

# **IMPACT OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK AND LOCK DOWN MEASURES ON TRIBAL AND FOREST DWELLERS**

## **(Preliminary Assessment Report)**

As the Covid-19 positive cases reportedly touched 31000 mark<sup>1</sup> with death toll crossing 1000 on April 29, the country was already over a month in a complete lockdown.

The lockdown measures have had a drastic effect on a large population of poor and marginalised communities as it has caused 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 migrant workers, shortage or lack of supply of ration to the communities combined with a loss of income.

Tribal and other forest dwelling communities are inevitably getting affected by COVID 19 and the lock down measures. The COVID-19 hotspots identified by the government include the 19 scheduled districts while positive cases have been reported from other tribal areas also. 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:***

Lack of information and awareness among the tribals and forest dwellers on 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 reverse migration from cities and urban areas also raises concern about spreading of the virus in tribal areas.

The Tribal Health Report of an expert committee of Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in 2018<sup>2</sup> has highlighted major lacunae in tribal healthcare such as severe shortage of healthcare professionals in tribal areas, lack of information and awareness etc. High level of social deprivation and exclusion has led to the prevalence of diseases and health concerns such as 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. This increases risks of infection to the tribal populations already living in

---

<sup>1</sup><https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-covid-count-april-29-death-toll-crosses-1000-mark-total-cases-over-31000/articleshow/75441195.cms>

<sup>2</sup>[http://tribalhealthreport.in/?Website\\_Launch\\_Mail](http://tribalhealthreport.in/?Website_Launch_Mail)

deprivation<sup>3</sup>. Testing and monitoring of the disease is inadequate and is mostly limited to urban areas. Providing testing facilities in tribal areas is a major challenge.

#### ***Issues of migrant workers-***

There are reports<sup>4</sup> of tribal migrant workers being stuck in cities with either no ration or eating merely one meal a day. It has been pointed out by various organizations and individuals in Jharkhand, Bihar and Chhattisgarh that the tribal migrant workers stuck in cities due to the sudden lockdown are more vulnerable than those who are in their own villages. In the villages some support system exists in the form of community being together, surrounding ecosystems including forests and agricultural produce helping them cope better. Those who are stuck in the cities however 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<sup>5</sup> 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. Provisions under the PDS are not adequately provided or are provided only to card holders. Tribal migrants have particularly faced problems to access PDS. Ensuring food and nutrition security during the lockdown in tribal/ OTFD (Other Tribal Forest Dwellers) areas needs to be the highest priority. There is an acute need to universalise PDS and nutrition support. At this time PDS should be provided to all needy families and migrant workers including those who don't have any identity cards on humanitarian grounds. Insistence on Aadhar cards must be suspended during this period. Provision of ration, vegetables, cooking oil and other essentials should be made available at the door step.

Ministry of Rural Development has already written to state governments on direct cash transfers, additional pensions etc. as relief during the lock down period. However, the Central Government should provide the State Governments adequate financial resources in order to put in place effective mechanisms for ensuring that all eligible tribals and OTFDs receive their cash entitlements. 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

---

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.ijmr.org.in/article.asp?issn=0971-5916;year=2015;volume=141;issue=5;spage=630;epage=635;aulast=Rao> As per the report while in general population, 256 out of 100000 people suffer from TB, in case of tribals the numbers are as high as 703. Some tribes, such as the Saharias, a tribe from Madhya Pradesh (MP) belonging to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) category are especially vulnerable to TB with 1518 cases per 100000 population. 50 percent of all malaria related deaths are that of tribal people.

