

COVID19 & Forest Rights

*The impact of COVID 19 and Lockdown on
Adivasi and Forest Dwelling Communities*

In This Issue

Voices from the Ground

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Sambalpur, Odisha**

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MP**

**Madhuri Krishnaswamy,
Badwani, MP**

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**Ridika Malik, Kandhamal,
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**Pradeep Chaterjee,
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**Purnima Upadhyay,
Amravati, Maharashtra**

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Women in Kandhamal district defend their community forests from FD CAMPA plantations

The Covid19 pandemic and the lockdown (in force since March 24) has had a drastic impact on Adivasi and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers, impacting their livelihood, health, movement, access to forests, food sovereignty and several other basic rights. This bulletin collates media articles, ground stories and analytical reports to highlight the key problems that communities are facing.

This issue focuses on understanding the realities of the COVID19 pandemic and Lockdown through perspectives and voices of people at the grassroots. Some of the big problems that emerge during the period of May 11-May 31 are: the lack of markets and minimum support price for selling Minor Forest Produce, the need for just livelihood options for migrant workers, the hollow promise of government 'Atmanirbhar' package and the problematic nature of CAMPA money being used by the forest dept. instead of the gram sabha, the trend of violation of gram sabha autonomy and forest diversion, as well as climate change issues seen in the form of forest destruction, cyclones and locust attacks.

Media Coverage

- [Covid 19 Lockdown Tale: Kendu Leaves and Sal Seed – The last livelihood hope](#)
- [Covid-19 lockdown fear makes Spiti tribals switch farm strategy.](#)
- [Chhattisgarh to spend Rs 225 crore to buy forest produce from tribals, bypass middle-men](#)
- [Tendu Patta Collectors blocked the highway in protests](#)
- [Lockdown Janta Bulletin #17: Archana Soreng](#)
- [44 village panchayats in Maharashtra join hands to auction tendu leaves, bring higher income to tribal villagers](#)
- [Chhattisgarh purchased 98% of the total forest produce amid lockdown](#)
- [COVID-19 Could Lay Waste To Forest Produce Worth Rs 1.2 Trillion](#)
- [How lockdown has hit tribal communities and forest dwellers](#)

MINOR FOREST PRODUCE (MFP)

Susana Dung Dung, member of Vana Laxmi Sangh (an MFP cooperative) in Sambalpur District, Odisha

Mahua & Tendu leaf are the major source of our income. Due to the Covid19 Lockdown, the Tendu leaf collection was delayed this year. Later when we were about to start collecting, the untimely rain destroyed both the quality and quantity of the Tendu leaf. The untimely rain resulted in infection in the Tendu Leaf by insects & we might have to stop the collection because of the poor quality of leaf.

Right now, it is the 5th day of our collection, we might have to stop on the 10th day, because of low quantity and quality of produce. But, this year, our income & livelihoods have crashed as there is no market & traders. We are sad and pained by the critical condition of our community members, who are stuck in the cities & are walking back home. Over here, we are at least able to survive because of our forest, but they are struggling for food.

Fuljencia Tete, Kuchinda block, Sambalpur District, Odisha

Now the Sal seed has come. We are requesting the government to implement the Minimum Support Price for MFP Scheme and procure Sal seed at Rs. 20. We are facing a lot of problems as this scheme is not being implemented properly.

LIVE NEWS:

[23 more minor forest produce items included in central scheme offering minimum support price](#)



Women play a major role in the MFP collection and processing



Young woman processes Sal seed in Deogarh

Media Coverage

- [Coronavirus lockdown | Pandemic adds to the penury of tribal migrants in Madhya Pradesh](#)
- [After lockdown distress, villagers are unwilling to migrate again](#)
- [In Odisha's Villages, Returning Migrant Workers Stare at Severe Uncertainty.](#)
- [Jamlo's last journey along a locked down road](#)
- [Malkangiri tribal migrant worker dies of exhaustion](#)
- [95% migrants want to return home despite uncertainty: Survey.](#)
- [Is repurposing MGNREGA the right way forward?](#)
- [India's pandemic response is a caste atrocity.](#)

Madhuri Krishnaswamy, Jagrut Adivasi Dalit Sangathan, Badwani District, MP

We are seeing a shift in migration patterns from southern Madhya Pradesh, as earlier all people would migrate as agricultural labour, now some people are even moving to labour in industries and less safe set-ups, where Adivasi workers in particular are very ill treated. Due to the lockdown, migrant workers returning home have little food security. While the government had announced rations regardless of ration cards, people are not receiving sufficient rations. At the same time, people spent huge amounts of money in order to travel back to their villages, and there is no source of livelihood in the villages. MGNREGA has been in crisis for years, with no work offered or in other cases payments being delayed for months on end. We must remember that many of these issues are not new, but COVID19 has revealed all the “old diseases” and problems that communities have been facing for years. In Badwani district of Madhya Pradesh, there is very little forest cover and in general this and little or no recognition of forest rights is a big reason why forest communities are dependent on migrating for work.

