

## COVID-19 and Lockdown in India: Challenges for the Tribal Economy of Odisha

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### ABSTRACT

This paper, drawing on secondary sources and extensive fieldwork, grapples with the implications of lockdown for the tribal economy of Odisha. Minor forest produce (MFP) is a critical component of the tribal economy in Odisha. COVID-19 and subsequent mitigation measures such as lockdown and restriction on movement coincided with the peak season for gathering of MFP. Lockdown, by disrupting collection and trading of MFP, has severely affected the livelihood base of the tribal people and other forest dwellers. Governments at the Centre and state have taken up several measures to deal with this difficult situation. Governments exempted work under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) and collection of MFP during the second phase of lockdown. However, distress sale of MFP and loss of income have emerged as major concerns due to delay in policy decisions. Reverse migration of laborers to tribal villages poses the new challenge to state's preparedness. At a broader level, the current crisis situation reminds us to seriously think in the direction of implementing tribal rights over forest and forest produce.

**Keywords:** Lockdown; tribal economy; food insecurity; minor forest produce; minimum support price; tribal rights.

### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented before us an unprecedented crisis situation. The International Labor Organization (ILO) in its report entitled "ILO Monitor 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition: COVID-19 and the World of Work" describes the corona virus pandemic as "the worst global crisis since World War II". National lockdown in order to fight the COVID-19 pandemic was announced by the Prime Minister of India, Narendra Modi, on March 24, 2020. The lockdown of three weeks came into force on March 25, 2020. Such lockdown was an essential step undoubtedly. However, lockdown has had an uneven impact on the Indian society characterized by vast inequalities. Adverse effects of the lockdown on the country's marginalized communities are a major concern. These marginalized communities include the daily wage laborers, rural and urban informal sector workers, marginal and landless farmers, and forest dependent tribal people. This paper examines the impact of the lockdown on the forest dwelling tribal communities in the state of Odisha. I argue that

it has increased the burden of the tribal economy in spite of the appreciable measures taken by the central as well as state governments.

The paper proceeds in Section 2 by briefly discussing the methodology. Section 3 describes the significance of minor forest produce (MFP) for the tribal economy in the state of Odisha. Section 4 analyses key institutional and policy interventions by the Central and state governments with regard to MFP. Section 5 examines the impact of the lockdown on the collection and sale of MFP by forest-dependent communities. And, Section 6 concludes by drawing out the implications of the recent policy decisions for the future of MFP aspect of the tribal economy.

### Methodology

This paper is based on data collected mainly from the secondary sources. A part of Section 3 dealing with the importance of MFP for the tribal people is informed

by my ethnographic study supplemented by field surveys, interviews and focus group discussions in the tribal villages of Odisha. The field work was carried out in the remote tribal villages of the districts of Rayagada, Koraput, Kalahandi, and Kandhamal during 2009-19 to study different aspects of the tribal societies in Odisha. These villages include Rasijhiri, Mandibisi, Kebidi, Malijharan, Hatimunda, Gunner, Muskuta, Phatkimahul, Pukijal, Hatsil, Maikanch, Sakata, Denguni, Amaguda, Garta, and others. Conversations with some local people during the lockdown provided useful data as well.

### ***Tribal population and MFP in Odisha***

The state of Odisha has a significant tribal population in remote tracts of its land, dense forests, and hilly terrains. Tribal people constitute 22.85% of the total population in Odisha. This is more than twice that of the national level. With a total tribal population of 9.59 million, Odisha ranks third in the country. According to the Census of India 2011, there are about 32, 918 forest fringe villages in Odisha. Out of a population of 23.38 million in these villages, 7.04 million belong to the Scheduled Tribes. The southwestern part of the state has the highest concentration of tribal people. The tribal dominated districts in the state are Mayurbhanj, Keonjhar, Sundargarh, Kandhamal, Koraput, Rayagada, Malkangiri, Nabarangpur, and Gajapati. In these nine districts, tribal people constitute around 50% of the population. "Of the 645 Scheduled Tribes enlisted in India, Odisha hosts the largest number - 62 indigenous tribal communities reside in the state" (Mallick & Ganapathy, 2017). Out of 62, 13 are primitive tribes. The most important tribal communities are the Kondh, Oraon, Paraja, Santhal, Gond, Juang, Gadaba, Bonda, and Sauora.