<sup>4</sup> [https://twitter.com/JharkhandJanad1/status/1247827403520393218?s=20https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/trifed-writes-to-states-uts-outlining-impact-of-covid-19-on-tribals-120040301110\\_1.html](https://twitter.com/JharkhandJanad1/status/1247827403520393218?s=20https://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ani/trifed-writes-to-states-uts-outlining-impact-of-covid-19-on-tribals-120040301110_1.html)

<sup>5</sup> It must be noted that this is an issue of lack of social security net for these migrant workers in terms of labour rights because the legislations in place such as the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008 are very badly implemented. This leaves these workers with no means to secure their labour rights and does not put any responsibility on the employer for their wellbeing particularly so in the current context. The responsibility of the welfare of the migrant worker lies with the state under the above said act. Also, due to this unprecedented situation their constitutional right to life with dignity which includes access to bare minimum necessities for survival such as food (secured under RTF, 2013) is being violated.

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. As per reports in many states work under [MGNREGA](#) has registered a record low during the lockdown. It is critical to resume implementation of MGNREGA to enable all tribals and OTFDs left without work or income to earn the minimum wage during the lock down period. 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 with which they can take up activities such as land development, improving productivity of Community Forest Resources etc.

***Loss of livelihoods from Minor forest produce:***

The lock down has affected collection, use and sale of minor forest produces (MFP) or Non Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) by tribals and forest dwellers. An estimated 100 million forest dwellers depend on MFP for food, shelter, medicines and cash income<sup>6</sup>. 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. Since it is forest dwelling women who are most actively engaged in collection and sale of NTFPs, the adverse impact on women forest dwellers if this season is missed, will be severe, and will have ripple effects on the general health and resilience of the entire family for the coming year<sup>7</sup>. States like Odisha, Maharashtra have come up with guidelines allowing collection of NTFPs.

Although the NTFP issues have been highlighted in a letter written by the Minister, MoTA to Chief Ministers and in the order passed by MoHA on 16<sup>th</sup> April exempting NTFP collection from lockdown, these measures don't fully address the MFP issues. The Minimum Support Price scheme (MSP), a major economic safety net, has failed to deliver due to lack of implementation in most of the states and slashing of minimum support prices of many NTFPs by the central government. The MoTA has written a letter to the states on 1<sup>st</sup> May 2020 announcing revision of MSP for 49 MFPs after consulting with some of the States<sup>8</sup>. However, what is most critical is the institutional support that doesn't exist for *collection and procurement of MFPs with immediate payment*. The proposal for providing support through Van Dhan Vikas Kendras (VDVKs) would not help as so far there are only about 1000 VDVKs. Most of even these VDVKs are not fully functional. Similarly, the primary procurement agencies (PPAs) proposed earlier by TRIFED for facilitating implementation of MSP schemes have not been constituted in the states or are not functional. Further, only

---

<sup>6</sup><https://pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=178469>

<sup>7</sup><https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/mar/31/Covid-fear-looms-large-over-tribal-communities-2123864.html>, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/lockdown-halts-harvesting-season-in-forests/article31253235.ece>, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/economy/covid-19-lockdown-odisha-s-mahua-flower-collectors-left-in-lurch-70306>

<sup>8</sup><https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1620100>,  
<http://pibphoto.nic.in/documents/rlink/2020/may/p20205101.pdf>

SHGs, JFMCs and producer companies are considered PPAs but not the gram sabhas and their village forest protection and management committees constituted under the FRA. The Van Dhan program does not include tendu leaves and Mahua flowers, two of the most valuable NTFPs from the income point of view. Most importantly, it is not at all clear how such Kendras would fit in with the Gram Sabha centric forest governance mechanisms as provided in the FRA and PESA.

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. Both the central and state govts need to devise strategies to engage with the traders to ensure purchase of NTFPs. 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<sup>9</sup>, with poor administrative and infrastructure backup<sup>10</sup>. 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<sup>11</sup>. The provisions for recognition and protection of the habitat rights of PVTGs under FRA have not been implemented in the states. The lockdown measures have further added to their existing struggle for survival, there are reports of them not being able to access forests for meeting subsistence needs neither do they have access to other livelihood activities. 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. Jharkhand JanadhikarMahasabha has instances of PVTG families (Korwas)<sup>12</sup>, residents of Garhwa district facing hunger despite being entitled for Antyodaya card and pension. They have demanded that Jharkhand government implements a relief package for PVTGs comprising adequate grains, pulses, vegetables, oil, cash grant, soap and medicines.

