



COVID19 Pandemic Voices from Margins

Webinar series Webinar 2:

Farmers and Workers from the De-notified and Nomadic Tribes of Purulia,

West Bengal.

Date: April 10, 2020

Minutes

PANELLIST PROFILE

1. **Prasanta Rakshit**, He has been working with Kedia Sabar community from the last 3 decades. He was one of the key founders of Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti with Late Smt. Mahasweta Devi. The initiative has been working with DNTs in Purliya, West Bengal. As a part of the initiative, he has worked on education, legal aid, livelihood, citizenship and land entitlements.
2. **Jalandhar Sabar & Kharu Sabdar**, are farmers from Kuda village works with Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti.
3. **Lakhan Sabar**, a farmer from Boro village.
4. **Ratnabali Sabar**, Student from Latpada village.
5. **Phulmoni Sabar**, a migrant worker from Kuda village.

Mr Tom Thomas, Moderator, Praxis: Praxis is an Indian organisation that focuses on various facets of participatory democracy. Praxis tries to bring the voices, concerns and solutions of marginalised communities through several kinds of research and studies directly or through face to face meetings that happen physically or digitally between the community members, policymakers, media, activists etc., This webinar series of COVID-19 Pandemic – Voices from Margins is a continuation of that attempt as during the lockdown days the major hope is to bring to the forefront the voices of the communities that are left unheard. During this exigency, an obscene class character has been witnessed where millions of poor are left with neither the livelihood nor the options for social distancing which is most essential to keep the virus at bay and in turn the country safe. They are bearing the brunt of this pandemic's burden. This webinar is an attempt to reach out to people who are experiencing marginalization living in different parts of the country. Despite the government's efforts, many issues have arisen in ensuring the welfare of the people. During today's session, we will be interacting with the people of Purulia their hardships, reality and issues they currently face.

PANELLISTS DISCUSSION

MAYANK (NAG-DNT): Sabar is a scheduled tribe one among 200 communities all over India, labelled 'Criminal Tribes' by British penal code 1871 Act. With the Nationalisation of the forest, they got in conflict with the government of India. As the process limited their mobility in the forest leaving them homeless and landless. They stayed outside the village

due to the stigma attached to them. This lockdown has taken a toll over the community at a various level as most of the sabar live as a daily wage worker.

Lakhan Sabar: My name is Lakhan Sabar. I am from Boro village, P.S. Boro of Purulia district. I have faced a huge loss this year with my agricultural produces. When the cucumbers were ready to be sold, lockdown started. I managed to sell a total of 5 to 6 quintals- once 2 quintals at Rs.9, once 4 quintals at Rs.7 and once at Rs.8. That's all, now the vehicles are not plying. I have taken loans of Rs 20,000 from the cooperative bank and Rs 15,000 from other sources (savings) - that makes a total of Rs.35,000. My family survives on the earning from my agricultural production. I support my children's education as well; my son will appear for Higher Secondary exam this year. I sold a goat to pay off my loan. But for next year's yield, I will face a problem. I hire labours in my farm- 15 to 16 labours each time for sowing seeds, watering and plucking. There will be lot of money required for paying the labourers. Now how will the work happen? My life sustains through the agriculture. How will we manage in this situation? I managed to save money by selling tomatoes. That is what we were using so far.

Jalandhar, PBKSKS: I am a farmer from Kuda Village, Manbajar block. Since lockdown, we Sabars are facing a problem. We are not able to buy even salt and oil. Those who grow vegetables are not finding ways to sell them. Cucumber yield is destroyed. Even watermelons are going to face a problem now.

Kharu Sabar from Manbazar block says for the last five years, I have been growing veggies like tomato, gourd, beans, cauliflower, cabbage and twice a year Watermelon, Ridge gourd, cucumber, etc. I spent almost Rs 64000 on my crops but have recovered only Rs 10,000 and Rs 800 from beans. I am thinking to start my work again in August, but now, I don't know how to sell vegetables that are already planted and ready for harvest. My family is going through a lot of trouble given the current situation.