The Socio Economic Caste Census (SECC) 2011 of the Government of India reveals that while 54.28% households in Odisha are landless, 63.46% households in the tribal districts of the state are landless. The incidence of poverty among the tribal people is 75.8% in rural Odisha. While tribal people constitute 28% of the rural population, they constitute more than 43% of the rural poor. According to the Food Security Atlas of Rural Odisha 2008, the districts with a higher proportion of forests and tribal population in the Eastern Ghats and central tableland lay in the most food insecure categories in terms of the Food Security Outcome Index (FSOI). Rayagada, Gajapati, Malkangiri, and Kandhamal are extremely insecure districts. Nabarangpur, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, and Koraput are severely insecure districts. Mayurbhanj is moderately insecure.

The fragile economy of the forest dwelling tribal population and particularly vulnerable tribal groups (PVTGs) in Odisha is dependent on the collection and sale of minor forest produce (MFP) and non-timber forest produce (NTFP). Both timber and NTFP are important for the tribal economy. However, due to "the clamping down of a host of government restrictions on timber produce, tribal people and other forest dependent non-tribal groups have drifted towards non-timber forest produce (NTFP)" (Parthasarathy & Patnaik, 2003, p. 2). NTFP, popularly called MFP, stands for all non-timber forest produce of plant origin. NTFP includes tendu leaves, sal leaves, tejpatta (bay leaves), mahua (or mohua) flowers, mahua seeds, neem seeds, karanj (pongamia) seeds, sal seeds, wild honey, mango, and tamarind. These NTFPs are collected during the summer season. Around ten million people in Odisha collect NTFPs such as tendu leaves, mahua flowers, tree-borne oil seeds, siali and sal leaves.

Odisha is the third largest producer of kendu leaves in the country after Madhya Pradesh and Chhatisgarh. The production of kendu leaves in Odisha is about 5,00,000 quintals per annum. Kendu leaves produced in the state find national as well as international demand because of their uniqueness. According to the chief conservator of forests in Odisha, around 80% of kendu leaves of the state coming from 17 out of 21 districts is processed. Processing involves drying, graded sorting, binding, and depositing after plucking of leaves. The remaining 20% of kendu leaves of the state, coming from Koraput, Malkangiri, Mabarangpur, Rayagada, and Kalahandi, is of inferior quality and unprocessed (Sinha, 2020). Kendu leaf offers employment opportunities to millions of poor and landless people. More than eight lakh workers in 21 districts out of 30 in Odisha collect kendu leaves. Then, 20, 000 binders and 17, 000 seasonal workers are employed. "Most importantly", Mohanty (2014, p. 15) notes, "kendu leaves provide employment in the lean period of summer, when the opportunity for wage earning is minimal." Hence, Kendu Leaf Development Fund was set up in 2014. Even though the demand for kendu leaf has fallen in recent years, kendu leaf trade has continuously registered profits.

Other than kendu leaf, mahua flower and seed, sal seed, siali leaf, tamarind, and bamboo are most important MFP items. Tribal people collect around 25, 000 quintals of mahua flower every year. They use mahua flower to prepare alcohol for their own consumption. They also use the flower to prepare cake, jam and other food items after drying it. Mahua seed and sal seed are used for oil extraction. Sal tree is widely seen in Odisha. Coming to dependence of families in Odisha's tribal areas on major

MFP items, highest number of families (around 12 lakhs) are dependent on mahua (flower and seed) followed by tamarind (around nine lakhs), kendu leaf (around eight lakhs), and siali leaf (around eight lakhs).

