Panellist Profile:

Panelist 1:
Saheb Nath Madari belongs to the Madari community in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. He works as a daily wage labourer. The Madari community was traditionally involved in snake charming, entertainment tricks with monkeys and bears and performing on the streets. With the rise of animal rights, the Madari have had to find other employment. Many have left their nomadic habits to settle down to become farm workers and daily wage labourers. He is 30 years old and there are 8-9 members in his family.

Panelist 2:
Mohd. Safi is 49 years old and lives in the Jim Corbett National Park, Uttarakhand. He belongs to the Van Gujjar community. Van Gujjars are traditionally nomadic and rear buffalos, cows, and horses. Currently, his entire community is fighting for their right over the forest and he wants to educate his community about community forest rights. He wants young children from his community to receive an education.

Panelist 3:
Arjun Shinde is a daily wager belonging to Oddar community from Thane, New Bombay, Maharashtra.

Panelist 4:
Devi Gore lives in Thane, New Bombay, Maharashtra, and belongs to the Od (Vadar) community. She is a student and was part of the Community Research Fellowship coordinated by NAG-DNT and Praxis. Panelist 3: Saheb Nath is from Ahmedabad, Gujarat belonging to the Madari Community.

Panelist 5: Munishwari has completed her course in teacher's training and is currently pursuing a law degree in Madurai. She belongs to the Kal Oddar Kurvarar community. She chose to study law to help her community fight against the baseless accusations laid on them by the police.

Panelist 6: Vijayan is from the Kal Oddar community. He set up the Azhagikudi Makkal safety and protection centre. Vijayan helps community members access their entitlements and also offers legal support to them.
Tom Praxis primarily focuses on participatory democracy. It essentially tries to bring out the voices of marginalised communities through conversations or research and study. This webinar is the 6th in the series of webinars on COVID-19 - Voices of the Margins and in this webinar we have different communities from nomadic, semi nomadic and denotified tribes who would talk about their experience during this lockdown period. As we all understand that lockdown and nomadism debase each other as these are mobile community that have been locked down completely. We will hear from people belonging to different communities and different places such as Gujarat, Bombay, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and so on.

Mayank, NAG: Historical Context of the Community –
The etymology of the word ‘nomad’ is derived from the Greek word ‘nemos’ that means posture. Etymologically ‘nomads’ refer to the people who move from one place to another along with their personal belongings such as animals. Nomads or semi nomads are the social group traversing seasonally as a part of their livelihood. Citizenship is related to the modern concept of state where people are linked to a specific political boundary and this is considered as nation, state or country. Unfortunately, the nomads were never a part of this modern civilisation, treated indifferentely to its political movements and could not identify themselves with it, remained as non-participant in the formation of the state. As we all understand that lockdown and nomadism debase each other as these are mobile community that have been locked down completely. We will hear from people belonging to different communities and different places such as Gujarat, Bombay, Tamil Nadu, Uttarakhand and so on.

Panellist Discussion
Panellist 1: Saheb Nath Madari
My name is Saheb Nath Madari, I live in Ahmedabad. Most of the people in my tribe are now beggars. Before the lockdown, we stepped out on the streets on a daily basis, and managed to earn at least something. But now that has also been shut down. Most of the younger people in our community work as labourers in factories. They get paid Rs. 100-200. After coming back they go on the streets to beg. But even when begging, people look at us with suspicion-like we rob or kidnap children. This is the extent to which our community is stigmatised. Recently, a woman from our community was killed. She had a small kid. The kid has fallen ill. We are afraid to even beg because of the way we are perceived. But still we have to go, no other option. We get 2-3kg wheat, etc. at times and our priority is to feed children first. At least earlier, we had some means of earning money and buying food. Now that is also gone. Inspite of living here for the so many years, we have not got any benefits from the government. The condition of people from our community is very poor, no one has anything to eat. Few people had ration cards but they have been cancelled we don’t know why. So even that option is gone.

