

# NOMAD POST

## #RightTheWrong

A newsletter from nomadic and denotified tribes

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# Analysis Report Of Information Collected From DNT Workers in Purulia, West Bengal During The COVID-19 Lockdown

Data collection by Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samity (PBKSKS) and Partners in Change (until 6 April 2020) and  
Data Analysis by Partners in Change

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

[Partners in Change](#) in collaboration with Paschim Banga Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samity (PBKSKS) is working with the De-notified, Semi-nomadic and Nomadic tribes, tribals, migrant workers and other vulnerable communities through various activities like running education centres, promoting kitchen gardens, workshops on health awareness and accessing governments schemes etc. One of the focus areas is working with Kheria Sabar Tribe by building the capacity of financial, governance and programme systems of PBKSKS, a Community-led Organisation of Kheria Sabars in Purulia District of West Bengal. PBKSKS has a network of around 1,500 families in Purulia District. The [National Alliance Group on De-notified, Semi-nomadic and Nomadic tribes](#) is the national advocacy partner for this initiative.

In order to assess the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown, Partners in Change along with PBKSKS reached out to **33 villagers belonging to Sabar community, a denotified tribe from 30 villages of Purulia District** in West Bengal. Most of the people from Sabar tribe face stigmatisation because of their status as erstwhile criminal tribes.

The research team did the assessment keeping two main objectives as the focus:

- Coping mechanisms of the Sabar tribe during the COVID-19 lockdown
- Access to government schemes, such as Public Distribution System (PDS), Ujjwala scheme, loans and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNERGA).

Telephonic Interviews were conducted with 27 men and 6 women between 4<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> of April 2020. Key highlights from the findings are detailed in the sections below:

## 2. FINDINGS

### 2.1 Wages

Most of the Sabar families are daily wage earners. None of them, as of April 6, 2020 have received any wages for the lockdown period from the contractors. None of the workers have approached them either, as they feared violating the lockdown. The fear of virus, as yet, has not percolated among the community. The Prime Minister has requested employers to pay salaries to all workers even for the lockdown period. This does not seem to be happening anywhere here.

### 2.2 Indebtedness

Of the 33 tribals interviewed, nine of them have *already* taken a loan from money lenders during the lockdown period. Out of the nine, one took the loan from his employer, which means there is a high chance of the worker getting into a bondage situation. Further, one family involved in agriculture has land on lease and has to pay Rs 1000 per bigha, per month

to the land-owner and it is most likely that they will not be able to make this payment in the upcoming month and seek deference of the same. If the owner agrees to defer payment, the loan will accumulate, and if he disagrees, the farmer will be forced to approach local moneylenders to help with a resolution.

The reasons for the loans, so far, have been to access food. One person has specifically taken a loan to fulfil nutritional needs of a new born child. The problem is that while there is nil income, the expenses on food provisions have gone up. The workers are mentally stressed due to this situation. For instance, even a well-resourced farmer felt the pinch when he has to pay Rs 800 to purchase a gas cylinder. He is not sure whether he would get that for free as promised by the government.

### **2.3 Right to Food**

Of the 33 tribals interviewed, all of them have been able to have only two square meals a day. None of them have gone hungry yet. However, it must be noted that most have been able to get food because of loans, advances or support from local organisations or individuals. Seven out of the 33 had at least one family member who was ill, which means that the family also requires money for medicines. Three out of these seven families had taken a loan to tide over the expenses of the treatment.

The Government of West Bengal has proposed to reach out to 7.88 crore beneficiaries through the Public Distribution System. In Purulia, all the 33 families we interviewed had PDS cards. They had all availed PDS but only two of them stated that they got the extra ration of 5kgs of rice. Of 33 villagers, 24 families are entitled to free grains from Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) as there are pregnant women or children less than six years of age in these families, but only 17 of them have received the free grains so far.

At present, most villagers are surviving with the ration of the previous month. Fourteen villagers stated that they accessed food through other individuals, Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), Panchayat and the local MLA. This means a number of other institutions are coming forward to support the tribals but this is not a lasting solution and shows that the state is still not able to ensure right to food for all its citizens especially marginalized tribal population which is staying at the margins.

### **2.4 Covid-19 Relief Entitlements**

**Jan Dhan Account:** Only 5 villagers have a Jan Dhan account. Of that, one woman stated, that she received a notification about Rs 500 as deposited but is yet to confirm. The Government initially announced that 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holders were to each get Rs 500 per month, subsequent to which they stated that it has already credited Rs 500 each to over 4 crore account holders. At least 4 women we spoke to, who have Jan Dhan accounts did not receive any funds as yet.