MFP is a critical source of livelihood for the tribal people. It is the backbone for their survival. Since MFP is collected and not cultivated, the process does not require any capital investment. It demands labour and time on the part of tribal people. "Hence, the economic value of MFPs is the value of labour time involved in searching, plucking, weeding or otherwise collecting from the forest and carrying the same either to their homes or to the market" (Thakur & Thakur, 2009, p. 448). MFP forms the basis for subsistence as well as cash income for the forest dependent communities. Tribal people derive a major portion of their food, fruit, medicine, and other consumption items from the MFP. They get cash income through sale of MFP. According to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs estimate, tribal people derive 20 - 40% of their annual income from MFP.

MFP provides subsistence during the lean seasons to the tribal communities. "Some families also store a good quantity of produce for personal consumption throughout the year" (Senapati, 2020). Thus, MFP has social and economic significance for the tribal population. It has been rightly observed that "MFP starts with the word 'Minor' but is a major source of livelihood for tribals who belong to the poorest of the poor section of society" (Tribal Co-operative Marketing Development Federation of India Limited [TRIFED], 2020). Hence, MFP as the basis of tribal livelihood can be strengthened with government support. In fact, Government of India admits that "if NTFP activity is strengthened, tribal people can become prosperous in their own habitat, in the shortest time span, with moderate investment by the Government" (TRIFED Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana, 2020).

Furthermore, it is important to see the gender aspect of MFP. MFP collection and sale is mostly done by tribal women. In the context of Odisha, studies indicate that out of ten MFP collectors, eight are women (Vasundhara, 2020). Kendu leaf plucking is entirely done by women. Thus, the activity is a tool for economic independence and empowerment of women in the tribal areas. Government of India acknowledges this fact: "the gathering of NTFP from the forests and the primary processing of NTFP at homes is done by women folk. Strengthening NTFP is a sure way to women's empowerment in tribal areas" (TRIFED Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana, 2020).

MFP items are seasonal in nature. The period of March to June is crucial for the collection of MFP. In this regard,

there are some variations within the set of MFP. For instance, it is a process of three and a half months for kendu leaf. Bush cutting is done in the month of February. The leaf growth phase takes place over a period of one and a half months from March to mid-April. The activity of plucking starts around mid-April followed by other activities up to pre-marketing till mid-May. For mahua flower, the three-month period from March to May is crucial.

### ***MFP and the State Policy***

Over the years, several institutional interventions have been made by the state to deal with NTFP. With the nationalization of kendu leaf trade in 1972, the Forest Department was given the responsibility for collection and processing of kendu leaves in Odisha. And, Odisha Forest Development Corporation Limited (OFDC) was given the responsibility of marketing kendu leaves handed over to it by the Forest Department. OFDC was entrusted with the charge of dealing in kendu leaves, sal seeds, and bamboo. OFDC is the first state-owned forest development corporation in India. In the following year, a separate department for kendu leaf organization was created under the headship of the Chief Conservator of Forests.

In 1973, Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation of Odisha Limited (TDCC) was set up as the apex cooperative body at the state level. It replaced the earlier Forest Produce Cooperative Marketing Society. TDCC functions under the Scheduled tribe and Scheduled Class development department of the Government of Odisha. It facilitates the marketing of tribal produce. The chief objective of TDCC is to purchase surplus agricultural produce and MFP at fair and reasonable prices. TDCC was granted lease of MFP in 19 forest divisions of the state in 1991. In order to dispose of the items procured, TDCC has tie-up arrangements with several national and state level organizations. Most well-known of these organizations is Tribal Cooperative Marketing Development Federation of India (TRIFED). TRIFED was set up in 1987 as a national-level apex organization under the Multi-State Cooperative Societies Act, 1984. It is currently placed under the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India. Organizations dealing with MFP are members of TRIFED. Studies (Das, 1996) point out the consistent failure of the TDCC to provide the declared price to the primary collectors.