Panellist 2: Md. Safi
There has been a large impact on Van Gujjars in summers, they shift their location near water dams and few in Mountains Van Gujjar moves near Tial where it is cold mountains where it is cold and now it has been stopped this has now created a problem for them. Secondly, van Gujjars don’t have bank accounts only very few of them have bank accounts and they end up taking support from money lenders (Baniya and Lalla's) and they fix rate of milk annually (on Deepavali) at Rs. 40 and Rs. 35 for those who have debt on them from the moneylender. The problem is that the rate has fallen from 40. Down in village villagers are getting access to the food supply from the government. For our quota, in my village, people
have ration card but there are certain villages where Van Gujjars neither have Ration Card nor Voter Id Card. Our ration Cards are also under Van Gram and that is also an issue, Villagers are getting ration and we have been asking but get sympathise only, they say you give us in writing, you will get it. They say you don't have BPL Cards., White Cards, etc. etc. they are trying to fool us. They are not denying to provide us, they keep saying that you will get it. But so far we have not received any. As of now, we are managing with leaves from the forest, at present, it is the season of hay, which we are not able to get neither fodder (like chokher and khal) that is not available. In Uttara Khand, there is a total ban on inter-district travel. We are in Uddham Singh Zila and we cannot travel to the neighbouring district, our source for fodder, factory, small farmers everything is there, cannot access them, and is tough. We are strugglingly to manage for food. Those who used to eat thrice a day have shifted to twice and those who were eating twice now once. In our village, there are 50 and at least 20 people struggling for food.

Panelist 3: Arjun Shinde
We have been living in Patni, Maharashtra since 10 years. Everyone here belongs to the Oddar community. There are around 600 people in the community. Most people work as daily wage labourers in Mumbai. They go for work in Mumbai for 10-15 days. Since lockdown, there has been no work at all. Our ability to buy food changes on a daily basis as we are daily wage labourers. We have not been able eat since days. Around 20-25 people in the community have ration cards which are applicable here. The remaining people’s ration cards have their village address, so they are not able to avail ration over here. We are getting food from the Govt. under the Atal Yojana, but the quality of food is really poor. One day the food we got was in such a bad condition that our stomach got upset. The quantity of food they provide is also less, only enough for a child. The food is usually dal, bhat, bhaji, roti. But since we do not have any other option, we are dependent on that food. 10-12 families have started walking towards their villages now on foot. More than 600 km, it has been more than 10 days and they haven’t reached yet. They are also being stopped by police at multiple times on their way back home. If the situation prevails, no one will live here.

Panelist 4: Mahadevi Gore
Hi! My name is Mahavedi Gore, I stay at Ganpati Pada, Vashi, Navi Mumbai. I belong to Oddar community. I would like speak about lock down related hardships. Lock Down has been declared by Narendra Modi sir from 23rd of March till 3rd of May. However, we are not sure if it would continue even after 3rd of May. Oddar community is predominantly seen at Solapur, Latur (Maharashtra), Gulbarga (Karnataka) district. Oddar community is predominantly involved in stone dressing, cutting (stone quarry work). People residing at our location (Oddar community at Ganapati pada, Navi Mumbai) are having ration card while many of them do not have local ration card (they have ration cards issued from their native districts) hence, not getting any entitlement from the ration store of Navi Mumbai. We as a DNT community are facing lots of hardships due to this lock down. First of all, we people are not adequately educated hence, involved in menial jobs like construction work (male), domestic help (female). Because of this lock down we are losing daily wages, those who are temporarily salaried are also prone to lose their jobs. Some of those who are temporarily salaried people received Rs. 1000-Rs.2000/- once from their employers, but how long that amount would last? What if this lock down is further extended by Narendra Modi sir? Whether we would be able to retain our jobs, we don’t know.

Many people are engaged in digging, road construction, stone quarry work etc. since everything is closed the employers would not continue labour, thereby, daily wage earners would suffer a lot. Someone will have to do something about it. The govt. (i.e. Maharashtra state govt.) had earlier declared that 3 month’s rations would be provided to people at a time,
however, we received only wheat, pulses and rice that too for only one month, and how people would manage in that? Nagar sevak (elected representative of Municipal Corporation) like Mr. Kulkarni has been distributing cooked food once daily to some of the families residing at Ganapati pada. However, this cooked food is not sufficient to families where there are more than 7-8 people.