### ***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<sup>13</sup>. Also pastoral communities have been affected as the

---

<sup>9</sup><https://tribal.nic.in/writereaddata/AnnualReport/NACRecommendationsforPVTGs.pdf>

<sup>10</sup><https://tribal.nic.in/writereaddata/AnnualReport/NACRecommendationsforPVTGs.pdf>

<sup>11</sup><https://tribal.nic.in/writereaddata/AnnualReport/NACRecommendationsforPVTGs.pdf>

<sup>12</sup><https://twitter.com/JharkhandJanad1/status/1247854252128489472?s=20>

<sup>13</sup><https://www.thestatesman.com/india/Covid-nomadic-gujjars-advised-suspend-massive-bi-annual-migration-exercise-1502874123.html>, <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/wildlife-biodiversity/covid-19-himachal-s-pastoral-community-in-the-shadow-of-lockdown-70359>, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/nomadic-van-gujjar-tribe-caught-in-lockdown-with-nowhere-to-go/articleshow/74956429.cms>

milk economy faces severe crisis as procurement and sale has been disrupted during the lockdown<sup>14</sup>. In Uttarakhand the issues of Van Gujjars have been discussed in a meeting of Chief Secretary and concerned officials on 28<sup>th</sup> 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. *CSOs working with pastoral communities have produced a separate report on impact of the lockdown on pastoral and nomadic communities*<sup>15</sup>.

### ***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<sup>16</sup> 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 on forest land used by tribals and other traditional forest dwellers, including by fencing of such areas accessed for community rights. 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). The MoHA has issued an order allowing forest department to carry out forestry and plantation operations. This order can be misused by the forest dept to carry out plantations in cultivation land and community forest resources of tribals and forest dwellers which can lead to further violation of their land and forest rights. 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 6<sup>th</sup> 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

---

<sup>14</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/dehradun/in-haridwars-sealed-village-thousands-of-litres-of-milk-being-dumped-in-drains-every-day/articleshow/75072991.cms>

<sup>15</sup><https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Ln5ZSQkhj8JfA0On3CIM74T5-sJA2Q6K/view>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/environment-ministry-on-project-clearance-spree-activists-wary/story-vv0oGyPPmtPIL6E8mlpZMJ.html>, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-env-min-panel-for-automatic-extension-of-forest-clearance/story-e6W7xbhu5b16xidB855rHK.html>, **Green nod to mines extended by 2 yrs**-Hindustan Times (Delhi)-6 Apr 2020, <https://thewire.in/political-economy/lockdown-mining-steel-essential-regulatory-oversight>

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. There is great danger of this advisory being misunderstood and misused to further alienate and restrict access of these communities to the natural resources that they are dependent on for their lives and livelihoods. In fact going by the news reports this has indeed started happening. A news article from Rajaji National Park reported that a critical zone has been declared, surrounding 30 kms of the park and there is complete restriction of movement of the local Van Gujjars to access the park due to this advisory. Furthermore, several quintals of milk that the Van Gujjars sell in dairies in Haridwar was overturned and destroyed by the forest department in a bid to prevent the Van Gujjars from reaching the cities<sup>17</sup>.

In Kinwat taluka of Nanded District in Maharashtra, an elderly man from the Kolam PVTG group has allegedly been thrashed by the local forest department officials for going into the forest to collect bamboo<sup>18</sup>. 32 houses of tribals were reportedly demolished<sup>19</sup> by forest officials in village Sagada, Khandualmali forest area, Kalahandi District, Odisha on April 24. Gujarat forest dept officials allegedly torched tribals' huts, fields in Dang district. As per the report<sup>20</sup>, the state's forest officials told villagers to leave their land or face consequences. This is when Forest Rights claims were under appeal and pending with the District Level Committee (DLC). Forest rights activists, in a letter dated April 17, 2020<sup>21</sup> wrote to the Union Minister for Environment, Forest and Climate Change highlighting that this advisory may be misused to restrict the access of tribal and nomadic communities to the forests and natural resources.<sup>22</sup> The letter urged the ministry to reissue the advisory with clarifications that it should not be implemented to restrict customary and legal rights of use and access of the local communities living in and around protected areas.<sup>23</sup>

### ***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. These funds have now come handy in a

---

<sup>17</sup> Reported in Amar Ujala on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April, 2020.

