

# NOMAD POST

## #RightTheWrong

A newsletter from nomadic and denotified tribes

**Nat, Bediya and Bacchara workers: Where Gender, Caste, Migration  
and Criminalisation intersect**

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**PRAXIS**



# Nat, Bediya and Bacchara workers: Where Gender, Caste, Migration and Criminalisation intersect

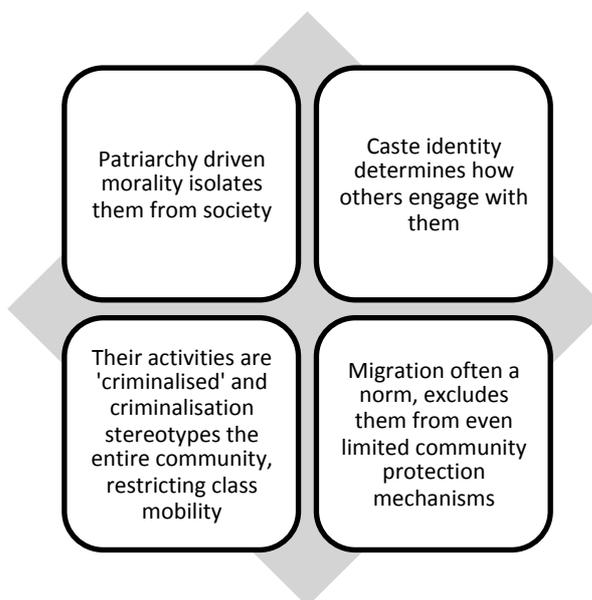
An Analysis Report Of Information Collected During The COVID-19 Lockdown  
Between 4 and 13 April 12, 2020

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Background to Nat, Bediya and Bacchara Community

The Nat, Bediya and Bacchara communities have been subjected to historical injustices both in colonial as well as free India. They were victims of the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871, wherein the entire community was notified as “criminal” by the state, because the Act implied that these communities were criminal by birth and practiced crime as a profession. There have been various versions of histories that are associated with them on their association with criminal activities and many of their traditional crafts including folk arts have over the period been pushed to the “wrong” sides of law and social mores, customs and traditions. They are, at present not only fighting patriarchy, legal criminalization and the caste system, but also become victims of a strong industry that traps them into bondage by reaping their socially excluded status. Some key aspects that characterise their lives are detailed in the figure alongside:



From early March 2020, when the coronavirus reached pandemic status and the media started reporting it, these communities, began to experience the beginnings of economic distress. When the national lockdown was announced, these communities faced an exacerbated situation, much worse than some others given that many of them were already struggling with seeking livelihood, being away from their traditional support system and limited or almost no access to relief from the administration which has always been at loggerheads with them formally.

### 1.2 Context of Current Study

The [National Alliance Group for Denotified, Semi Nomadic and Nomadic Tribes](#), along with [Praxis](#) organised a rapid assessment of the situation faced by Nat, Bediya and Bacchara communities. The research team interviewed **106 workers** across **13 districts** in **5 states**. Workers were interviewed about the receipt of their salary and on loans they have taken during the lockdown period. They were also asked about the challenges they faced while accessing reliefs and entitlements. The workers were interviewed between April 4 and 13, 2020. Further, the research team, including community fellows have been in touch with and

facilitating relief support to members of these communities in Delhi and Mumbai which has in turn, contributed in understanding the unique situation of the community members.

### **Box 1: Sample Profile of Interviewed Respondents**

Overall, 106 workers were interviewed randomly over telephone. Sample details are below:

**Gender:** This included 58 women and 48 men.

**Community:** 44 belonged to Nat community, 38 to Bacchara and 26 to Bediya community

**Geography:** 28 from Bihar, 52 from Madhya Pradesh, 16 from Rajasthan, 5 workers from Maharashtra and 5 from Delhi. Within these states, respondents were Mumbai (5), Araria (21), Neemuch (38) and Ajmer (11). City-dwellers formed 10% of the sample.