In addition to OFDC and TDCC in the state, there are organizations such as Odisha Rural Development and

Marketing Agency Society (ORMAS) and Large Size Multi-Purpose Societies (LAMPS). ORMAS was established in 1991 under the Department of Panchayat Raj to assist in the field of marketing of rural products. LAMPS were set up in 1977 on the basis of the recommendations of the Bawa Committee. Some LAMPS were attached to OFDC or TDCC, rest of them were operating independently. Each society, catering to a population of 10,000 - 20,000, was supposed to market produce of the tribal people. Many existing Primary Agricultural Cooperative Societies (PACS) were converted into LAMPS and new LAMPS were created in several areas. Most of the LAMPS are no longer operative.

At the national level, Government of India launched the *Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana* as NTFP-led tribal development scheme last year. It seeks to set up 50,000 *van dhan vikas kendras* (VDVKs) in the tribal areas to ensure the availability of primary processing and value addition. It would create additional income for tribal communities through establishment of VDVKs as common facility centers where minor forest produce could be collected and value added. As per the policy concept note, each VDK was supposed to have ten tribal self-help groups (SHGs). Each tribal SHG was required to have up to thirty members. About eleven states were supposed to set up twenty one demonstrative units from their VDVKs by December 2019. However, the scheme of VDVKs is at a preliminary stage currently. Most of the VDVKs are yet to be established. For instance, out of the 156 VDVKs proposed for Odisha, only one VDK at Kuchinda in Sambalpur district is functional. The few established VDVKs focus on capacity building and training of tribal people.

The Forest Rights Act (FRA) and the Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas (PESA) Act are two major interventions of the Central Government with regard to the rights of the forest dependent communities over the MFP. The FRA includes all non-timber forest produce of plant origin such as bamboo, brush woods, stumps, cane, tussar, cocoons, honey, wax, lac, kendu leaves, medicinal plants and herbs, roots, and tubers under the NTFP. Further, the FRA empowers the *Gram Sabha* (village council) with the right of ownership, access to collect, use and dispose of MFP traditionally collected within or outside village boundaries (Section 3[c]). Similarly, the PESA Act asks the state legislatures to ensure that Panchayats at the appropriate level and the Gram Sabhas are empowered with the ownership of MFA. The overall implementation of the FRA in the state of Odisha so far is unsatisfactory.

Procurement and sale of MFP is governed by the state government policy adopted in 2000. The policy

authorizes Gram Panchayats to regulate the purchase, procurement and trade of NTFPs. These NTFPs include 68 MFP items. This policy was adopted to ensure that primary gatherers receive fair price for the NTFP. So, trading in NTFP can be undertaken only after the registration with the Gram Panchayat concerned. A notification of 2001 brought to an end the earlier practice of price fixation by a committee at the state level. It introduced a system of price fixation at the district level. Now, the district collector is empowered to fix the minimum support price (MSP) for all the NTFP items. The system involves participation of the Panchayat, TRIFED, and OFDC. The district collector has to consult district forest officer (DFO), district Panchayat officer, district welfare officer, and representatives of TRIFED, OFDC and Women and Child Development Department. Accordingly, the Panchayat Raj Department notification of 2002 states that the Gram Panchayat shall have the power to regulate procurement and trading of minor forest produce whether produced in Government land and forest area within the limits of the village concerned or collected from reserve forests and brought in the village. Further, in case of a forest area where *Vana Sanrakshyana Samiti* (Forest Protection Committee) has been formed, the Gram Panchayat shall give priority to such Samiti and its members in the matter of collection and trading of minor forest produce (Odisha Forest Development Corporation [OFDC], 2020).

### **Lockdown and MFP**

From the discussion so far, a few points become clear. First, the process of MFP collection and sale is seasonal in nature. Hence, the beginning and the culmination of the process needs to converge with the seasonal boundaries. Second, fixation of MSP for the various MFP items is significant along with their collection and sale. This step is essential to ensure fair price and justice for the marginalized sections of people involved in the MFP-related activities. Third, the concerned state agencies are supposed to take timely decisions so that livelihood of the tribal people does not get disrupted. Other than MFP that is seasonal in nature, work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act (MGNREGA) and distribution of essential items under the public distribution system (PDS) and pro-poor schemes are the important bases of livelihood of these poor sections of population since there is low productivity of agriculture. With this, let us now turn to lockdown and its effects on the tribal economy.

