



COVID19 Pandemic Voices from Margins

Webinar series Webinar 4:

Nat and Bediya women speaking on the intersectionality of gender, stigmatisation, migration and caste.

Date: April 17, 2020

Minutes

Panelist profile:

Panelist 1: Mamata is a bar dancer belonging to the Bediya community. She lives with her mother in Mumbai, Maharashtra

Panelist 2 (did not want to be named): She is a resident of GB Road, Delhi, which is a red light district. She belongs to the Bediya community

Panelist 3: Roshni Khatoon is a Community Research Fellow who is from Forbesganj, Bihar and is currently pursuing her BA in Patna. She is from the Nat community and was part of the Fellowship programme initiated by Praxis.

Panelist 4: Md. Kalam is the head of Sambhawana Welfare Society, Bihar which works with the Nat community.

Panelist 5: Shakila is a Community Research Fellow who is from Araria, Bihar. She is from the Nat community and was part of the Fellowship programme initiated by Praxis. She is currently preparing for entrance exams for a Masters in Social Work.

Panelist 6: Rohini Chhari is an activist based in Morena, Madhya Pradesh. She is from the Bediya community and is the head of Bhumi Gramutthanevam Sebhagi Gramin Vikas Samiti, Madhya Pradesh.

Mr. Tom Thomas, Moderator, Praxis: Praxis is an Indian organization that focuses on various facets of participatory democracy. Praxis tries to bring the voices, concerns, and solutions of marginalized 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. As the days go by we are seeing more and more evidence of government keen on easing the burden of the middle class, banks, industries, etc and very little on the hardships and uncertainties of the poor, marginalized and migrant workers in general. We are seeing that the supreme court is keener than telling the government very little evidence of the government is seen. This is the fourth webinar of the Praxis along with the National Alliance group for denotified tribes. This webinar is to bring out the voices of women from the NAT and Bediya community, whose traditional occupation is sex work and related entertainment work. We also have done a short study on the Becheriya community which is also a denotified community the findings will be shared by the colleagues of Praxis.

Mayank, NAG: History OF the community

Criminal Tribal Act, introduced in 1871 by the British in India. they aimed to control their movement and the criminal behavior of the nomadic tribe. British understanding of these communities is based on caste system, that why the Britisher also called them a born criminal. In 1952 CTA is denotified that why this community is known as the Denotified tribe.

DNT is a diverse group that practices different occupations. One of the groups of DNT involves in entertainment like Kathputli, Sapera, Madari, Jadugar, etc. Among these community Kanjar, Nat, Bedia, Bachara, Kabutari, etc. known to be involved in intergeneration sex work. If you talk to the elderly in the community, they considered themselves as a folk performer. These folk artists visit different villages and earn money through performing their folk dance, music and song.

However, with the passes of time, with no resources like land ownership, housing, lack of education, etc. they are facing difficulties in surviving. This makes them a victim of the billion-dollar adult industry. They are the bottom of the whole chain and no power to protect and defend themselves, but most civil society and state target them within the framework of social-molarity and criminalized them even more. The main issue and concern are that this industry is not owned by this community, it is owned by the people who are in a higher position. They don't engage with those who run and control adult industries. The reasons are simple these are powerless and resourceless communities and represent merely a data in the MIS excel sheet

Panelists DISCUSSION

Panelist 1: Mamta

My name is Mamta, I live in Bombay and there is a lot of problems that I am facing here. It's getting very difficult for us. There are a few COVID 19 patients here also so it's tough. We have to walk distant to buy essentials from our place. Cylinders are being sold for higher prices around Rs.1200 - 1300 so it's getting difficult for us to buy cylinders. I had a brother who was a driver he passed away in an accident in the village. I had an elder brother with whom we used to live here in Mumbai, he was a rickshaw driver he also recently passed away around 19 February. I have a younger brother, who lives separately with his family. He does not support us, nowadays nobody cares or does anything for others. I used to sometimes go/not go to the bar, now a day that has also stopped. There are many women like us who are not doing anything it's getting tough very soon a situation of hunger is going to arise. Right now we are completely clueless there is an older mother who I have to look after. There would be many women like me.

