrant workers being stuck in cities with either no ration or eating merely one meal a day are without any support system, shelter, food, or water and facing acute hunger and almost a famine like situation. In addition they have to often face police atrocities and criminalization, causing mental and psychological distress.

Food insecurity, loss of livelihoods and employment

Poor access of tribal and forest dwellers to Public Distribution System (PDS) is reported from across the states.. Insistence on Aadhar cards must be suspended during this period. There are also reports that tribals and forest dwellers are not able to get direct cash benefits as either they don't have bank accounts at all or banks are located far away from

their villages. Urgent steps must be taken to ensure that the cash reaches their hands directly. Wage employment has been badly affected due to the lockdown measures. Special attention must be given to ensuring that single women and women headed households are covered under this. FRA title holders are entitled to an additional 50 days of work under MGNREGA.

Loss of livelihoods from Minor forest produce:

The lockdown has affected collection, use and sale of minor forest produces (MFP) or Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP). The NTFP collection season from April to June provides major income support to tribals (almost 60 percent of annual collection takes place during this period) and, most unfortunately, it coincides exactly with the lockdown. Further, the trading and value chain of NTFPs has been completely disrupted under the lockdown as traders are not willing to buy NTFPs in the current situation. Application of GST on tendu leaves has further affected the income of communities depending on tendu leave collection.

Issues of PVTGs:

Among the tribals the particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) are even more vulnerable. It must be noted that the 75 listed PVTGs live in remote and

scattered geographical locations in India[xi], with poor administrative and infrastructure backup. Over the years they have become more vulnerable due to the loss of their customary rights for cultivation and use of forests for livelihoods. This has led to hunger, starvation, malnutrition etc. among PVTG members leading to a situation where their basic survival is at stake. The Baigas in MP have reported problems due to restrictions on their movement. There are distress situations being reported from PVTG areas due to lack of access to PDS.

Issues faced by Pastoral and nomadic communities:

The migration and seasonal access of pastoralists have been restricted due to the lockdown. Many pastoral communities are reported to be stuck in other states/ districts without access to rations and fodder for the livestock[xv]. Also pastoral communities have been affected as the milk economy faces severe crisis as procurement and sale has been disrupted during the lockdown[xvi]. In Uttarakhand the issues of Van Gujjars have been discussed in a meeting of Chief Secretary and concerned officials on 28th April 2020 where decision has been taken to ensure supply of fodder to Van Gujjars and procurement of milk, but migration and movement of the community has

been completely prohibited which can affect their rights and livelihoods.

Forest land diversions:

Diversion of forest land without the consent of Gram Sabha in violation of the FRA continues even during the lock down. The local tribals 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 MoEF 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[xviii] when people are in lockdown and cannot come out even to resist.

Compensatory afforestation-:

Even as COVID 19 spreads and livelihoods are affected due to the lockdown, there are reports of Compensatory Afforestation (CA) plantations being carried out . These actions are not only in direct violation of their rights under the FRA, but also are causing severe distress to the tribals and forest dwellers in the present situation by impacting their livelihoods and destroying agro biodiversity (important for food and nutritional security). It is necessary for the MoTA to ensure that the guidelines allowing forestry operations and plantations are

implemented only with necessary safeguards to comply with Forest Rights Act and with the consent of gram sabhas with the objective to sustain local livelihoods and support agro and biodiversity of the region.

Restriction on entry within PAs and eviction from forest areas:

An advisory issued by the MoEFCC on the 6th of April 2020, instructs all states and union territories to ensure reduction in human wildlife interface through restriction of movement of people to National Parks/Sanctuaries/ Tiger Reserves. This advisory would immediately impact about 3 to 4 million people living in and around protected areas. These are mostly tribal communities including PVTGs, nomadic and pastoral communities, fish workers, among others and are most dependent on the natural resources within and around the protected areas for their livelihoods.

Non recognition of forest rights and tenurial insecurity

Tenure security of tribals and forest dwellers is key to ensuring their livelihoods and food security. There are now several examples of empowered Gram Sabhas with community forest resource (CFR) rights under the FRA, which have improved the

productivity of their CFRs and are sustainably managing them. Many of these gram sabhas are generating higher revenues from collection and sale of NTFPs benefiting NTFP collectors and also retaining some funds for village development activities. Lack of due recording of existing forest rights and resultant tenurial insecurity is likely to increase vulnerability and more adversely impact livelihoods and food security of forest dwellers in the lockdown period and after. Women are likely to be the worst sufferers of not having clear forest rights. In the absence of gender disaggregated data, the extent to which the rights of women headed households and single women are being recognised remains unclear.

B.COPING MECHANISMS ADOPTED BY COMMUNITIES FOR DEALING WITH COVID 19:

Despite facing the above mentioned issues and livelihood concerns many tribal communities are also devising innovative coping mechanisms in these difficult times. Tribal communities have effectively used customary practices to enforce self isolation and protective measures. In Andhra Pradesh West Godavari and Krishna districts, besides practicing self isolation, the Lambadas have even used traditional medicines (Nirgundi, Modugu,

Guggilam, Billedu, Neem, Tulasi etc) and healing practices to improve immunity and disease resistance[xxvii]. Similar examples have been reported from other states (Chhattisgarh, Arunachal Pradesh).

Tribals in Chhattisgarh have taken initiatives to make their own protective equipments such as masks from palm and betel leaves.

In West Bengal tribal villages such as Para, Pancha, Barrabazzar, Balarampur, Bagmundi blocks in Purulia and Suri and Sainthia blocks in Birbhum districts, have self isolated and cordoned off their villages. Interestingly, migrant workers who reached these areas from outside, self isolated themselves on trees in the absence of private rooms in their houses and quarantine facilities which should have been provided by the government.