**Types of professions:** Entertainment sector (40), Daily wagers in entertainment (30), Farming and agricultural labourers (7), Driver (2) and not stated (27).

**Age and Ability:** 29 were elderly or disabled or caregivers, who were not into any remunerative work, a week before the lockdown.

This is **not** a representative sample, nor a structured study. The interviews were organised from April 4 and 13, 2020.

## **2. FINDINGS**

### **2.1 Entertainment Sector**

Performing at weddings and local festivals or different occasions, is very common for members of these three communities. Some of them perform in dance bars and sing in hotels as well. Many of them also work to entertain individual clients, including through sex work. A total of 70 interviewed workers out of 106, worked in the entertainment sector. 30 others referred to themselves as daily wage workers associated with the entertainment sector.

As a result of the lockdown, the community's major source of livelihood, which is from the entertainment sector, took a big hit with the banning of gatherings. Sumita, remembering the day of announcement of lockdown, said, "Weddings and local functions were postponed. Festival gatherings were prohibited. We were totally shattered." Sonia said, "Dance bars and hotels were closed. Some of these closures started becoming effective even before the announcement of the lockdown. The fear of virus also affected the overall industry".

The impact on the industry surfaced over weeks beginning early February, but many weddings and gatherings were banned abruptly once lockdown was announced. Anvesha said, "Many of us invest in advance from our own savings, looking forward to the wedding months. We buy clothes and other materials required to organise the programmes. Thekedars (contractors), who also have to do their own preparations, generally take advances and do not necessarily pass these on to us". Thus, the week into the lockdown created a sudden fall in work and income, which affected the workers monetarily as well as psychologically.

## 2.2 Wages during lockdown

None of the 106 interviewed workers were able to access any kind of wage for their work or services through the employer or vendor or client. The lockdown has affected their work in entirety. Even those into agricultural labour have not been able to access any farm employment during the period. The entertainment industry was entirely shut. The access to patrons and clients has almost been nil.

The workers also carry a fear that the entertainment industry, especially weddings and religious gatherings are going to be prohibited for some months. Sonia says, “Even weddings those would happen would happen later, will be without much of fanfares, in the absence of any musical or dance performances”. Another worker says, “Over many years, we (community) have been stereotyped into one kind of work and activities. We have tried moving into other activities and occupations but failed”. For these communities, to try and experiment horizontal mobility in terms of new occupations has always been a challenge. Many have tried and failed individually and collectively. They also feel that society has been ostracizing them- and their acceptance is limited to certain occasions and for certain activities only.

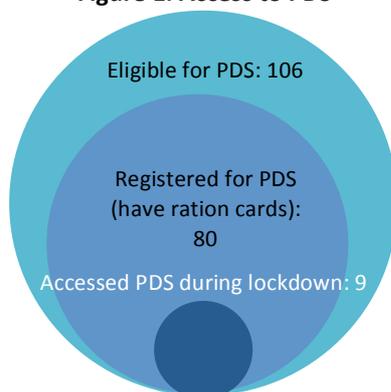
The immediate days of lockdown have provided some of them with experiences that were very difficult to imagine. Sumita said, “Our regular clients and contractors were not of any help- some refused and some were not in a position to help us because of the lockdown.”

## 2.3 Access to Food during lockdown

The NAG team received several distress calls from community members in metro cities who were not able to access food. While there were shelter homes, the community members fearing retaliation did not even attempt to go there for food. Rakesh said, “We are used to staying within our community. We avoid getting into wider community dining, especially in scenarios like this. Further, there are no shelter homes close by which are providing meals.”

