

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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INTRODUCTION

The third issue of **COVID19 and Forest Rights Bulletin** is focused on **the voices of women** within the larger impact of COVID19 lockdown on Adivasi and Forest Dwelling communities.

Socio-cultural values and norms have traditionally excluded women from participation in community decision making fora and denied them equal inheritance and property rights both under formal and customary laws. The Forest Rights Act 2006 is among the few progressive laws which attempt to undo this historical injustice by mainstreaming gender equality in the recognition of forest rights.

This bulletin provides testimonies of women of Adivasi and Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), Traditional Forest Dwellers and Pastoral communities of the impact of lockdown on their lives and livelihood. Some of these women reside within forests where they have tenurial security, others are resisting harassment and eviction and some do not survive to tell their story. Some live in Protected Areas, while others labour in the city. Some are responsible for their entire families while others are single women battling survival on their own. You can come across women's experiences of

BELOW: Women gathered in numbers to defend their forests from FD's CAMPA plantations

PREVIOUS PAGE: Woman in Kandhamal district defending her natural forest trees from Forest Department

struggle and of hope, as members of Minor Forest Produce cooperatives, as leaders in their Gram Sabhas and Forest Protection Committees.

For women in every sphere of life, the lockdown has had an impact in many specific ways: food insecurity and nutrition issues, low minor forest produce collection and sales due to lack of mobility, markets and climate change, forest diversion and plantations on lands which women have cared for and are dependent on, gender based violence and bonded-labour for women migrant workers, all in the absence of just livelihood options. In Gram Sabhas where women are recognised as rights-holders, equal participants or leaders, the resultant of greater security, sovereignty and health for forest communities and the environ-

ment becomes evident from the testimonies.

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TRILOKI DEVI'S STORY

A VANRAJI PVTG WOMAN FROM UTTARAKHAND

I am **Triloki Devi**, 65 years of age, Vanraji, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG), from Khatima block, Uddham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand and have faced harassment by the Forest Department (FD) during the lockdown. All of the 40 families, 15 Adivasi and the rest Other Traditional Forest Dwellers, in my village close to the Nepal border are dependent on forests for their livelihood. From the forests we collect: fuel-



ABOVE: Triloki Devi

wood, grass, medicinal plants, fodder, herbs and roots. We usually depend on forests for food: vegetables, roots and ferns such as jibura, linguda, parmal or fish and jungle birds. Earlier, my community used to sell dry wood to restaurants, but this livelihood option has stopped after lockdown. Furthermore, due to strong winds these days, many of the mud and stick houses have been destroyed in our village.

My life is affected due to constant harassment caused by the FD towards my community and more so during the lockdown. Despite having filed claims for our rights under the Forest Rights Act (FRA), we are living in constant fear of harassment by the FD.

There is no action by the government against the FD for perpetrating this violence. In fact recently, the FD forcefully got my son drunk and beat him up badly. When I raised my voice about this, the FD threatened to forcefully evict me from the village. I cannot even file an FIR as nobody listens to us. During this lockdown I have not been able to work, I do not have a job card, nor registration in the labour department. I do not have a Jan Dhan Yojana account. I have been ill and I cannot even get treatment done.

Our Demands: We demand from the government that our Community and Individual Forest Rights should be legally recognised as per FRA, 2006 and that our Vanraji community gets linked to the mainstream through convergence of government welfare programmes. We also demand justice for our PVTG community who has not received rations while other communities have!



ABOVE: Women in Kandhamal, Odisha protecting their forests from CAMPA Plantations.

RIGHT: Woman collecting MFP.



STORY OF RAJANTI MALIK

AND A WOMEN'S COLLECTIVE RESISTING
CAMPA PLANTATIONS IN ODISHA

My name is **Rajanti Malik** and I live in Pidormaha village in Daringbadi block of Kandhamal District in Odisha. **In the midst of this lockdown, while we were told to stay at home, the Forest Department destroyed and cleared our natural forests. They came and cleared the existing forest, on which we depend for food and livelihood, to plant other trees.** On that very day, May 27th, our women's collective surrounded our forests to demonstrate our resistance.

Due to the coronavirus lockdown, we couldn't even sell our Siali leaf and Sal leaf plates, Tendu or Bahada and all of these are getting spoiled. We are feeling helpless and are unable to understand how to feed & safeguard our children. In this crisis, between lockdown restrictions and the Forest Department actions, we are helpless. How will we survive?