<sup>18</sup> Reported by Amit Kulkarni from Nanded, Maharashtra

<sup>19</sup> <http://thewirehindi.com/119382/odisha-forest-department-officials-break-houses-of-32-tribals-amid-lockdown/>

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/environment/amp/covid-19-gujarat-forest-dept-officials-allegedly-torched-huts-fields-70426>

<sup>21</sup> [https://twitter.com/meenal\\_tatpati/status/1250970645338308608/photo/1](https://twitter.com/meenal_tatpati/status/1250970645338308608/photo/1)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/centres-advisory-to-prevent-covid-19-human-animal-transmission-can-be-misused-forest-activists-2213737>

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/centres-advisory-to-prevent-covid-19-human-animal-transmission-can-be-misused-forest-activists-2213737>

number of cases to deal with the situation created by COVID 19 related lockdown. A number of villages in Vidharba region of Maharashtra where recognition of rights under the FRA has been much higher, are such examples. These gram sabhas have used funds generated from sustainable harvest of NTFP from their CFR forests to procure and distribute essential food supplies to all village households in order to deal with the COVID crisis<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, those granted entitlements for individual forest rights are now able to benefit from several government schemes for land development, irrigation etc. Single women and women-headed households with IFR rights have also been able to receive such benefits.

Despite this, most of the tribals and forest dwellers don't have recorded legal rights over forest land and resources. The Forest Rights Act has, at the minimum, the potential to secure forest rights of at least 20 crore tribals and other traditional forest dwellers over 40 million ha (50% of India's forest land) covering 177,000 villages. As per a status report on implementation of Forest Rights Act, (MoTA status report till November 2019), individual and community rights have been officially recorded over only 10-13% of the potential area. Recording of Community Forest Resource management rights is merely over 3 to 5 % of the actual potential.

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. Although FRA requires recognition of rights in the joint names of both spouses, in practice FRA titles often record women as 'dependents' rather than as equal right holders. Even where titles are issued in joint names, whether women are aware about it remains unclear. 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<sup>25</sup>. 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.

---

<sup>24</sup><https://thebastion.co.in/politics-and/out-of-the-woods-how-the-fra-is-helping-a-village-in-maharashtra-during-the-covid-crisis/>

<sup>25</sup><https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/covid-19-tribals-take-traditional-route-to-safety/article31187350.ece>

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.<sup>26</sup>

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.

### **C. RESPONSE BY CENTRAL GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES AND STATE GOVERNMENTS**

Since enforcement of the lockdown on March 24, 2020, the first response to address issues of tribals came as late as on 6<sup>th</sup> April<sup>27</sup>, 2020 when the Union Minister for Tribal Affairs wrote to the CMs of the states highlighting the difficulties that tribal communities would face if MFPs were not harvested in time. The MoHA issued an order on 17<sup>th</sup> April<sup>28</sup> exempting collection of MFPs from the lockdown. However the orders haven't really addressed the issues at the ground level as tribals and forest dwellers continue to face problems in collection and sale of MFPs. Barring this, responses from the Central Government Ministries have been severely impacting the interests of the tribal communities and wildlife. These include the above mentioned advisory regarding "containing and management of COVID-19 in National Parks/Sanctuaries/Tiger Reserve" issued on 6<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, which, apart from other measures, asked to reduce human wildlife interface<sup>29</sup>.