Ratnabali: I am from latpada village of Barabazar block, Purulia. I lost my father; mother supports me in pursuing my studies. I am studying in college. Sabars spend the day's wage in buying rice, pulses and potato. Now, we are unable to step out for work in other villages and even in our village. Sabars are not getting any work, so what will they do? Now Sabars are fishing in the ponds, digging soil to take out stems and selling these in own village to manage some of the expenses. They get rice and atta from ration. If one family have four ration cards, only two of them are getting ration and relief benefits. How will they run the family? This is a problem we are facing. We get 2kgs of rice and 500 grams of atta against one ration card. How long will the family sustain on this? One day, the BDO of Barabazar block came to our village and distributed 2kgs of rice and potato. Some families have received either rice or potato depending on the number of family members. Yesterday evening someone else also came and distributed 2kgs of rice, 2 kgs of potato and 250 gms of masoor daal. How do these suffice for three meals a day? Hence, they are staying hungry. Sabars are deprived of the benefits of Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Kisan Yojana. Moreover, they don't even know why they are deprived. Whosoever has zero balance account, they received Rs. 500 and rest don't. If this lockdown situation continues, what will

the Sabars do and how will they survive? Whatever the Sabars earn, they spend. They do not know how to save money, hence stay hungry.

Phulmoni, Migrant Worker from Purulia: I go to work in Burdwan - I get Rs 220 wage a day and 2kg rice. In the lockdown, facing a lot of problems. I am speaking to the employer in Burdwan, but unable to go to work. Ratnabali mentioned that whosoever have Jan Dhan account are receiving 500 rupees, though the no. is very less. Shopkeepers are not giving us things on credit or loans. I am unable to go to Burdwan to harvest rice as a daily wager as no vehicles are not available. I am getting rice from the ration, but this is hardly enough. We get rations once a week. And this is hardly enough for the family.

Prasanta Rakshit, PBKSKS said "I am working with Kheria Sabars for 37 years which helps me to get a sense of lockdown and its effects on the community. There are a few concerns for the future based on what I have seen for all these years and my interactions with others who work with the Sabars.

Malnutrition and child mortality: One is the increase in malnutrition among children. The children used to get food through Anganwadi, but now this is replaced by the Anganwadis providing the family with ration. What use to be assured nutritious meal at least once a day, will not happen anymore. Children are not getting eggs that they used to get earlier. There is a possibility of an increase in child mortality given this situation.

Loss of land rights: The government gave Sabars Land Patta - this will gradually go away from their hands as they will end up illegally mortgaging the land for loans.

Alcoholism and illicit liquor making: Here the poor who don't have money/food, so at times they buy country liquor to cope with the hunger. This may lead to illicit liquor production in this area in the households. Sabar people might also start making it a livelihood.

Loss of livestock: For the people here, livestock is capital. People own goats, poultry like hens, ducks, etc. They will gradually start selling these to make up for the lack of livelihood and income. Additionally, people here have slowly stopped eating meat because of COVID due to rumours.

Increasing stigma: The British already criminalised Sabars with the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. We have worked all these years to reverse the stigma caused by the criminalisation. Now, with this situation, it is possible that some people might take to robbery or dacoity under compulsion to feed their families. This, and also the illicit alcohol brewing will end up restigmatising them. We see our efforts of all these years going down the drain in the future.

NIRMITHA, Praxis briefed the methodology adopted in rapid assessment of lockdown impacts. The study was conducted in association with The National Alliance Group on Denotified, Semi-nomadic and Nomadic tribes, national advocacy partner for the initiative. To assess the impact of the lockdown, the team reached out to 33 villagers from 30 villages of Purulia District in West Bengal. They all belonged to the Sabar tribe. The research team

spoke to the tribals/villagers on how they are coping with the lockdown and whether they are accessing government schemes, such as PDS, Ujjwala scheme, loans and MNREGA. Interviews were conducted telephonically with 27 men and 6 women between 4th and 6th of April 2020.

TARINI, Praxis shared the findings from a short research study. The key points have been mentioned below:

KEY FINDINGS:

1. Wages and Salaries: Most of the respondents were daily wage workers and of them, none had received any pay during the lockdown.

2. Indebtedness: There is a worrying trend of loans – which is likely to increase in the coming months. Nine of the respondents had already taken loans since the lockdown. The main reason for loans was to feed the family. In addition to food, illness was an added reason for loans. Three households that had taken a loan also had at least one person who was ill. Most loans were taken from neighbours/relatives. One respondent had taken a loan from the employer.