**Old Age or Disabled ex gratia payments:** 13 families have at least one person registered under these schemes. 11 of them have received this month's pension. However, they are not yet sure of having received any additional payment as promised by the government. The Centre has decided to give three months pension in advance to all the 2.98-crore beneficiaries. Besides this pension, they are entitled to Rs 1000 ex-gratia amount, which none of them have received yet.

**Ujjwala Scheme:** While most villagers were unaware about the ujjwala scheme, 11 shared that they are part of the scheme – none of them had received free cylinders. The central government has announced that gas cylinders, free of cost, would be provided to 8 crore poor families for the next three months.

**Kisan Samman Nidhi Scheme:** Of the 33 interviewed; only one of them has stated that he has received Rs 1000/- in March. The first instalment in the month of April as announced, is yet to be released. As part of the COVID-19 Relief package, under the Pradhan Mantri Kisan Yojana, the first instalment of Rs 2,000 due in 2020-21 will be front-loaded and paid in April 2020 itself.

**Prochesta scheme:** The West Bengal government has decided to provide Rs 1000 for people who are working on a daily wage. None of the 33 villagers received Rs 1000 payable to unorganised daily wage labourers.

**MNREGA:** 32 out of 33 villagers have a job card but none of them have got any payment or any job for the last few months. The Centre has stated that MNREGA wages would be raised to benefit five crore families. Every worker will get an additional wage of Rs 2,000 over the next three months. The Centre has just released Rs 4431 crores to clear pending wages dues for MNREGA workers. However, none of the villagers seem to have benefitted from this announcement thus far.

<b>Status of Receipt of Covid19 Relief Package by Sabartribals in Purulia (n=33) as on April 6, 2020</b>			
<b>Covid19 Relief Entitlements</b>	<b>Number of Villagers</b>		
	<b>Received</b>	<b>Listed</b>	<b>Eligible</b>
<b>Women Jan Dhan Account holders to receive Rs 500 for the month of April, 2020</b>	0	5	33
<b>Old Age/ Disabled/ Widow</b> ex gratia payment (additional ex gratia of Rs 1000/-)	0	11	13
<b>Ujjwala scheme</b> (Free gas cylinder)	0	11	33
<b>Kisan Samman Nidhi</b> (Rs 1000 as advance payment for 2020-21)	0	1	26
<b>Prochesta Scheme</b> (Wage for unorganised labour)	0	33	33
<b>MNREGA</b> (Past dues and new job with additional wage)	0	32	33
<b>Eligible:</b> Qualify for the respective scheme <b>Listed:</b> Registered in the scheme <b>Received:</b> Benefitted from the scheme  <b>Source:</b> Rapid survey dated April 4-6, 2020. 33 villagers from 30 villages, Purulia district. All villagers belong to the Sabar community.			

### **3. REFLECTIONS BY ANALYSIS TEAM**

The fact that people have been forced to take loans already, at the start of the lockdown, is a matter of concern. In about two weeks, this number could increase drastically if relief measures do not reach them immediately. At the current rate, there is scope for increase in cases of bonded labour, given that workers will either turn to moneylenders or employers to borrow money. In addition to loans for basics like food, loans for healthcare might also become a necessity in the upcoming months, making it difficult for families to survive without such loans.

While many schemes have been announced by the government, the access and reach of these schemes still remains limited. Only a handful of the workers spoken to had received some kind of support. While a few mentioned receiving food from the local MLA or Block Officer, entitlements related to food or money were still difficult to access.

#### 4. INTERIM RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of contractual labourers, who have been working in other locations across the country, have returned to these villages during the lockdown period. Most of them have come without any savings. Some of them did not even receive the salary owed to them for the previous week. The extended lockdown will surely not be beneficial for these workers and they would need cash transfers to meet their basic requirements. The government should consider this and initiate some scheme for them. **It is clear that the government's request to the employers to continue paying wages to the workers for the lockdown period has no takers. It is not easy for any family to survive without income, especially if the lockdown gets extended.**

This particular community has constantly been stigmatised for their erstwhile criminal tribe status by society as well as the administration. Given that the current period would enhance the dependency of the community on the state even for accessing basic needs, it would be good to appoint a local community organisation as a nodal point for the relief mechanism. The state has to recognise that discrimination against the community exists and that would get worse during the relief operations.

Indebtedness has always been a trigger for other social and economic exploitation, causing a rise in trafficking, bonded labour and child labour. The local panchayat should quickly map the existing indebtedness prevailing among the tribals and submit a report to the government, which could look at providing some immediate relief by the way of repayment of these loans.

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