MIGRANT WORKERS & LIVELIHOODS

Rahul Shrivastava, Bhoomi Adhikar Abhiyan/
Jan Jangal Zameen Sajha Manch, Jabalpur, MP

With the lockdown announced, the MP government had no primary data on number of migrant workers, nor bothered work out a response a plan! Therefore, we began to reach out to other grassroots sangathans in different districts to do a survey and estimate the numbers of migrant workers coming home, through which we found that around 2 lakh workers have arrived home while around 2 lakh have not yet. Further enquiry revealed that of the Adivasi and Dalit population (which is 36% of MP's total population of 7 crore), around 14 lakh people would be migrant workers, with the majority being SC/ST. And we knew from the sangathans that 2 lakh people had not returned home. Where are they? Are they bonded labour? It is necessary to engage in a political campaign for these people.

Beyond these numbers are the real stories of people. For example, Sangeeta Marawi, from Mandla Nivaas was a construction worker in Jabalpur along with her husband Vishram Singh. When the lockdown was announced they began to walk with their two children to Dhangnava-Rampuri. At night during their journey, she went into labour and delivered a baby in the forest. Luckily, they made it safely to the closest village the next day. Just today at Barela bypass I met a group of women who had taken the train from Bombay to Nagpur and then walked more than 300 kms, and still had a journey to make.

Another story is of Ram Singh and 9 other workers who walked home from Belkheda to Patha Narayanganj. When I approached them, they softly said “ *There are people helping us along the way, city people, but they give only 1 packet of food for a large group like us and then want to take a photo with us. You know in our villages and forests, we give and share whatever little we have.*” I asked them what they thought of the future, and he replied “ *When we didn't go to the city, we were happy with the forests, with the little that we got. Now we cannot even go to the forest, the Forest Department beats us up. We must get the right to our forests. We don't want this charity food. We are alive only because of the rice, millets, rice, vegetables, chillies, that we grow on forest lands.*”

Rajim Ketwas, Kasdol block, Balodabazar district, Chattisgarh

On May 18, in the middle of COVID19 lockdown, the Forest department began to fence lands, on which the community has legally recognised forest rights, for Compensatory Afforestation plantations, which restricted forest access of the community, both Adivasi and Dalit, in violation of FRA. This year, the collection of MFPs such as Mahua and Tendu was already delayed, but due to the fencing, communities have been put in further distress.

Ridika Malik, Daringbadi Block, Kandhamal district, Odisha

On May 27, the Forest Department cleared 12 acres of our mountain and forest for CAMPA plantation. We have been cultivating in the forest for generations and feeding our children. We usually make leaf plates and sell them, however due to the lockdown we could not sell our forest produce or the leaf plates, and it all got spoiled. We did not get any work during this lockdown. Now, in the middle of all of this the Forest Department has cleared our forest. What will we eat to survive?

Media Coverage

- [People in HP's Kinnaur District Petition Against Expansion of Kashang Hydro Project...](#)
- [Red Flags over Center's draft EIA notification](#)
- [No COVID-19 response plan for tribal communities in "self-reliant" India package](#)
- [Tribal groups aghast with no mention of relief for Adivasis in PM's Atma-Nirbhar package](#)
- [Transfer CA funds to Gram Sabhas, tribal rights groups demand](#)
- [Utilisation of Controversial CAMPA funds is Old Scheme Not COVID19 Package: Tribal Rights Experts](#)
- [Land banks to help economy post lockdown could threaten poor communities](#)
- [Environmentalists opposed coal mining in Saleki of Dehing Patkai Elephant Reserve](#)
- [Odisha Forest Department cuts down traditional trees, destroys livelihood of forest workers](#)
- [Wilderness conservation and a flawed imagination of nature](#)

Pradip Chatterjee, DISHA, Sunderbans, West Bengal

In Sunderbans, every honey collector is a fisher person, even though not all fishing communities are honey collectors. The peak season for fishing is October-February, and the rest of the year communities dry their fish as well as collect honey. Over here, forest rights are intertwined with small fish workers' rights. In the Sunderbans, a prograding delta, there used to be an abundance of mangroves and therefore an abundance of fish, however now this has changed. Due to depleting mangroves along the coast, people have gradually had to move into the core area of the tiger reserve for fishing, putting their lives at risk.