3. Right to Food: All respondents were about to eat at least two meals a day. However, most are either surviving on ration from previous months or due to support from local organisations or individuals. While all respondents have PDS cards – only two said that they have received extra ration.

4. Entitlements

a. **Jan Dhan Account (Rs 500 for women):** None of the respondents or their wives had received Rs500. One stated that she had received a notification, but has not confirmed whether the money has been received.

b. **Old Age/ Disabled/ Widow ex gratia payment (additional ex gratia of Rs 1000/-):** 11 families were registered in the scheme, but none have received Rs 1000

c. **Kisan Samman Nidhi:** None of the eligible respondents had received any additional benefits

d. **Ujjwala scheme (Free cylinder):** None of the 11 respondents who were registered under this scheme has received a free cylinder.

e. **Prochesta scheme (Wage for unorganised labour):** None of the respondents had received this additional wage

d. **MNREGA:** While 32 of the respondents had job cards, there were no jobs.

POLICY-LEVEL CONSIDERATIONS

Dheeraj, Praxis shared the policy challenges need to be addressed. One is the stigma Sabar community face generally in the distribution of welfare measures. To gain the first level of confidence and to ensure the reach of lockdown welfare measures it is essential to engage the community-based organisation in the relief process.

Secondly, local level procurement should be considered by the government as most of the people are ready to harvest finds difficult to find market and actual price for the produce.

When Samiti have strategized well to buy goods from the local population other institution as well as the government can use the products as relief materials.

Increasing loan for food is another pressing issue. the dependency of loan from local sources due to lack of income may increase bonded labour in this area.

Institutional challenges such as access to the bank should also be considered. As the voices in this panel said the incessant lockdown has accelerated the high level of anxiety. As a result of the lack of livelihood and survival, the community may be pushed back to illegal liquor drinking and fear of theft leads the stigma to get rooted.

Vikas, Praxis introduced the idea behind Nomad post which collects data from the community to analyse the issues they face. From the experience, the community have witnessed the exclusion in the reach of welfare schemes and benefits generally announced in specific to the scheduled tribe by the Government. Information such as whether they had three meals a day? Did the Government provide rations? if not how they are managing were collected. The research is planned to set out in seven states of India among Scheduled tribes. Data will be gathered in most of the state by the community fellows who were trained in participatory research.

Q&A SESSION:

LIVELIHOOD

QUESTION: What is the status of job security, will the employer employ you after lockdown?

RESPONSE (Phulmoni): Yes, my employer will certainly take me back to work; I am working with his family for the past 40 years. During every harvest season, I will be working on the field.

QUESTION: Has the employer/ contractor given any assurance to pay for the interim period?

RESPONSE (Phulmoni): No, we have not received any money or assurance from the employer at this though time.

WOMEN AND GENDER-SPECIFIC CONCERNS

QUESTION: Are there any gender-specific problems that women are facing?

RESPONSE (Nayan): We are aware that any endemic affects men and women differently, do you feel this is going to hold good for the Sabor community as well? Even if not physical or domestic violence, there are other health issues. For that, we are visiting the local health centre.

QUESTION (Yogendra Ghorpade): Despite food insecurity, what is the situation of pregnant women, how the deliveries are happening keeping in mind remote locations

RESPONSE: ASHA Di, has been going to the village regularly, in case of any medical need ambulance is working.

QUESTION (Sadhika Tiwari): Are women facing increased Domestic violence?

RESPONSE: Nothing specific on domestic violence mentioned by the women on call.

GOVT SCHEMES & GEN:

QUESTION: Can we get some statistics on the denotified tribes in West Bengal and Purulia (since the focus is on Purulia)?

RESPONSE: The nomadic and semi-nomadic communities are Gond, Lodha, Kheria or Kharia, Bahelias, Bauri, Chamar (the community is known by the subgroups Charmakar, Mochi, Muchi, Rabidas, Rishi), Dom or Dhangad (Doma), Ghasi, Kanjar, Khatik (Khatis), Mallah, Nat, Pasi (Pasia), Beldar (Berad), Jogi, Suku (Sugali), Bhar, Birhor, Bediya or Bedia (Beria), Yogi Nath, and Fakir or Sain. The data regarding communities are available in the Census.