Panelist 2:

There are many difficulties nothing is going right. The ration that earlier was coming through NGO women residing in the buildings on the front side who are into this business, that has stopped. We were getting ration through NGOs now reaching out to that is difficult, the ration distributed by police is also now difficult to reach to us. The moment people get to know that a person is from GB road it becomes more difficult to access government facilities. Even the Adhaar Card was made out of fear of police from this location as in future they would be susceptible to be thrown out of this place, will get caught and would lose their income source incase no proof is available. They don't have a ration card nor any documents for cylinder and neither the zero-balance account which was initiated by Prime Minister. Many of them are scared to apply for legal documents because of the stigmatization attached to their work, some people look at us differently, and some treat us badly. Some girls survive on daily earnings; at this point, they are not able to access medicines. There is going to be a lot of difficulty for them as they are not doing any business or work that they get salary every month, their profession is what they make their money from. If this lockdown gets extended, these women will die of hunger!

Panelist 3: Rohini Chhari

The issue of morality is impacting the community during the lockdown. Those who say sex work should be stopped should be the ones stepping forward to come and support the community today. The community's history and culture are being eroded by the government (slowly finished). They keep passing acts and slowly finish all facets of it. But why we see if those things associated with upper caste things like classical music are what is promoted. The celebrities also entertain but they are perceived positively. Since 1871, the work that began as an entertainment, and when they started moving to cities, they started trying to break that down. I want to know about people who live in cities - what do you do to promote your culture in your 9 to 5 life? These communities have been trying to preserve theirs (whether is animal tricks or snake charming or entertainment). The current government schemes - Is Rs, 500 the government should see how many people have Jan Dhan Yojana account or Ujjwala scheme, how many of them have received, Is it for an individual or a family, and also if 500 rupees is sufficient to help a family survive? The stigma creates fear among people regarding the consequences and exploitation they will be subjected after being identified in accessing the government schemes.

These communities which usually face stigmatization find it difficult to get identity documents. So what the gift is giving based on these identity cards, how do we access it? Those who belong to the SC and ST communities have had their culture and traditional occupations slowly destroyed. The Drugs & Magic Remedies (Objectionable Advertisement) Act, 1954 destroyed the traditional occupations of communities such as Nat, Bediya, Banchhada, Sansi, Kanjar, Kalbelia, Sapera etc. which was an essential part of their culture and tradition. And the government is responsible for this. Even for basic survival and food, the SC and ST communities are now completely dependent on a culture of handouts promoted by the government. Their If actors like Amitabh

Bachchan and Deepika pass on a basic message, they get paid in crores. But people from the community are stigmatized and called names. The government should also change their perspective towards this community. How far has the government thought for the women and children belonging to this community? What about their children and their education? At present all the people from this community are suffering from hunger. Nobody has seen all the good work done by them. At present all the people from this community are suffering from hunger. The situation post lockdown also will have adverse impact and there are probable chances of no work for 4-5 months. My request to all is to question those who talk about "reforming" this community. Where are you?

Panelist 4: Md Kalam

The community-based prostitution in Bihar and UP is largely home-based. That's how it is different from the metro set up. Nat and Bediya communities are involved in sex work in UP and Bihar. According to the Panchayati raj system, people residing in villages get ration cards, etc. Red light locations are treated differently. Very few people have a ration card due to the stigmatization that exists. Many other members in the community have lost their work including selling vegetables etc. The accessibility to government schemes is very limited. Police also are targeting people from this community (as they always have) and even beating them. The fine people for Rs 1000 and damage their means of livelihoods (like vegetable carts etc). In villages at least there is space. In cities, even that doesn't exist due to which children do not have enough spaces to learn or play. Under Jan Dhan Yojana, around 320 families got Aadhar links so they got some money but those who didn't link cards didn't get any money. All private clinics are closed. So, the children and women (in prostitution) have no access to medication or health centers. In North Bihar, many of the Nat community have a communal angle to deal with. They are victims of communal politics. One of the major problems especially for women of older age is about their survival as they neither do get clients at present nor do, they have any savings.