The first phase of the lockdown began in the country on March 25, 2020 for three weeks. In the battle



against Coronavirus, Odisha has many firsts to its credit in the country. Odisha became the first state in India to announce a lockdown and extend its tenure to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on its past experience of dealing with cyclonic storms, Odisha declared the Coronavirus attack a 'state disaster' on March 13 in view of growing spread of COVID-19 in India and in most other countries across the world. The first case of COVID-19 in Odisha was reported on March 15, 2020. Subsequently, the Government of Odisha decided to initiate a state level lockdown from March 23, 2020. As the first phase of national lockdown was coming to an end on April 14, Odisha was first to extend the lockdown till April 30. While extending the lockdown, Odisha Chief Minister, Naveen Patnaik made it clear that he was choosing 'saving people's lives' over 'keeping the economy buzzing'. On April 14, the Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, announced the second phase of nationwide lockdown from April 15 - May 3.

Let us now examine the effect of the lockdown on the tribal economy. The disruptive impact of COVID-19 on the tribal economy is because of the period of lockdown coinciding with the harvesting season for MFP collectors. In the first phase of the nationwide lockdown, there was complete restriction on MFP-related activities. As the selling period for several MFP items is from March to June, a major concern emerged that the lockdown would result in loss of livelihood for the families of forest dwellers. This can be seen in different ways. First, tribal people could not collect the MFP as villages put barricades at the entry points of their villages as per the lockdown guidelines restricting forest access. Hence, low collection of MFP was reported. Traders, who had paid MFP gatherers in advance, resented lack of supplies. Second, for those gatherers who had collected MFP early, lack of communication facilities like transport was the bottleneck. Third, the weekly *haat* (market), the place for trading of MFP, was shut down. Tribal gatherers could not find buyers. Thus, the gatherers could not sell even though they had collected and stored MFP. "We have our early collection of mahua flowers ready, but there are no buyers", said one MFP collector, Sarbeswar Mohant (Senapati, 2020). Fourth, due to lockdown guidelines, no nodal agency at state or national level came forward to reach out to the tribal people. At this juncture, it was crucial to facilitate trading of MFP and cash availability to the gatherers through direct bank transfer (DBT). The hard cash earned by trading MFP is "critical for their (tribal people's) sustenance during the monsoon season when employments dry up" (Barik, 2020). In such a situation, the major concern was 'distress sale' of MFP by tribal gatherers due to exploitation of unscrupulous market forces.

This caused a huge outcry from the civil society. Civil society activists demanded that the government should procure the MFP at the MSP and ensure immediate payment after procurement of MFP from the primary gatherers (Mitra, 2020). TRIFED acknowledged these valid concerns and urged the Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Government of India on March 30, 2020 to declare the existing 1,108 VDVVs as procurement centers for MFP. The TRIFED proposal stated that although VDVVs were set up for skill upgradation of tribal communities, they should procure MFP collected by the forest-dependent communities. In the early first week of April, a TRIFED letter to the state and union territory governments and state level nodal agencies emphasized that measures should be taken to protect the tribal gatherers. Subsequently, TDCC directed traders to purchase MFP from tribal people. Nothing substantial came out of this, though. In fact, VDVVs were not in a position to meet the needs of procurement of MFP at such a short notice.

The first phase of lockdown impacted two other strong bases of the tribal economy as well. There was complete restriction on the MGNREGA related work. The MGNREGA, in spite of its major limitations, provides an opportunity to the poor and landless to work with dignity. In this context, it is alarming to note that there is a relatively lower budget allocation to the MGNREGA by the Central Government this year. While the allocation was Rs. 71, 000 crores last year, it is Rs. 61, 500 crores for 2020- 21. During this lockdown phase, the priority for the state government was delivery of essential food items under the PDS in the tribal areas. In this regard, the government machinery worked on a war footing. However, because of the remoteness and hilly terrain, several tribal villages encountered major difficulties. For instance, even in the last part of April, it was reported that "hundreds of tribal families in remote Swabhimani Anchal of Odisha's Malkangiri district are left out from the food security and other pro-poor government schemes" (Das, 2020).