QUESTION (Devaki): Are these stories being shared with the district admin in any way for response action?

RESPONSE: Yes, the situation of Kheria Sabar has been communicated to CM Bengal, Secretary of state West Bengal and district magistrate Purulia. There is no written communication from their side yet.

QUESTION (Nyima): Since centre, as well as state governments, have announced packages for farmers as well migrate workers. Did they receive any?

RESPONSE: - They have not received Jan Dhan, Nissan scheme, Ujawala scheme. They are receiving ration from PDS, but none have reported getting ration for three months. However, they have only received ration for one month from ICDS for children, lactating and pregnant women. They have not received any things as per relief packages announced by farmers as well as migrate workers.

QUESTION: Do they normally get agriculture support from KVK and any KVK centres in their area to look after their agriculture issues?

RESPONSE: No, they don't have any support to look after their agriculture issues.

QUESTION (Mayank): With summer and rainy season are on way, we are may going to face drought and flood. Are we prepared?

RESPONSE: Purulia is a drought-prone area. And if it doesn't rain on time, drought is going to come. There is no effort from the state to address this issue. Rain harvesting model needed to implement throughout Purulia.

QUESTION (Aditi): what are expectations of Sabar from the government- more food or money help than 500 in Jan Dhan account, is that 500 enough?

RESPONSE: Mere providing rice will not be sufficient. The child required nutritional food. Multi-grain can be one of the options, The Sabar will not have any cash and also the business is going down. The is of employment will be the main concern, MANREGA could be one option but will be useful if payment is done on time.

CHILDREN

QUESTION:(Vijeta Laxmi): Just want to know how children of these marginalized workers are dealing with the situation. Are they happy because now they are getting more time with parents or stressful?

RESPONSE: School are closed, and it's difficult for us to retain them in the house. They go to the river and play with their friends.

QUESTION (Janusha): What about an education status and any standard schools in the area?

Answer: Sabar has the lowest education status among schedule tribe of West Bengal. The drop-out rate is high at the middle level.

QUESTION (Paromita): related to children again, when children are not going to school how are the children been dealing in this situation, and how much are they affected, with no school, no food from school.

RESPONSE: The AWC has been given the monthly entitlements, but no eggs which are important for nutrition. So with schools not there, this is leading to the fear of malnutrition.

COVID-19 & LOCKDOWN:

QUESTION (Mrinmoyee Bora): Has anyone been affected with COVID-19 in their area? are they able to understand what this virus is about?

RESPONSE: We had made a list of 1000 HHs and submitted to DM Purulia for relief of Rs 1900. We gave this on April 3rd. We got the approval in April. In Bandana block, we have not received approval for relief. Most Sabars and majority of poor people live here but they have said we don't need relief in this block. At noon, we also mailed the SP for the relief after the BDO said they don't need us to share relief 22nd March - Janta Curfew, two days before that, we had a meeting about Coronavirus. We decided to make handbills in Sabar language on precautions. The Sabars migrate to Gujarat, Maharashtra, etc. So to inform them about quarantine - we build awareness of this. Our secretary Jalandhar Sabar has also created a song on this. We announce these on microphones.

QUESTION (Yogendra Ghorpade): Are people able to purchase medicines for pre-existing diseases?

RESPONSE (Aditi): As of now, ASHA didi is providing medical support for basic health.

QUESTION (Farhan Khan): What about the test rate in the state or particular area? what steps have been taken by the govt? to ensure 100% Compliance of lockdown. How they are ensuring the essential needs of the public.

RESPONSE: In government hospital, the state is setting up the system for CORONA, however overall public and private health system in Purulia district is bad. The Purulia police are active and have been ensuring complete lockdown

QUESTION (Pritha Choudhury): There are a lot of agencies providing relief at this point. Is there any inter-agency coordination process that has been put into place yet?

RESPONSE: Farmers did not receive any support yet. Most of them take a loan and repay the loans by selling their goat. We are surviving on the savings we made from

agriculture/harvest. We sent a letter to the CM for a food package for DNT groups on March 30th demanding the essential needs of the public.

Please find the Nomad Post report as well as the audio of the Webinar here:

<http://www.praxisindia.org/covid19.php>

The next webinar is on April 15, Wednesday, with interstate migrant workers.