Families who do not have local ration card, should they have just one meal a day? in the absence of ration cards and money. How people would manage to survive eating just one meal a day? In our Ganapati pada there is just one public toilet, everyone uses the same. They charge us Rs. 2/- (each family there are 7-8 people on an average) per person, how would we pay for toilets, when we do not have money to eat? Similarly, there is just one dustbin which is not being cleaned on regular basis. Grocery Shop keepers are selling products almost on double rate, we have to pay Rs. 10 for an item which was cost us Rs. 5/- before lock down. In my neighbourhood there are 2 sisters and one brother in a family, their parents are sucked at Gulbarga district since lock down was declared. These siblings are eating cooked food provided by the corporation member once daily. They are not aware how their parents are managing far away from them. Person with disability and elderly people were supposed to get financial assistance, however no one has received any such financial support till date. So far as my knowledge is concerned, such financial assistance has reached however, not yet distributed to the people.

Panellist 5: Munishwari
The people in this community are mostly daily wagers and even before the lockdown they were dependent on their daily wages for food. Because of the lockdown they are not able to go for work and have been struggling a lot to even get food. All of these families are dependent on their daily wages to buy basics like milk or biscuits or vegetables but they have not been able to provide their children with any of these necessary supplements as they do not have any earnings. Due to this they tried to get loans from the neighbours and were not offered any loans since they are daily wage workers and they might not be able to pay it back. Most of the people from this community are from BPL and they live in joint families, they have been facing mental stress because of this. As most of them are living in rented houses and they have not been able to pay their rents. Some were not able to pay rent for 2 months and the owner had taken away their key. Although they requested the owner that they would pay their rent after the lockdown he asked them to pay the whole amount to get their house back. Because of this people with the Ration card used the Rs.1000 given to them to pay the rents. But there are more than 20 families without a ration card and we had requested the owners to let them stay but if they fail to pay before the end of April they will also be chucked out. Parents are struggling staying at home with children and this has been causing mental stress. Most of the families have more than 4 children and before the lockdown they were dependent on schools (Balwadi’s) to provide food for their children. But after the lockdown they are not able to provide food for them because of this and in most families, they eat only 2 meals per day. If this lockdown exceeds people might die due to hunger rather than being affected by corona. These children are dependent on schools and their teachers but schools have given leave and these children might be affected the most. The daily workers either sell mats or bangles or work as rotational knife sharpeners. Even after the lockdown most of them would not have work because there is no standard demand for their line of work which also affects their source of income. They are also being troubled by the police since they do not belong to a standard job category.

Panellist 6: Vijayan
This community has been affected by the police continuously as they have registered theft cases on them. During this time none have any source of income and children are affected
education wise. Most of them are using the 1000 rupees given by the government, to get gas cylinder. We are facing a lot of problems during this time and it has been difficult for us to survive. None have own house all are living in rented houses. Daily wage earning is the only option that we know but now we do not have that also.

Dheeraj – If we look at the communities talking to us today, we need to understand that, all of them are unique and so is their problems. These communities need to be identified along with their issues faced in this pandemic situation. One of the major problems is their food security as they are not able to avail ration through BPL or EPL ration cards. There are people in these communities who do not have any ration cards and they cannot access to Govt. promised ration.

If tribe wise looked at, there are issues attached to the community from ages. For Gujjars, they are highly dependent on forest and this is the time when they go to the uphill with their cattle which has been stalled now due to this lockdown. Prices are decreasing as they have already mentioned that price of the milk has fallen in their region. So, there is a need to focus on this community per se as these are the people who comes under the migrant population. The sort of stigma they face every day is in the forefront now as we just heard them. Also they have been resisting the social stigma from long back and now became resilient to it.

Madaris are into begging. Allegation of abducting children are there. Stigma is attached to them that leads to lynching and brutal killing. But there were no proactive messages from any Government website, addressed to media to clear out the misunderstandings with regard to the stigma attached to the community people.