In the forest villages of sub-Himalayan West Bengal, communities have set up monitoring mechanisms to ensure that those migrant workers who have returned to their villages report suspected corona cases as soon as these are observed. [xxviii]

These instances of local response by the villages in remote forest villages and the examples of Gram Sabhas organizing relief work from their own resources in Maharashtra make it evident that

decentralization and community empowerment can be more effective in dealing with the crisis if resources and support are provided to such self governing local institutions. Considering diverse responses and decentralized decision-making will give the state an opportunity to deal with this public health crisis more efficiently.

SUGGESTED ACTIONS:

These issues would need to be addressed by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs by devising comprehensive COVID 19 response strategies for tribals and forest dwellers that could include measures suggested below.

1. Setting up a COVID Response Cell in MoTA- with a team of designated nodal officers to coordinate with State governments/ tribal departments and civil society organisations to monitor issues of tribals and forest dwellers and provide necessary support. A web based interactive system can be launched with information on villages/habitations with tribal and OTFD population along with other related information such as COVID Hotspots identified by the health ministry. The COVID response programs can be supported by funds available under Article 275 as

well as funds available in the District Mineral Funds, Special Purpose Vehicles for the projects.

2. Ensuring appropriate guidelines and instructions- MoTA should issue necessary guidelines/ advisories to the states on measures to be taken for tribals and forest dwellers to deal with COVID and lockdown.

3. Raising awareness and Ensuring healthcare- The MoTA should work with state tribal departments for reaching out to the tribals, PVTGs, pastoralists and OTFDs to create awareness about COVID 19 and the protection measures to be adopted by communities. It is important to prepare information materials in pictorial form and in local tribal languages that clearly explain the nature of the disease, quarantine and containment measures, testing, myths etc. Coordination between health department workers (ASHA, ANM and others) and traditional healers must be part of any such local responses to COVID 19 to ensure traditional knowledge systems are part of these response mechanisms. Localised and separate quarantine strategy which encourages natural environment and community participation (developed and managed by community/GS supported by health departments) should be promoted.

4. Ensuring Food Security, Survival Incomes and Protecting Livelihoods- ensure free distribution of ration and nutritional food comprising millets, wheat, dal, vegetables through PDS to all for the next 6 months. This can be done by universalising PDS and basic income which needs to be provided to all tribals and forest dwellers including the migrant workers.

5. Strengthening NTFP based livelihoods- The MoTA and TRIFED should work with state tribal departments to urgently devise effective institutional mechanisms for the collection, storage, procurement and sale of non timber forest produce during the ongoing collection season. Necessary financial and logistical support should be provided directly to the Gram Sabhas and the forest management committees constituted under the FRA in addition to other PPAs for NTFP procurement. Forest department should be directed to extend support to the GSs and other PPAs for transportation of NTFPs.

The state governments should immediately be provided financial support to implement the MSP scheme covering all important NTFPs. A hike in the prices under MSP scheme in the short term can provide the much needed income support to the tribals during the lockdown. The central govt should

completely waive off GST levied on tendu leaves which can raise income of tribals and forest dwellers from tendu leaves.

6. Ensuring support to PVTGs and pastoral communities- The MoTA can issue an advisory to the state governments to give special attention to reaching out to the PVTGs and pastoral communities to i) ensure awareness and access to health facilities, ii) ensure that their livelihood activities such as use of forests, seasonal migration are not affected due to the lockdown, iii) provide PDS and essential commodities to these communities, iv) support procurement and sale of milk and milk products of pastoral communities, v) support and facilitate procurement of fodder and other essentials for livestock.

7. Ensuring support to communities living in protected areas- Tribals and forest dwellers living in the wildlife sanctuaries, national parks and tiger reserves have been facing problems in exercising their livelihoods rights. The advisory issued by MoEFCC which, inter alia, restricts movement of villagers inside the protected areas further raises apprehensions about the tribal communities losing access and livelihoods during this time of distress[xxxvii]. The MoTA should request MoEFCC

to modify the advisory on PAs to ensure that rights and livelihoods activities of communities living in and around PAs are not restricted due to the lockdown and to ensure the communities be provided with food, income and other essentials.

8. Ensuring wage employment combined with basic income for ensuring food security- MoTA should coordinate with MoRD and state agencies to implement a plan to enable all tribals and OTFDS to avail wage employment under MGNREGA including the 50 days of additional work for FRA title holders for taking up activities such as land development, improving productivity of CFRs etc.

9. Compensatory afforestation, forest diversion and displacement- MoTA should request MoEF to release the huge compensatory afforestation fund available with it to the Gram Sabhas constituted under FRA to support community forest management for generating livelihoods and wage employment for tribals and forest dwellers to deal with the economic crisis. MoEF should be asked to review its policy decisions taken during the lockdown to ease forest and environmental clearances to prevent violation of the forest rights of tribals and forest dwellers. The MoTA should also

proactively review ongoing forest land diversions and mining to ensure that FRA is not violated.

10. Ensuring effective implementation of Forest Rights Act- The MoTA should work with the state tribal departments to develop more effective mechanisms for implementation of FRA and for scaling up the recording of individual and community forest rights to cover all the 1,77,000 potential villages with forest land. It should be ensured that tribals and forest dwellers are not restricted from exercising their rights and access to forests due to the lockdown. Gram Sabhas must be provided support and resources to protect and conserve their CFRs for sustainable use.