The challenge that the community faced with access to food on the first few days of the lockdown has been unprecedented. 58 families were forced to take loans just to fulfil their basic need for food. Of the 106 people interviewed, at least **three** workers stated that they **stayed hungry** i.e. went without food for at least one day. **38** workers have stated that there were days when **they got a maximum of only one meal in the day**; and **61** others stated that there were days when **they got a maximum of only two meals**. There were only 4 who said that they were able to access three meals during the lockdown

Figure 1: Access to PDS

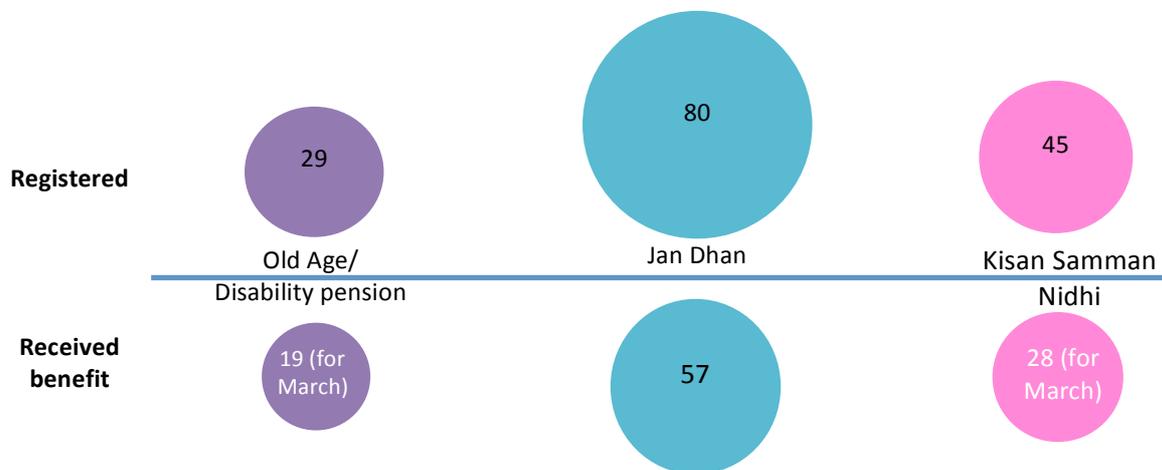


In terms of the **public distribution system** figure 1 alongside details the same on numbers of eligible persons, registrations and access to rations during the lockdown. Some of respondents shared that they lived away from the registered shops, but others were not able to access rations even in their own location because accessing was very difficult.

## 2.4 Support from the Government

Three schemes were explored with the 106 respondents and findings are presented in figure 2 below:

**Figure 2: Access to Schemes from Government**



With the old age / disability pension, most of them are yet to receive the April month pension, which according to the central government, is to be provided in advance.

Many of the women seem to have received it, but have not accessed it yet. Sumita said, “What will we do with this? We cannot access banks. They are very far. We also do not know the timings of bank.” Further, a number of women have never used Jan Dhan account before. The accounts were non-operative.

“We just saw announcements made by the Government. We had no idea how to access them. Relief was announced in crores (*karodon ka relief announce hua*). We did not get any penny.”  
- Rani

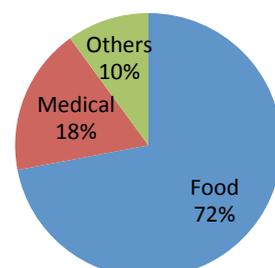
The community felt that there has neither been any time for preparation before the lockdown nor was any proper information. Nusrat said, “The neighbourhood or the village should have been provided with a nodal contact, who could regularly update us with what is happening with virus as well as lockdown. At least Government could have done this much!”

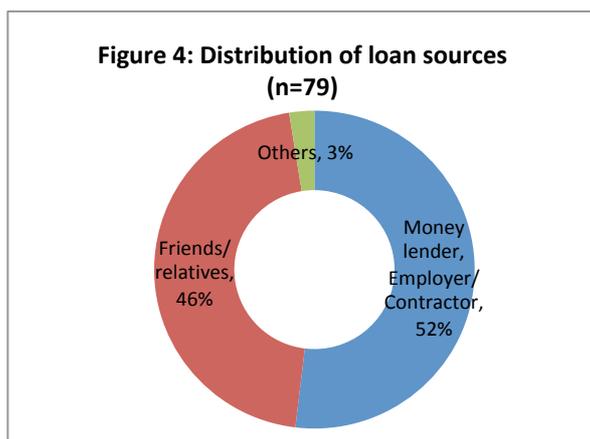
Many of the respondents are also into multiple occupations, and engage in agriculture during the sowing and harvesting seasons. Some of them are registered in the Kisan Samman Nidhi scheme. 45 of them are registered and 28 of them received payment in March 2020. The April amount is still awaited.

## 2.5 Alarming rise in Indebtedness

In many cases, people ended up resorting to taking loans. Of the 106 respondents, 79 had to take loans to tide over these difficult times. On being asked about the key reason for the loans, they shared it was largely to cover medical and basic food expenses. These have been detailed in figure 3.

**Figure 3: Distribution of loan tiggers (n=79)**





Shweta said, “Even when we called helplines, we were told to approach police stations for help. We know it would not work, so we never tried.” Often the past experiences create an impression on the community about institutions that would help them and that would not. Even at the lockdown, those experiences forced them to stay alone and starve. Rani says, “The only way for them was to take loans etc. from grocery shop owners and auto drivers. They were very helpful. We have to

return them once we earn something. They are also giving these loans from their miniscule saving.”

The worrying fact is that 79 of the 106 workers have accessed loans to meet their expenses. 58 workers were forced to take loans to fulfil daily needs for food. 14 of them took loan to meet their need for food as well as medical expenses, which also indicates high morbidity and low immunity among the community members. One of the respondents had to take a loan in order to meet the expenses related to the delivery of their child, during the lockdown period. A few respondents (7) had also taken loans for farming.

Of 79 who took loans, figure 4 shows that 41 got the loan from money-lenders or contractors or employers. This easy credit from private players has been beneficial for them to meet immediate needs, but it is also worrying given the potential impact this can have on trafficking and bonded labour in future.

Narendra, who volunteers with NAG, said, “A background about the three communities is crucial to understand how indebtedness will fuel trafficking. All three communities are engaged in the sex industry to a certain extent, if not completely. The industry is known for its exploitation and creating channels for trafficking. To get out of the debt, it is very much possible that newer and younger girls might be pushed into commercial sex”.

### 3. KEY DISCUSSIONS WITH COMMUNITY RESEARCH FELLOWS

In order to gain more insights into the different aspects that affect the lives of these entertainment workers and their families, the team had in-depth discussions with the Community Research Fellows. These fellows were part of a fellowship programme supported by NAG-DNT which was focused on research methods. The six fellows are from the Nat and Bediya community and live in Bihar. The key points from these discussions are listed below:

#### 3.1. Relief is not reaching community

- The community is not receiving food and PDS. They face problems of lack of identity documents and also the challenge of revealing their identity to the relief administration. The community is used to concealing their identity to access rights and entitlements. They rarely used to access PDS in non-lockdown circumstances. They preferred to pay

higher 'rent' to get entitlements than suffer or be stigmatised by revealing their identities. During this relief period, this has not worked

- They are able to get "direct cash transfer" into bank accounts, as this does not require interface. But without an ATM card, they have no access to banks to get cash - which is a challenge.

### **3.2 Fear of rising indebtedness, which could lead to increased trafficking**

- When the community's access to relief is restricted, and their ability to sustain themselves through livelihood options is restricted, they resort to credit to survive. Given that the community is close knit, are all affiliated with the sex industry and their relationships are close, members are able to get loans from money lenders – traditional means of access to easy credit is not going to be affected much.
- The community might have to repay the debt by contributing to the trafficking industry – directly or indirectly. This fear is not yet commonly owned by the state or civil society organisations.

### **3.3 Caste matters. Its impact is not reducing at all.**

- Everything boils down to the community that one belongs to. "Once it is established that a certain person belongs to one of these communities the attempt is to keep us where we are". Immediately, every stereotype gets associated with us "prostitution, criminals, immoral, not capable of doing anything else, will come back to same thing later".
- It is also because of our caste, that no one wants to actively engage with us. No one wants to support us. Officials try to avoid us. Only those NGOs that regularly work with us continue contacting us. During relief time, there were many new NGOs, but they were 'scared' to approach us.
- The community also reacts based on their past experience. So they would also not proactively approach relief administration officials and claim their entitlements. Further, community dining, even at shelter homes, is not going to be easy, because if anyone deciphers their identity, we carry the fear of unnecessary backlash by any fellow sufferer from other communities.
- Unless there is an attempt to look at abolishing overall caste system, things would not change fast

### **3.4 Patriarchy is cruel and defies any attempt to empower the community**

- There is no doubt that sex work is a direct product of patriarchy, which objectifies and commoditises women. Further it imposes a set of moralities, which make victims feel guilty and locates them into 'irreparable situations'. Victims fault themselves and sustain patriarchy.
- The support even from neighbourhoods and progressive institutions get affected given that no one wants to associate with us directly.

### **3.5 Criminalisation continues - the administration does not recognise this process.**

- The association of the community with its traditional occupation and of the occupation with the community; along with criminalisation; and a lack of support from the government to help them with alternative livelihood options - is in itself a criminal act by the state.
- The administration conveniently believes that the "occupation" and "community" are criminalised. Either way, the fact is that the occupation is continuing and a large segment of the community follows that occupation which has been criminalised. This happens with a convenient nexus with administration as well as the industry and society at large. However, the blame and responsibility is on the community.

- A large section of the community is fighting the sex industry as well as the morality norms of the society.
- Under this circumstance, when relief has to be administered by the state administration, which criminalised the community, there is going to be a challenge. The problem is that this is not even recognised as a problem by the government.

#### 4. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ration and basic essentials for the household should be provided to all workers for a minimum of two months.
- Awareness programmes regarding Covid-19 need to be conducted in rural areas. Masks should be supplied through government agencies in rural areas.
- Direct cash transfers should be facilitated, to a tune of six months' compensation.
- Local nodal organisations, which have been working with such communities for many years, should be included as points for relief distribution.
- Rs 500 is not sufficient for the Jan Dhan Yojana and a minimum Rs 2500 should be provided for the next six months. For those who do not have Jan Dhan accounts, these accounts should be opened on an urgent basis.
- The government should give a clear plan and guideline for the food supply and distribution, so as to reduce black-marketing.
- Gas cylinders and electricity bills should be made free universally for all daily-wage workers (including entertainment workers) for the upcoming three months.
- Families with elderly, children and/or pregnant and lactating women should be top in the priority list. Relief should be given to them on a priority basis.
- Medicine should be available free of cost through ICDS or ASHA

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**Data Collection:** Naya Jeevan Gyan Prachar Sewa Samiti (Madhya Pradesh); Bhumi Gramuathan Evam Sebhagi Gramin Vikas Samiti (Madhya Pradesh); Sambhawana Welfare Society (Bihar); Samvedna (Madhya Pradesh) Vikram (Rajasthan), Aditi Mishra (Maharashtra)

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### Annexure: Key Tables

Community	No. of respondents
Bacchara	36
Bedia	26
Nat	44

Gender	No. of respondents
Female	58
Male	48

Districts	No. of respondents
Morena	6
Ajmer	11
Araria	21
Barmer	3
Bhopal	2
Jodhpur	1
Mumbai	5
Neemuch	38
Rajgarh	2
Supaul	7
Udaipur	1
Vidisha	4
Delhi	5

State	No. of respondents
Bihar	28
Delhi	5
Madhya Pradesh	52
Maharashtra	5
Rajasthan	16

	No. of families
Hungry	3
One meal	38
Two meals	61
Three meals	4
Total	106

	No. of families
Had to take loans during lockdown period	79
From Money lenders or employers/contractors	37
From friends/families	36
From Employer	4
Others	2

	Interviewed	Eligible	Registered	Received
Jan Dhan	83	83	80	57
PDS	83	83	80	9
Kissan Samman Nidhi	83		45	28
Old age/Disabled/Widow	83		29	19