Panelist 5: Roshini

I am sharing some challenges faced by single mothers and the elderly. Neither do they have a ration card, nor any rations nor savings? They have applied a lot of times for ration cards however they still do not have it. They have felt and have been said that because they belong to lower caste, they face discrimination. They have also not been provided with sanitizers, masks neither do they get any medicines. Being a single mother, they do not have any family members to help them. For those whose family members are working outside, they are also not able to send money to their families. REQUEST govt to provide ration

Panelist 6: Shakila Khatoon

I am going to speak about education. Before lockdown also there was a deficit in education. People from this community are not able to reach to higher education as they are not aware of the reservation quota at all. The girls get married at a very young age. Due to poor family conditions, the boys of the family are forced to work at a very young age. Boys take the family's responsibility and they are unable to pursue higher education. We are not able to clear the entrance exam as the support system in the villages is not enough and there is no support system for the children to build their capacity. The other supporting factor is caste discrimination in school (Example: biased behavior of the teacher, the upper caste boys comments) which enables the children to continue their education. Upper caste classmates speak abusively of those students who face all these troubles and get to school. After completing 10th and 12th the children are unable to get admission to the colleges due to family economic conditions. Many of the families do not send their children to school because they think later they have to continue with their traditional work. Due to lockdown, those families who are studying outside are being called back by their family as their family is in poor condition and does not have any support. If they go back there is no possibility that they will continue with the studies. Of these problems about 90% of the community people are illiterate.

Vikas and Tarini, Praxis:

The data is collected from 58 women and 48 men, with the help of the research fellows through the phone. The study is done in 5 states, 28 from Bihar, 52 from Madhya Pradesh, 16 From Rajasthan, 5 from Maharashtra, and 5 from Delhi. This is not a representative sample, nor a structured study. The interviews were organized from April 4 and 13, 2020.

The questions were about the challenges they are facing in terms of getting wages, work and access to schemes. 106 workers have not received any wages. An added issue is due to the nature of work there is a lot of uncertainty as to when in the future will they be getting their wages again.

In terms of food, 3 families slept hungry one night, 38 of them said they have only one meal a day, 68 of them said they have only 2 meals a day and only 4 were able to access three meals during this lockdown. Only 80 of them have a ration card, in that only 9 were able to access. 2 of them said the quality and quantity is poor. 80 of the women have JhanDhan accounts, 57 have received money, the issue is they were not able to access the banks and don't know the timing of the banks. Old age pensions only 29 were eligible out of that only 19 got their pension for March month and for April none have received the pension. Some are involved in multiple works, few are farmers 45 were part of the KisanSamanNidhi scheme, but only 28 have received the benefits in the March through the scheme. 79 out of 106 respondents have taken loans since the lockdown, nearly 58 of them have taken loans for food and rest were taken for buying medicines, farming, and other household needs. The sources for the loan is Moneylenders, Contractors, Employers, this has the potential to increase the trafficking and bonded labor. In the case of GB road, most of the women refrained from getting any of these documents.

Q&A SESSION:

Impact of COVID 19 on indebtedness, access to entitlements

QUESTION: Are these communities enumerated? What is the number? How many of them have documents/bank accounts if at all?

RESPONSE: The community is variously categorized as SC, ST OBC at different places. 2011 census has only for those who are in SC. OBC has not been out. in Bihar as per the 2001 census HinduNat population is 38615. there is no data on Muslim nat. As per our study where we met 106 community members, most of them have managed Aadhar and get linked to Jan Dhan but they do not access banks to get money.

QUESTION: Even if they survived what will be the long term impact of indebtedness?