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINOR FOREST PRODUCE (MFP) IN THE LIVES OF MANIYA DHURWE AND MAYAKALI BAI, GOND ADIVASI LANDLESS WOMEN FROM MADHYA PRADESH

In terms of division of labour, women have been socially assigned with the task of MFP collection from forests. Therefore, when such accessibility to the forests is prohibited for vulnerable forest communities, especially women, it impedes their lives.

Maniya Dhurwe is a Gond Adivasi, landless woman living with her husband and two infants in Gubri village of Bichhiya Block of Mandla district in Madhya Pradesh. Her family has leased a small patch of land (around half an acre) for paddy cultivation and gets rice from PDS but Maniya's name is not included in the ration card. As a result, there isn't enough food for subsistence of a family of four. **At such a time, access to MFPs proved to be a shock absorber which helped this family to tide over the crisis.**

In the month of April, Maniya and Ashok collected around 15-20 kg of mahua (*Madhu-*

ca longifolia) flowers which they sold at a rate of around Rs 25-30 per kg. Since the market was closed and inaccessible, they sold to vendors who came by from village to village to buy the flowers from the collectors. Maniya bai says that if they would have sold it directly themselves in the market, they would have probably received a slightly higher rate per kg, but the fact that they could even manage to sell in such a crucial time was important for them. ***"If it weren't for the mahua flowers it would have become difficult for us to feed ourselves and our children during the lockdown"***, says Maniya.

Mayakali bai, is a 50-year old widow living alone in Bhimpuri in the buffer of Kanha National Park. With no ownership of land,

BELOW: Mahua flowers drying.



she receives a small share of the yield from the land owned by her brother-in-law. She depends completely upon the forest for her livelihood and on daily wage work for income. This season, during the lockdown due to COVID-19 she could collect and sell around 300 bundles of tendu leaves for which she has received a total of Rs 750. She would wake up at 4 am to collect the leaves and return only by noon. After a quick lunch, and tying the leaves into bundles, she would leave for the *phad* (the place where tendu leaves are sold) at 3 pm. The *phad*, in this case is 5 km away from the village. Mayakali bai along with other women from the village go together walking and often have to return in the dark after they have sold the leaves.

However, the sale of mahua was not as successful. Mayakali bai says that this year, due to the attack on people by tigers and movement of elephants, the Forest Department announced precautionary measures in the buffer villages and asked the people to not to go into the forest early in the morning or late in the evening to collect the mahua flowers. Mayakali bai says that her mahua trees are inside the forest and she needs to go early in the morning to collect the flowers since the tree sheds the flowers at night. Due to these repeated warnings, she did not go to collect the flowers for a few days. The opportunity cost of this was huge; she would have been able to collect 8-10 kg more had it not been for these restrictions. **Restrictions also came in the form of unpredictable weather phenomena. For instance, this year, in addition to the stress induced by the lockdown and the pandemic, stress was also induced on the forest dwellers due to a climate change induced variation in tendu leaf and mahua growth.**



ABOVE: Mayakali bai

THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY **MALDHARI PASTORALIST WOMEN** IN GUJARAT

COVID 19 has impacted on the migration pattern of maldharis. They have to take new routes as not only was their movement restricted for a long time, but also due to fear and stigma of coronavirus amidst farmers and villagers who would otherwise invite them to stay on their lands. In some places, Maldharis entry to villages was completely restricted and sometimes they were faced with exchanges of intense argument or even minor scuffles.

While this was discomforting for all, it was particularly difficult for women, as their role is to negotiate with the villagers for water, ration, selling milk in the village, etc. To perform these tasks in newer places has left them with uncertainties, discomfort and often a feeling of insecurity. Villagers also started prohibiting the Maldharis from drawing water in their villages. Since, this is women's responsibility, they have devastating experience to fetch water for the household needs and the needs of livestock.

Maldharis sell the milk in the dairy cooperative and to the private contractors, but with newer routes, they were not familiar with the dairies and also the private contractors. Thus, the burden of selling the milk comes on women. It was found that in many cases, they have to sell their milk & milk products at a very low price. To quote an example, where they used to get the rate of Rs. 40 per litre of milk, due to lockdown they have to sell at Rs 22 per litre. This has ruined the pastoralists both financially and socially. Adding to financial troubles, the trading of livestock was completely impeded, the price of cattle feed spiked during lockdown and it was impossible to get anyone to assist in tasks such as sheep shearing that occur in these summer months.