In the Sunderbans, it is fishworkers and small-scale fisherpeople who are suffering. The large scale owners of fisheries were not affected, as the lockdown came around the time of the annual fishing ban for spawning (15 April-15 June), and these big owners never spent on fuel (on which they already get subsidies), nor did they pay any wages. Therefore, it was migrant fishworker communities, mostly scheduled caste communities who are traditionally small-scale inland fishers, who were stranded at the harbours without an income or food. We are demanding relief of 15,000/family per month to small scale fisherpeople and workers as well as a post-lockdown restoration of Indian marine fisheries, with regulations that act in favour of small-scale fisheries.

While people were still trying to cope with COVID19, Cyclone Amphan came into the Bay of Bengal. Nowadays, with climate change we notice that cyclones now occur with a higher frequency and greater intensity than before. With cyclone Aila, numerous forest dwellers had to leave their homes and come out seeking employment. We are yet to assess the full impact of cyclone Amphan. Yet with climate change, we are making demands of the government to make habitat policy cyclone resistant (includes housing, livelihood etc.). Furthermore, we demand of the government to make a Climate Resilient Livelihood Restoration Proposal, which includes insurance on fishing boats and nets.

Media Coverage

- [Tribal communities in Odisha left to fend for themselves during pandemic and cyclone](#)
- [Over-consumption underlies Cyclone Amphan and COVID19](#)
- [Everything gone: Sundarbans stares at bleak future, fresh wave of migration](#)
- [Natural, biodiverse forests more reliable at fighting climate change than plantations](#)
- [Greening a desert invites locust storms](#)

Media Coverage

- [Gadchiroli collector freezes accounts of 19 gram sabhas](#)
- [Maharashtra: Govt. asks Gadchiroli collector to defreeze accounts of 19 gram sabhas](#)
- [To Help Conserve Precious Biodiversity, India Needs to Empower its Forest-dwelling Population](#)



A board stating that the water project is handled by the Gram Sabha of Rahu



The Gram Sabha of Rahu village meets to discuss bamboo harvesting this season

LIVE NEWS:

[Chhattisgarh govt makes forest department as nodal agency for forest rights, activists describe move as 'illegal'](#)



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VIOLATION OF GRAM SABHA AUTONOMY

Purnima Upadhyay, KHOJ, Amravati District, Maharashtra

In Melghat area, for returning migrant workers, MGNREGS is the only source of work. We have been working non-stop to ensure that people are given adequate man-hours per day. In addition, the lockdown comes during the season of MFP collection, however there has been no buyer. The Gram Sabhas demanded that State Governments pitch in and give Gram Sabhas a guarantee to buy their MFP. On 26th May, the State Government gave a Melghat order that instructed for funds to be disbursed through the panchayats to Gram Sabhas whereas FRA and PESA mandate direct transfer of resources to the Gram Sabhas. We are repeatedly seeing how the governments are trying to restrict Gram Sabha autonomy. The region is a drought prone region, and at this moment the water shortage is peaking. The issue of water is also exacerbated because the decision-making power is not conferred upon the Gram Sabhas. The entire region in fact needs a water audit through the Gram Sabhas to reveal how much is noted as expended on water projects by contractors, and how much communities actually benefit.

If one talks of the situation in neighbouring Gadchiroli district, the collector ordered to freeze 19 gram sabha bank accounts, claiming that they had mishandled a compensation amount for an electricity transmission tower. This was clearly an attempt to subvert the power of the gram sabhas, who are struggling in the midst of the lockdown to collect MFPs, and were simultaneously now being summoned to the Collector's office around 150 kms away.. The accounts were only unfrozen after many of us wrote and the Maharashtra government who subsequently wrote to the Collector, calling their action "against principles of natural justice" and noting that the gram sabhas were perfectly within their rights as per FRA.

In villages like Payvahir and Rahu, where community forest rights have legal recognition, people are 100% confident to resist outsider dominance. The gram sabha is confident in its role as decision maker. Ownership of community, the gram sabha, is the most important factor. In fact, even NGOs can only help build pressure and provide assistance in implementation of FRA, PESA, MGNREGS and other progressive laws. It is only members of the gram sabha who are stakeholders, residents of the area and can govern their lives and forests.