RESPONSE: We have been trying to reach the communities, and one of the challenges in the development sector also has limited mobility and immediate relief work is on the process. The challenges that are coming up are how we going to formalize the informal sectors. It is an opportunity to highlight the issues of marginalised communities and the intent of these webinars is to bring the voices at the margins to the mainstream and encourage people at an individual and collective level to think on the possibilities for them.

Initiatives in working with the Nat-Bediyas

QUESTION: Who has conducted this study?

RESPONSE: Study conducted by Praxis, National Alliance Group for Denotified and Nomadic Tribes, with the help of NAG volunteers from the community itself to collect the data.

QUESTION: Have you started any crowdfunding campaign that has been initiated by Praxis and National Alliance Group?

RESPONSE: Yes, there is a crowdfunding campaign done by a few individuals

QUESTION: Other than government, are there any organisations in places such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh or Maharashtra working for this community?

RESPONSE: NACO'S HIV awareness programme is also national level programme is working with these communities. There is availability of medicines are available at ART centres but no efforts are being done to take care of food requirement which is a basic need to survive. Even, the HIV positive people are not even taken care of their food needs. Earlier, there used to be Community Care centre which along with awareness generation who used to take care of food requirements of the needy but now this is no more functional.

Discrimination faced by community

QUESTION: What kind of offences are people from the DNT community being charged with since the lockdown?

RESPONSE: Those communities that are outside prostitution some of them have been arrested. People from Nat community who were involved in begging, making of herbal medicines and tattoo art have also been arrested. Before the lockdown and post lockdown also police come in the brothels largely for the alcohol being served here and are being charged underselling of alcohol. Communities such as Banchhada and Bediya community from Neemach often have to face discriminations in the hands of administration and also by the local panchayats. Mostly, the members in the local governance bodies belong to the upper caste and the attached stigma to these communities make their survival difficult and discrimination and denial is a common practice is commonly faced by them. The stigmatization is so strong that this community is not in the priority list for these people even if the relief materials reach out, they do not have access to it. Such stories are also not covered by media houses and

the matters are brought into mainstream by CSOs unlike the cases are given prominence in big cities like Mumbai.

QUESTION: Concerning the commercial sex workers. Are there any cases of rape amongst the sex workers? If so, are those reported?

RESPONSE: Firstly, she gets raped, then she pays bribe in addition to survive. The police often seek free sex from many of them - is this not rape? But most women see this as a "habit" and something that happens - so she doesn't see it as rape. She just wants to survive and feed her family. Most people don't want to get involved or think that this is something that should be acted upon. Law says after 6pm no women can be arrested. But to date, all arrests in Morena happen after 6 pm and not by women police officers. We don't get the status if they need to survive and don't want to spend/ waste time in court hassles. Women in prostitution are not granted the basic human rights such as right to life and freedom as they are not considered suitable to claim these rights because the stigma attached to them. Those who are at the margins will not talk about constitution. The law is known but they are not aware of the constitution.

One of the attendees in the webinar shared some insights from his experience of working with TANDA, Koshish about intervening for DNT communities to be handed over their belongings which were taken away by Police to make these communities vacate the roads (near Gateway of India, Mumbai) for lockdown. The belongings were handed over to communities after an intervention of NGO and the communities were instructed to vacate the place and find space in shelter homes. He narrated an incident of a riot like situation on arrival of the relief services that happened in one of the DNT community who had no food from past 2-3 days.

Domestic violence

QUESTION: It was discussed that many people didn't receive the payment. So, can there be any way out to create pressure on employers to pay the due wages? Also, has there been any increase in instances of domestic violence these days?

RESPONSE: There are greater chances of increase in instances of domestic violence when modes of earnings are impacted. Some days back, a family tried to commit suicide and the case was considered as a domestic violence case. The fights are mainly emanating due to no income and severe food crisis. Some days back, about 150 women in Morena gathered near the Collectorate to highlight their plight of food crisis before the administration. However, women were dismissed without any assurance for food/ relief supply. For many families, the next day meal depends on the daily earning. Amidst lockdown, people have no means of income and meal for the next day.

LINKS:

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