The financial loss majorly impacts women, as the migrating Maldhari women have the responsibility of managing the financial resources. Since they are away from native villages, they don't have access to ration from the PDS shops in the areas where they migrate. In other years they manage, however, this year due to income loss, they are in a huge financial crisis. A woman from Kutch says *"Our need for chapati is 20 per meal, but we are making only 10 chapatis these days. This is to ensure that the ration lasts for a longer time."* This has a major impact on the health of women in the group. Some groups have reported having to buy food items at a higher price and women having to walk long distances to get it. Thus, their drudgery and stress levels have increased.

BELOW: Maldhari women making butter and yoghurt.



SAHVANIYA TELLS THE STORY OF
THARU ADIVASI MAHILA MAZDOOR
KISAN MANCH LIVING IN AND AROUND
DUDHWA NATIONAL PARK, UTTAR PRADESH

I am Sahvaniya from Surma village and a part of Tharu Adivasi Mahila Mazdoor Kisan Manch. Our sangathan has been fighting for generations: first against eviction of two villages from the core area of Dudhwa National Park, later for revenue status and now for Community Forest Rights, which has been further delayed by the lockdown.

Ever since lockdown was announced, people have not been able to go to the forest, as the forest guards are harassing them and taking a lot of money from people who go to collect firewood. Further, since the 6th April Order for Protected Areas, the forest guards are also not letting people go into the forest claiming that human-animal infection spread is possible. While people are sustaining on foods grown on the lands close to the village, mainly wheat and vegetables, they cannot access the forests. In Kajaria village, people have been cultivating for a long time, and recently the FD dug a deep trench around the village preventing people from entering the forest. Not only is it impossible to access the forest but also there is danger of flooding on the lands there. The FD is now claiming that it is their land, although they refuse to show maps displaying the same. In Surma, the village pradhan is taking advantage of the lockdown and not allowing people to organise. The sangathan is also finding it hard to meet although we know that if we do not organise together, it is hard to put pressure on authorities.

STORY OF GAUTOBAI
ELDERLY GOND ADIVASI SINGLE
WOMAN IN CHATTISGARH

Gautobai, a 62 year old Gond woman lives alone in Madhopur village, Rajnandgaon district of Chattisgarh. Her sons are married and do not take care of her. She was left with 90 dismil of non-irrigated land, and therefore she has to depend on rainfall for her agriculture. She sells half of her harvests to other villagers, however this does not bring her enough money to live. The last time she received her pension was in 2019. While the government records show that she has received pension, she would only get 5 kg rice per month. During lockdown, she has neither received any ration, nor could she collect even firewood from the forests. She also did not receive a gas cylinder under the government scheme. **While at other times she would have made- do with self-consumption and sale of Minor Forest Produce from the forest, restrictions on movement and lack of markets during lockdown meant that this single woman was very vulnerable and on the brink of starvation during lockdown.**



ABOVE: Gautobai

STORY OF **DELAYED JUSTICE** DURING
LOCKDOWN **FOR LATE DAMA DEVI**
DALIT WOMAN FROM HIMACHAL PRADESH

Dama Devi, 52 years old, was living in Tikkri revenue village, Sairi panchayat of Mandi district. Almost a year ago, on 26 July 2019, Dama Devi died. A fact-finding team that visited her village found that earlier on that same day, Dama Devi had gone to fill water, when 6 Forest Department officials showed up in their khaki uniforms, without any prior notice, and threatened to take over her “occupied” lands. Dama Devi’s family had only 3 biswas of land, and would cultivate and use 1-2 bighas of neighbouring forest lands in order to survive. She never had any legal recognition or title of these lands. Her family had tiffs with other families in the village, who have used forest lands to build a temple. In fact, most families in the village were using some of the forest lands for their necessities.

On 26 July 2019, Dama Devi fell into shock due to the sudden harassment of the Forest Department in front of the entire village and cried while saying that her family was dependent on the forest land. Later on Dama Devi fainted, and the forest officials did not bat an eyelid and left the village. Dama Devi had in fact left this earth for good. Although her family filed an FIR under the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act that very night, it was officially accepted only on 28 August 2019. They asked for the 6 Forest Department Officials as well as some of the neighbouring families who were constantly fighting with them to be held responsible for her death.

The family of Dama Devi have been awaiting justice for close to a year. The court case was scheduled for March 2020, however was postponed due to the lockdown.