If we talk about the Od community, they are largely involved with construction sector but not registered as constructional labourers in the respective construction sites. None of these workers are going to receive any benefit like other 3.5 crores registered labourers. There is no clear strategies made up on them with which they can be benefitted.

However, police atrocities are continued due to the stigma of theft attached to these community such as Madaris, and Kal Oddars in southern states of India. This sort of harassment is also faced by the Sabars in Purulia. So, police cannot be the only relief agency in these regions and there has to be some other way to reach to these people so that their confidence is also built so that they can access to the food relief during this lockdown period. As these tribes come under the category of denotified tribes, they cannot be seen together. At the same time there are constitutional safeguards that need to be applied for these communities. There is also state level commissions with less power with very small budget for these communities that is creating massive disappointment among these people.

Discussion:

Government’s COVID response

QUESTION: Any comment on integrated public distribution system for tackling this problem of margins?
RESPONSE: As came across from many participants that they do not possess any documents to avail PDS or ration and that itself a big challenge to reach out to them as they are nomads.
Due to lack of documents, they do not have Aadhar card. Without Aadhar card they don't have ration card. The people with ration cards have also not received ration due to lack of supply by govt.

**QUESTION:** Do they have Jan Dhan Account? Did women receive 500 rupees?

**RESPONSE:** A rapid data collection with 100 sample is done in Navi Mumbai, till last week it has been observed that a very handful people have received 500 rupees in their Jan Dhan Account. Those who have ration cards, received 500 rupees in their Jan Dhan Account. But people who do not have ration cards or have ration cards of other districts did not get any ration from the Govt. and most of them are from Oddar community. Some of these people are currently in their native as they are seasonal migrants, they move towards the urban areas and did not want to carry their documents with them. Technically these people are not entitled to any ration or relief material promised by the Govt.

**QUESTION:** Is there any initiative by help groups to counsel these migrants as this pandemic has certainly led to a lot of mental and physical stress and trauma apart from the scarcity of necessities.

**RESPONSE:** Not as such. In Mumbai TISS has introduced a number for help called ICall that provides professional counselling over phone calls. They are also contacting local NGOs working in the field to connect with more people who are not directly able to call the ICall. There are a few NGO helpline numbers but in regard to migrant population, it still is a gap area.

**Follow-up of the Webinars and surveys with communities**

**QUESTION:** How have you been able to use the powerful documentation and voices from the affected communities with the NHSRC and other civil society groups?

**RESPONSE:** Almost 18 years back a committee on criminal or ex-criminal tribe reported the Govt. with regard to the situation of these communities and nothing happened after that too. Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have committees that report the state situation to the centre. There are two national commission formed by the previous Govt. Currently, nothing concretely has been done for these people. There are state boards and National Nomadic, Semi nomadic and Denotified Tribe Board with no proper power and budget to do their job properly.

**Accountability of employers**

**QUESTION:** Is there any provision for the employer to give free accommodation for these Migrant worker/Guest workers? Especially in this season as they don't have any work.

**RESPONSE:** The group of people that we have spoken with today, many of them were conversing with us from their own places, all of them have not moved or migrated yet to the urban areas. But considering the migrant labourers, National Government has requested the employers to pay the workers but it is not happening in large numbers. Most of the workers are contractual and they are not formally connected to the companies or the employers. There are middlemen or contractors who bring these labourers together and initially the contractors tried to sustain the labourers on their own, but with the extension of the lockdown almost 97-98% of the workers have not been taken care of by the contractors. Now these people are dependent on the food distribution system or relief funds. Central labour ministry has come up with a helpline number for labourers that covers only the registered labourers working with centre. These migrant labourers do not have any document related to the company per se. SDM has asked labourers to complain if they are not paid but for that also, one should have proper knowledge of formal system.
SUGGESTION:
In Tiruvallur, Tamil Nadu. District legal service authority has come up with the free online legal counselling WhatsApp no. 9940066638. Where the affected workers can sent in the name, age, gender, language and problem in short and they will get back in few minutes.