A major policy decision of the Odisha government on MFP came only towards the end of the first phase of the lockdown. On April 13, the state government allowed collection of MFP by maintaining social distance. New lockdown guidelines, released by the Central Government on April 15, stated that agriculture and horticulture related activities and the MGNREGA related work would be fully functional after April 20. Then, the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, exercising its powers under the Disaster Management Act, 2005, allowed collection, harvesting and processing of MFP by Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers. However, the instructions remained silent about procurement of MFP under MSP. The Central

Government launched the MSP for MFP scheme in the financial year 2013- 14 to provide a fair and equitable price for the MFP through MSP and, thus, improve the financial condition of forest dwelling communities. "While the scheme was started with a sum of Rs. 967.28 crore as Central Government share and Rs. 249.50 crore as the states' share in 2013, over the years, the funds have continuously dwindled along with its utilization" (Kukreti, 2018). However, during this period the money allocated for "Mechanism for Marketing of MFP through MSP" has gone up.

The Union Home Ministry's order on MFP came when the MFP season was almost getting over. Thus, tribal collectors of MFP incurred losses. Further, concerns emerge because of the poor utilization of the central grants for MFP procurement under the MSP scheme by the state of Odisha. As per the estimates of the Tribal Ministry up to the financial year 2018-19, Odisha is one of the states that failed to utilize the grant for procurement of MFP. Out of sixteen states, only Rajasthan and Chhatisgarh were able to utilize more than 60 per cent. With regard to the MGNREGA, even though work began after April 20, the reverse migration to the tribal villages appeared as a severe challenge. The challenge is to provide gainful employment to marginal workers upon their arrival from other parts of the country. The state government has decided to scale up employment generation for the returning workers. The results are yet to be seen.

## Conclusions

To sum up the discussion, COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown have had a major impact on Odisha's fragile tribal economy characterized by marginal farming, landlessness, poverty, and food insecurity. In the context of low productivity in agriculture, collection and sale of MFP acquires significance as a source of supplementary income for the livelihood of tribal people. The income amounting to more than Rs. 3000 per family during the period of three to four months, from March to May or June, caters to the needs of tribal people up to wintertime since work is not available during the rainy season. Lockdown, coinciding with the peak season of MFP, has severely affected the livelihood aspect of the tribal people and other forest dependent communities in the remote areas. Also, the lockdown has adversely affected work under the MGNREGA and delivery of welfare schemes of the government to households. Return of migrant workers lately has put further pressure on the delicate tribal economy.

As the future seems uncertain and grim, a few positive developments are worth mentioning. State governments have started procurement of MFP under MSP to protect the tribal people from the exploitation of private traders. Toward the end of April, Odisha government requested the Centre to revise MSP of 16 out of 49 identified MFPs and include five new MFP items. And, Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Govt of India revised MSP for 49 items of forest produce as per the guideline issued on May 1, 2020, under the centrally sponsored scheme entitled "Mechanism for marketing of MFP through MSP and development of value chain of MFP". Under this scheme, TDCC as the state nodal agency has to ensure that primary gatherers are not selling MFP below the revised MSP. TRIFED has created an online monitoring dashboard called 'Van Dhan Monit Dashboard' for reporting the activities undertaken at the state level for procurement of MFP. The question as to what further can be done now arises. The current exceptional situation serves as a reminder that the strong connect between the tribal people and forest needs to be urgently acknowledged and respected in the policy circles. Celebration of the Earth Day on April 22 amid lockdown further provided an opportunity to have deep introspection about tribal rights over forest and forest produce.

## