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A newsletter from nomadic and denotified tribes

Supplementary not Alternative Livelihoods: Pandemic-Induced Impediments to Livelihoods of Bar Dancers and Sex Workers

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National
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De-Notified
&
Nomadic Tribes

PRAXIS

**Supplementary not Alternative Livelihoods:
Pandemic-Induced Impediments to Livelihoods of Bar Dancers and Sex Workers**
An analysis of information collected during the Covid-19 pandemic
between 1 and 15 June 2020

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background

The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT) of India, have been subjected to historical injustices both in colonial as well as Independent India. Similar to gypsies around the world whose lifestyle was difficult to be controlled by the state, the DNTs were also regarded with suspicion during the colonial period. 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. Once the DNT community were branded as hereditary criminals, they were alienated from their traditional sources of income, and made vulnerable to a range of abuses. The Criminal Tribes Act was repealed in 1952 by Independent India, however, the DNT community continued to face stigma and criminalisation. While some of the DNT communities have been accorded to the list of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes, there are still DNT communities that have not been included in any of the categories. Even within these categories, it has been stated that the DNT communities are particularly vulnerable and have not been able to access most of the benefits under these categories (Renke Report 2008).

Majority of the DNT communities were left landless and jobless after the decline of sovereignty. These communities have a diverse cultural, social lifestyle and tradition where most of their practices claim on ancient heritage. The social and cultural characteristics of the DNT communities are associated with their economic activities. The DNT communities have been excluded from the political agenda for a long time and have been unable to gain access to any welfare opportunities. Getting a basic caste certificate, the necessary proof of eligibility for benefits, is difficult as many community members do not have government identification of any kind and are asked to produce documents from the 1950s to prove their identity.

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. The DNT communities have led a marginalised existence for decades. The Nat, Bediya, Kanjar and the Bachhra communities were historically performers engaged in singing and dancing as folk artists during the rule of monarchy in India. After the end of monarchy and change in the laws of the state these communities had nothing left for their survival and they engaged in sex work.

With no other source for income, sex work gradually became their primary source of livelihood, a 'traditional' occupation. Due to which most of the DNT communities continue to face social stigma. The DNT communities consider sex work as a culturally and socially accepted form of earning or livelihood, but the stigma attached to the profession has stigmatised the entire community. At present the DNT communities are not only fighting patriarchy, legal criminalisation and the caste system, but also become victims of a strong industry that traps them into bondage by reaping their socially excluded status.

1.2 Context of Current Study

The present study has been carried out by members of the Covid Assessment and Response team (CART). The team comprises 23 members, including 15 Praxis Research Fellows. (Ashish, Kiran, Aman, Anand, Ajay, Mahadevi, Nandini, Nisha, Twinkle, Roshni, Shakila, Farida, Md. Alam, Megha, Jatin, Tarini, Nirmita, Deepti, Pragya, Pradeep, Mayank, Vikas, Dheeraj)

Data was collected from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. In total, the study covers seven districts – Araria, Muzaffarpur, Purnia, (Bihar), Morena, Neemuch and Mandsaur (Madhya Pradesh) and Dholpur (Rajasthan). The data is collected from three communities, the Nat (60), Banchada (49) Kanjar (40) and Bedia (75) communities. Performing at weddings and local festivals or different occasions, is very common for members of these 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.

The group spoke to a total of 224 respondents, all of whom identify as women and are engaged in either a dance company, dance bar and/or sex work. The age of these women ranges from 18 to above 55 years of age. The data has been collected from 1st to 15th June, 2020.

Chart 1: Sample by Location (n=224)

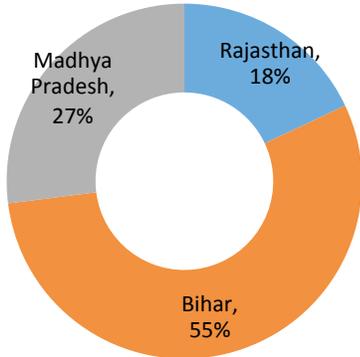
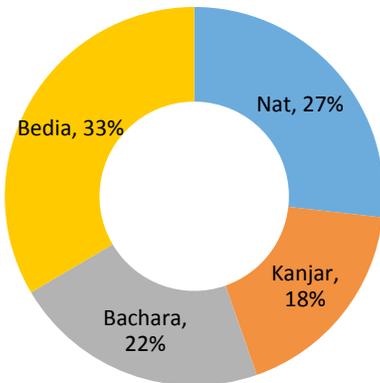
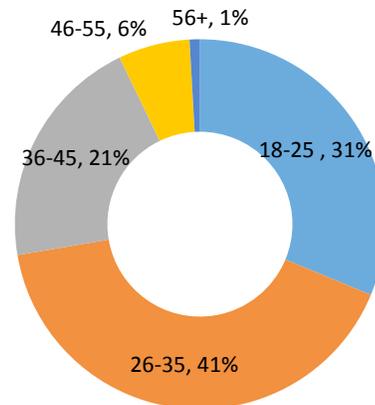


Chart 2: Sample by Community (n=224)



The lockdown and the subsequent need for social distancing during this Covid-19 pandemic has meant that the sex work and dance bar industry has been completely shut for three months now. Women from the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, a large number of whom form part of the workers in the entertainment industry face 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 they have always been at loggerheads with. Additionally, given the nature of their jobs – being either crowd-based or touch-based has meant that the future for these women and their work is very uncertain at the moment. While some are determined to wait it out and are optimistic about re-starting their work, some of the respondents were eagerly seeking out new avenues and other means to support their families.

Chart 3: Sample age group (n=224)



2. FINDINGS

2.1 Patterns of Migration

As sex work and bar dancing is practiced intergenerationally by these communities, there are strong established links between the source and destination. Young girls travel from their hometown to the city with women that they know and initially live with these women in the city.

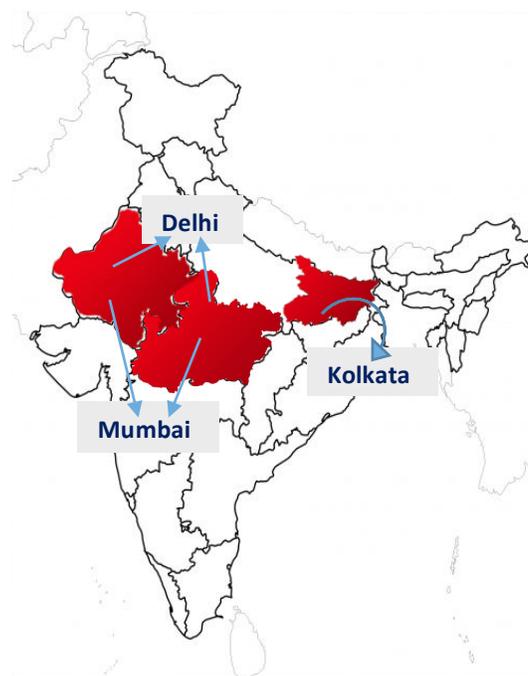
The most common migration pattern for women from the Bedia and Banchhada communities of Madhya Pradesh and the Kanjar community of Rajasthan are towards Mumbai (Maharashtra) or Delhi. Most women from Bihar either travel to Kolkata (West Bengal) or stay within Bihar, and travel to other districts like Muzzafarpur.

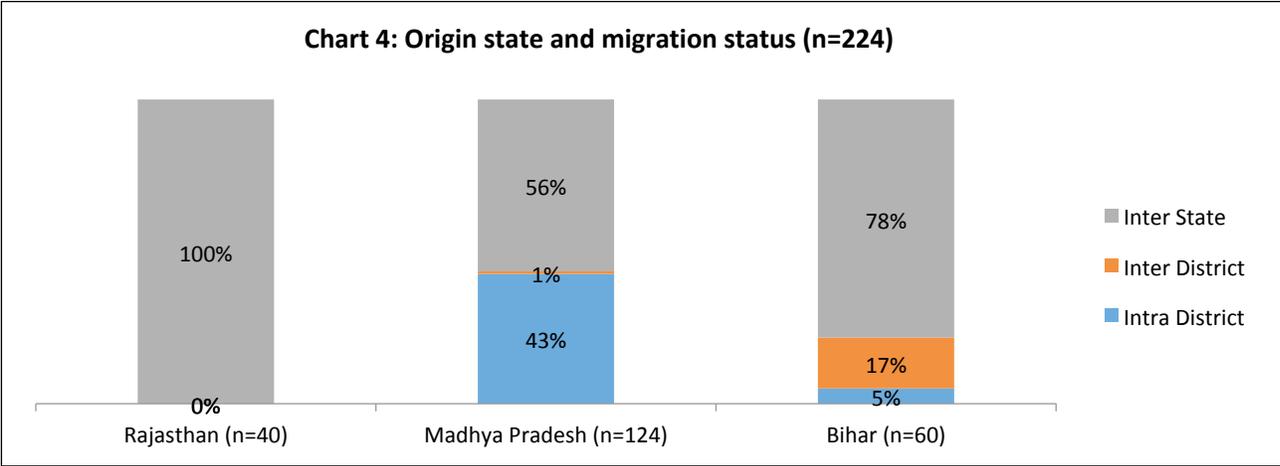
Out of the 224 respondents, 157 (70%) had undertaken inter-state migration. All respondents from Rajasthan had migrated to a different state, 56 per cent of the respondents from Madhya Pradesh and 78 per cent from Bihar shifted to another state to work. Among those that stayed within their states, there were 11 (4%) who undertook inter-district migration and 56 (25%) had undertaken intra-district migration. Inter-district migration takes place from one district to another and intra-district occurs within the district boundary.

Table 1: Migration	
Inter-state	157
Inter-district	11
Intra-district	56
Total	224

Most women migrate to metropolitan cities like Mumbai, Delhi or Kolkata. Comparatively better pay and better living standards and infrastructure were some of the reasons for women to opt for inter-state migration, the added aspect of 'anonymity' was a factor for some. However, many also pointed out that once their caste identity was known to others, they faced discrimination, especially from State and administration. The workers, therefore, faced discrimination on various levels – gender, based on their occupation and based on their caste identity. As many of the women are the sole or main breadwinners for their families, the higher incomes in cities play an important role in providing for their loved ones in the village.

Figure 1: Inter-state migration





2.2 Education

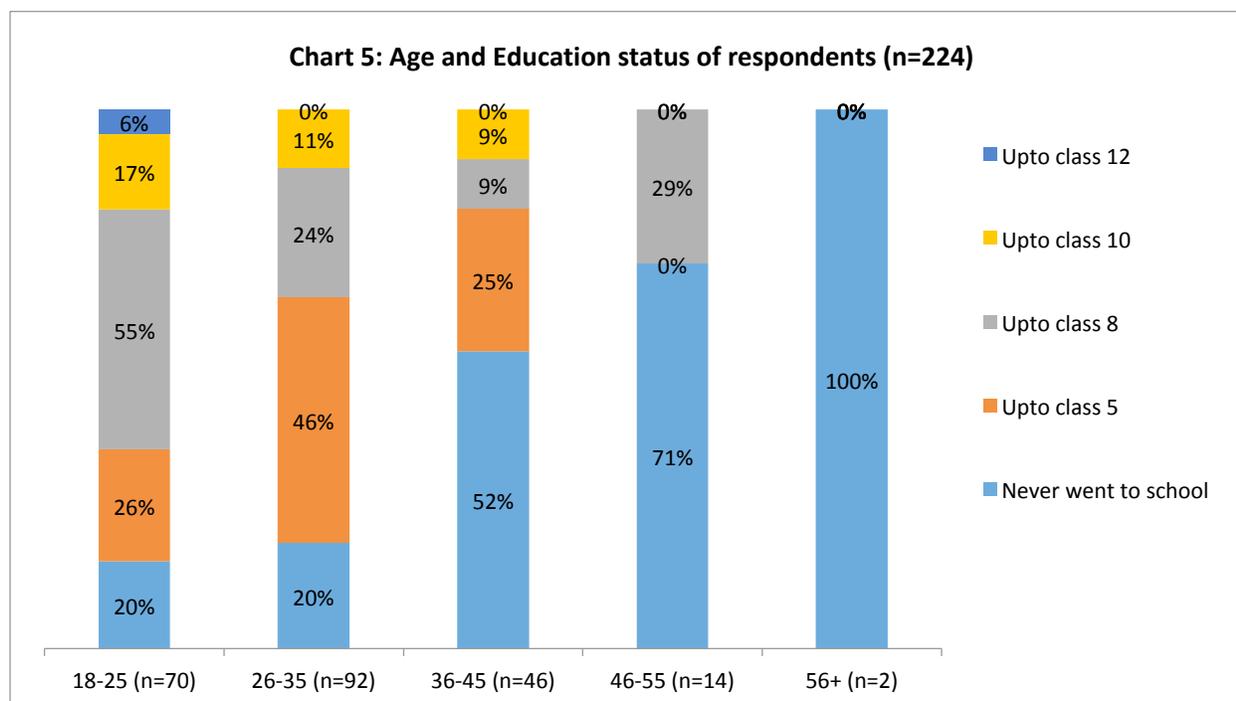
With regard to level of education, 30 per cent of the respondents never attended school, 33 per cent had dropped out before or in Class 5, while 35 per cent had dropped out between Classes 6-10. Only 4 respondents had studied till Class 12 and none had pursued higher education. Discussions revealed that the caste and gender identity played a key role in access to education.

Most young girls are discouraged from studying beyond class 8 or 10. The added financial burden of educating the children is important reason that forces families to take their children out of school. In order to earn money, young girls and boys are forced to engage in remunerative work.

Many adolescents stated that caste discrimination was another major reason for a high dropout rate within the DNT communities. Cases of students from lower castes being asked to clean up after others, to sit on the floor or at the end of the class, or be disallowed to play with students from higher castes, all lead to children dropping out and being unable to benefit from school. Many complained of teachers and principals being discriminatory in behaviour, thereby making it difficult for families to raise the concern with any authority. “When people in position themselves are being discriminatory, whom do we go to, what do we say?” Delays in access to caste certificates was also raised as a key concern for many families – as children were unable to obtain caste certificates (owing to them being asked for documents dating back to 1950) their admissions were stalled.

“The community members think that if a girl studies too much she will not want to get married or will start asserting her own will, so they try to get her married off at a young age. Some families are also worried about sending their girls for sex work, which then leaves marriage as the only other feasible option.”

- A young girl from the Nat community of Bihar



A noteworthy aspect of the data collected is that within the range of Class 6-12, the younger generation (those that are now between 18-35 years of age) have a significant number of respondents who have attended school at least till Class 10. Of the respondents that are now 36 and above, only 19 per cent had studied beyond Class 6. Of those between 18-35 years of age, 43 per cent had studied beyond Class 6. This shows that while education level are still very low, there has been an increase in the number of girls that are able to study beyond Class 6.

It is therefore important that there be a concerted push towards quality education. There is a need for the government to provide avenues for children from the DNT communities to access higher education. It is important that young persons are provided access to fellowships and scholarships by the government, civil society organisations and Universities and colleges.

2.3 Livelihood

In the current scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic, sex workers and bar dancers have been without work for close to three months. “We have no work and no money, we are surviving on ration that we are provided by some support organisations or helpful individuals” stated one of the respondents. As was documented in Nomad Post ¹, most workers in the entertainment industry have not been able to access government schemes or ration, as many of them have been without any kind of documentation like ration cards or LPG schemes. Harassment or ill treatment based on their occupation and caste identity have meant that many of the workers have not been able to access government entitlements such as ration cards, free LPG or any of the pension schemes. The fear of the police is also an added reason for them to choose to stay away from relief measures that are being provided via the police during the Covid-19 pandemic. For those that remain at the destination, the situation is grim. One of the

¹ Available at: <http://www.praxisindia.org/covid19.php>

respondents shared, “We have families that rely on us for money, since we have not been able to earn, we have had to take loans from others to send some money back home. What can we do? We have no other option.”

Restrictions and the continued need for social distancing have meant that most workers have been unable to begin their work. News reports² reveal that close to 60 per cent of sex workers have gone back to their villages as work has completely stopped. During our research, a resident of a red-light district in Delhi stated: “Most of the girls have gone back home, some are locked up in their rooms, waiting for things to get better. They all fear for their future, as of now they are completely dependent on others – landlords, relatives, or NGOs.”

When asked about some of the livelihood options that the women would choose to engage in during this period that they are unable to continue any of their usual work, their responses varied from farming, animal husbandry, making liquor, running a shop, tailoring, holding dance classes, beauty parlour and starting a small business at home. The skills that the respondents said they possessed included animal husbandry, cooking, dancing, farming, brewing liquor, shop keeping and tailoring.

Table 2: Age - skills						
	18 - 25	26 - 35	36 - 45	46 - 55	55 above	Total
Animal husbandry	2	8	4	2	0	16
Beauty Parlour	20	16	8	0	0	44
Catering	4	2	4	8	0	18
Cooking	14	10	10	0	0	34
Dance	2	6	0	0	0	8
Farming	6	4	4	0	0	14
Making liquor	0	4	2	0	0	6
Making shop	0	2	0	0	0	2
Processing food: Papad & pickel making	2	4	6	2	2	16
Shop keeping	6	10	4	2	0	22
Tailoring	14	26	4	0	0	44
Total	70	92	46	14	2	224

It is important to note here that, in any efforts made to create supplementary job opportunities, jobs that are most often undertaken by women but not considered or perceived as jobs ‘for women’ (such as farming, animal husbandry, brewing liquor, shop keeping, running a business, etc.) should also be included. For instance, many of the farming and animal husbandry related trainings often focus only on men, despite the fact that a large number of women are involved in this work.

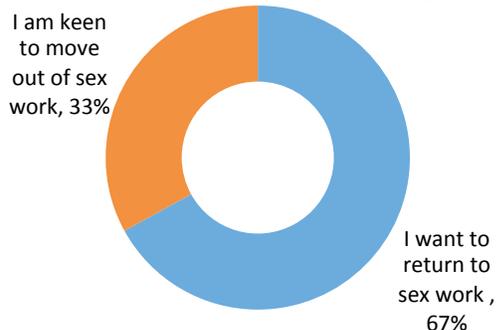
² <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/lockdown-over-60-of-sex-workers-in-delhi-return-to-their-home-states/article31606490.ece>

Table 3: Supplementary livelihood options women want to take up during the Pandemic	
Animal husbandry	16
Beauty Parlour	66
Catering	20
Dance class	8
Farming	2
Grocery Shop	22
Hotel/Restaurant Business	2
Nursing	6
Papad pickle making	16
Selling incense stick	2
Small Business	2
Tailoring	62
Total	224

Conclusion

The intersection of stigma, discrimination and criminalisation have all resulted in limited employment opportunities for women from these four DNT communities. Some respondents highlighted that even if they wanted to get into some other profession, it would be very difficult for them since the stigma of their caste identity as well sex work follows them. “No one will give us a job. For many of us, even if we possess the skills required for the job, based on our caste or our past work we are not given an opportunity” remarked one respondent.

Chart 6: Continuation of Sex Work (n=224)



When asked if they would rather choose to take up an alternate livelihood or go back into sex work or bar dancing, around 67 per cent of the respondents stated that they wanted to get back into the same work that they had been involved in before the pandemic. Many of the respondents highlighted that the lack of good-paying job opportunities was a key factor in consideration. A higher percentage of the respondents from the older generation (36-55 years of age) were keen to shift to an alternate profession, this may be the case due to the fact that in the entertainment

industry there is a higher preference for younger women. In some cases where the older women get involved in the management of the establishments or brothels, they prefer getting back into the same work.

Chart 7: Continuance of Sex Work by Education Status (n=224)

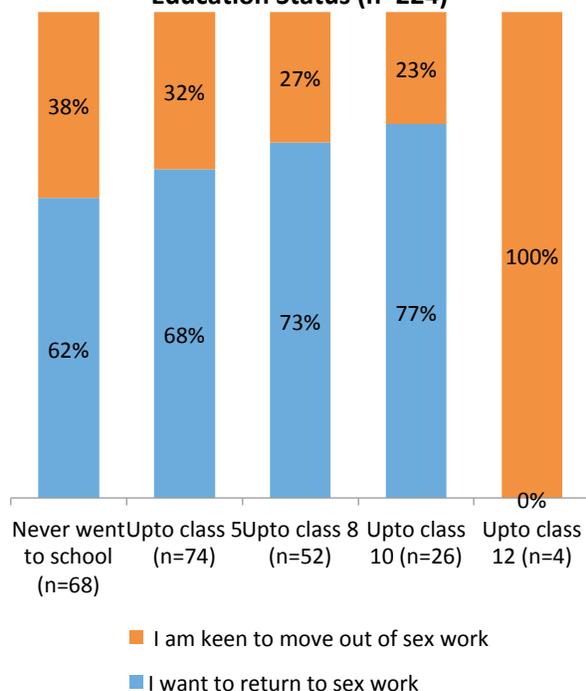
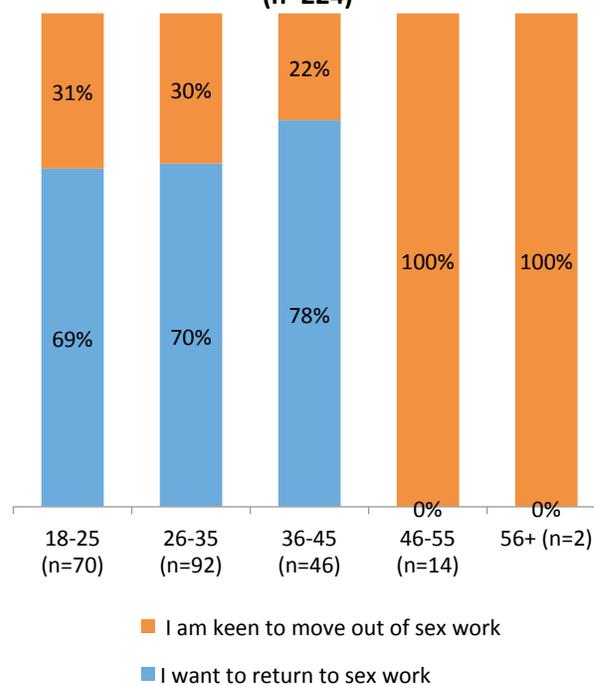


Chart 8: Continuance of Sex Work by Age (n=224)



Similar to other migrant workers, most of these women left their homes to escape poverty and inequality, to seek better lives, wages and living conditions. They are subject to caste and community based discrimination from childhood in public spaces, schools and any workspace that they are exposed to. They engage in the entertainment industry and also send home remittances that enhance the lives of those in the villages. Yet, they remain discriminated, marginalised and criminalised, trapping them in a constant state of uncertainty – as much in source areas as in destination. Both the worlds are often the same for them.

Data Collection: Budhan Theatre (Gujarat); Bhumi Gramuathan Evam Sehbhagi Gramin Vikas Samiti (Madhya Pradesh); DNT Adhikar Manch (Delhi); Kota Heritage Foundation (Rajasthan); Maji Badhilakhi (Maharashtra); Naya Jeevan Gyan Prachar Sewa Samiti (Madhya Pradesh); Nomad Film Trust (Haryana); Nomad Times (New Delhi); Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti (West Bengal); Sambhawana Welfare Society (Bihar); Samvedna (Madhya Pradesh); Towards Advocacy, Networking and Developmental Action (Maharashtra); Vajra Mahila Sangathan (Maharashtra)

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