BONDED LABOUR AND GENDER BASED
VIOLENCE: **REPORTING ON ADIVASI
WOMEN MIGRANT WORKERS**
FROM JHARKHAND WORKING IN BANGALORE

Two Adivasi women migrant workers, mothers in their early twenties, managed to escape from a bonded labour set-up where the contractor only paid them Rs. 1200 for 7 months of work and one of them was even raped. **Elina Horo**, of Adivasi Women’s Network in Jharkhand in an article in [The Wire](#), said “Due to the nationwide lockdown, we are unable to find out how many more Adivasi women are themselves in a similar situation in different parts of the country. **Human trafficking of Adivasi women and girls from the state is not new but this kind of horrific incident should force the government and its agencies to take urgent action against the routine exploitation of Adivasi women for strengthening women’s safety at work place and labour laws.** The state government of Jharkhand must ensure that they maintain a detailed record of all the migrant workers proactively register them in welfare boards and ensure that adequate social security is extended to them.” She further stated that special provisions must be made for migrant women workers.

STORY OF **WOMEN LED FOREST PROTECTION COMMITTEES** BY **JANHA PRADHAN** OF ODISHA

My name is **Janha Pradhan**, Kondh Adivasi, and a member of the Women Led Forest Protection Committees or Thengapalli in Village Gunduribadi, Ranpur block, Nayagarh district. We are 22 households in our village and we have been protecting our

BELOW: Janha Pradhan



forests for over 40 years using the thengapalli practice. Everyday 4 women go to the forest patrolling in order to protect it. At nights, young boys take turns to do the same.

We are Adivasi, the Forests are our life and we cannot stay without the forest. We collect Tunga, Korba from the forests and we need not buy vegetables such as brinjal and potato from the market. Our mother-in laws used to take care of the forests, as they grew older we took over their role. Our children will continue to patrol the forests in the future. Forests give us everything- food, fruit, medicine, bamboo, wood . If we get hurt, we collect and grind herbs to make a paste and treat our wounds.

During the COVID 19 lockdown, although we didn't have any income due to lack of markets to sell our Minor Forest Produce, yet we had food, medicines and nutrition due to the forests. **While our claims for forest rights are still pending, we know that the forests give us a great sense of security, therefore we will not give our forests to anyone. We will protect them day and night.**

SOCIAL EQUITY FOR WOMEN WHERE COMMUNITY FOREST RIGHTS ARE LEGALLY RECOGNISED - STORIES FROM MAHARASHTRA

These two media stories tell us about the impact of legal recognition of forest rights and women's active role in gram sabhas and Forest Management:

- [How Forest Rights made this Maharashtra village Atmanirbhar](#)
- [Out of the woods: How the FRA is helping a village in Maharashtra during the COVID crisis](#)

MEDIA ARTICLES

ON ISSUES RELATED TO COVID AND FOREST RIGHTS (1-15 JUNE)

- [Why Women, Children In Rajasthan's Tribal Belts Are Facing Hunger](#)
- [Northeast India Makes it Amply Clear That Ecology Is Political](#)
- [MP Forest official burnt down mudhouse, threatened to burn down more: Tribals of Burhanpur](#)
- [No Rations - Adivasis in Madhya Pradesh Go Hungry in Lockdown](#)
- [Maharashtra: Forest rights activists write to CM, demand intervention against 'bid to take away gram sabha rights'](#)
- [Odisha reverses historical injustices by recognising all PVTGs](#)
- [How Forest Rights made this Maharashtra village Atmanirbhar](#)
- [Pandemic lockdown lands new blow on India's struggling pastoralists](#)
- [What does self-reliance really mean? Amazing stories emerge from India's villages](#)
- [Covid-19, climate crisis: A double whammy for India's Adivasis and forest dwellers](#)
- [Nomads fight isolated battle to survive lockdown](#)
- [India continues to lose forest land to non-forestry projects](#)
- [Why 288 families in Bhopal were left scrounging for food during the lockdown](#)
- [The price of profit, OIL's misadventure threatens Tinsukhia's reserve forests & wild life sanctuaries: Assam](#)
- [India's Stimulus Package Fifth Worst On Global Environment Index](#)
- [PM Modi to launch auction for commercial coal mining next week](#)
- [Odisha diverts whopping 4,514 hectare of forest land for non-forestry use last year: MoEF report](#)
- [Govt stops sal seed procurement at MSP, distress sale likely](#)
- [Environment ministry unlocked many protected areas during the lockdown](#)
- [How COVID-19 made forest rights battle tougher for Tharu women](#)
- [LIVE: Govt stops sal seed procurement at MSP, distress sale likely](#)

Following Page: The natural forest in Kandhamal was destroyed by the Forest Department

For more info. or to share ground stories, Contact:
vanadhikarmedia@gmail.com