On 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020, the standing committee of the National Board for Wildlife (NBWL) held a meeting through video conference to approve wildlife clearance for 11 development projects, several of these inside designated protected areas<sup>30</sup>. The Expert Appraisal and the Forest Advisory Committees have also had several recent meetings and cleared a large

---

<sup>26</sup><https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/how-remote-areas-tribal-hamlets-and-hill-districts-are-coping-with-covid-lockdown/articleshow/75225213.cms?from=mdr>

<sup>27</sup><https://www.downtoearth.org.in/news/governance/covid-19-minister-of-tribal-affairs-arjun-munda-writes-to-chief-ministers-over-livelihood-of-tribals-70327>

<sup>28</sup><https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1615255>

<sup>29</sup><https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1611748>

<sup>30</sup><https://science.thewire.in/environment/national-board-for-wildlife-prakash-javadekar-environment-ministry-destruction-protected-areas/>



number of projects in rich forest areas<sup>31</sup>. The impact on forests and other social impacts on people residing in the areas of proposed projects is yet to be assessed.

On 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2020, the environment ministry amended the rules for Environment Impact Assessment 2006<sup>32</sup>, exempting several categories of projects from the requirement of environment clearance without considering the short and long term impacts of such decisions on the livelihood security of the forest dwelling communities. The EIA amendment has also diluted the provision to obtain written consent of Gram Sabha under FRA. Moreover, attempts at pushing for post facto environment clearance<sup>33</sup> for projects that already started defying environmental norms are also being made during this period.

#### **D. 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***- The ministry should constitute a COVID Response Cell 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. The ministry should organise video conference with State tribal departments and COVID response teams of the states to review the situation in areas with tribal/ OTFD population and to ensure that all support is made available in the tribal areas and to resolve the bottlenecks with the district and state authorities. 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. The response team should also co-ordinate with the Ministry for Women and Child Development to cater to special needs of women and children in tribal areas.
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. The ministry should also ensure that district and sub-district level officers are well informed about all relevant guidelines and orders related to COVID 19 and lock-down issued by the centre and the states from time to time and that these are complied with.
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

---

<sup>31</sup><https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/environment-ministry-on-project-clearance-spree-activists-wary/story-vvOoGyPPmtPIL6E8mlpZMJ.html>

<sup>32</sup><http://egazette.nic.in/WriteReadData/2020/218948.pdf>

<sup>33</sup><https://india.mongabay.com/2020/04/government-pushes-for-post-facto-environment-clearances-while-apex-court-disapproves/>

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. COVID care centers can be set up at the community level managed by community healers and nurses. Considering the remoteness of the tribal settlements Mobile Health Units should be deployed involving community healers, PRI members, women's self help groups and local CSOs. Special attention should be given to areas with migrant workers who have returned home. The facilities of testing and quarantine should be immediately provided to them with the help of Panchayats. Adequate provision of masks, soap and disinfectants should be made. Access to health services in case of emergencies including provision of transport should be provided. Access to safe water for cleaning and drinking is a critical need for tribals and forest dwellers which should be ensured.

4. ***Ensuring Food Security, Survival Incomes and Protecting Livelihoods-*** · Given known evidence of undernourishment in many tribal areas it is critical to 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. This should be irrespective of whether they have a ration card or not as already announced by some of the state governments like Chhattisgarh<sup>34</sup>.
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,

---

<sup>34</sup><https://scroll.in/latest/959330/covid-19-chhattisgarh-to-provide-free-ration-even-to-those-without-a-card-for-two-months-says-cm>

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<sup>35</sup>. 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. Information about these villages should be generated and provided to all state agencies and the district level committees. While ensuring the recognition of IFR and CFR rights in all the potential villages, the forest rights holders should be protected from the threat of eviction, displacement, any kind of rights violation due to state interventions such as plantations, diversion of forest lands etc. by forest dept. 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.

---

<sup>35</sup><https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/centres-advisory-to-prevent-covid-19-human-animal-transmission-can-be-misused-forest-activists-2213737>