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## **ANTHROPOLOGY SNIPPET-312**

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## Concern for PVTGs in Odisha as test hesitancy poses hurdle



Thirteen of the 62 tribal groups in Odisha have been identified as PVTGs, which are given special protection because of their dwindling population. Their current population is 2.14 lakh, spread across 11 districts.

WITH NEARLY 55 per cent of the Covid cases in Odisha being reported from rural areas, there is growing concern in the state regarding the safety

of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

Thirteen of the 62 tribal groups in Odisha have been identified as PVTGs, which are given special protection because of their dwindling population. Their current population is 2.14 lakh, spread across 11 districts of the state.

In the second surge of the pandemic, several people from these communities have tested positive for Covid. As of Tuesday, 49 members of the PTVGs from Rayagada, Malkangiri and Mayurbhanj districts have tested positive.

While there are fears of further spread of the virus in the communities, authorities in the districts are facing a serious challenge in detecting it as the community members are hesitant in getting themselves tested.

After 19 members of the Dongria Kondh tribes in Niyamgiri hills of Rayagada district tested positive recently, the district administration set up a testing camp at the foothill to detect and arrest the virus's spread. However, on the first

day of the testing camp on Monday, no one turned up.

“During the first wave, no one was infected here. Now they are scared that if tested positive they will be taken to the hospitals and might not return,” said Jitu Jakasia, a Dongria Kondh leader from Niyamgiri. “They are not aloof from the news of deaths due to the virus. They are also worried that their livelihoods will be affected. Since there is no mechanism for home isolation in their single-room thatched homes, they will have to be moved to isolation centres which they are not ready for. We have been spreading awareness but they tend to close their doors and not come out.”

After the first four cases were reported last Thursday, 13 tested positive on Sunday and two others tested positive on Monday. A total of 2,461 Dongria Kondh families, comprising 9,597 people, reside in 102 villages situated in the Niyamgiri hills.

On Tuesday, after repeated interventions by local leaders, 62 people, who were close contact of an

earlier detected case and showed symptoms, were tested for Covid in Gandili village of Bissamcuttack block.

In Malkangiri district, 12 members of the Bonda tribe have tested positive so far. In the first wave of the pandemic, 35 people from the community were infected.

In Mayurbhanj district, 16 Khadias from Lalpani area of Similipal have tested positive. A door-to-door survey was initiated in villages across Similipal inhabited by members of the Kharia tribe. Cases were reported from Lulunga, Kakarpani, Kochilaghathi, Tarajodi and Gadipokhari villages.

“Lack of awareness is a major challenge for us. Cold and fever when the season changes is considered normal. So they refrain from approaching health facilities. But they live in close proximity and as a close-knit group. Spread of infection is more likely in such cases. We have launched awareness programmes with their own community leaders,” said Uttam Kumar Das,

head of a medical team supervising testing amongst the Khariar tribe.

Meanwhile, demands to prioritise vaccination amongst the PVTGs has also gained momentum. Congress MP Saptagiri Ulaka has urged Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik to prioritise the vaccination in the 18-44 groups. At present, vaccination in the said districts are underway for people aged above 45. The state government on Monday approached the Centre with a demand to aid in vaccinating the PVTG population in the state.

“Through the state government we have approached the central government to help vaccinate all the PVTG members. Their immunity is a major concern and we are pushing for vaccination,” said Project Director of Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihood Improvement Programme P Arthanari. The department is also setting up local quarantine centres close to the villages of the PVTGs for isolation and immediate treatment. “These villages are mostly in secluded areas or hill tops.

The nearest Covid care centre is also far and the people have also shown resistance in getting admitted at the hospitals in the district headquarters. So we are setting up these isolation centres," Arthanari said.

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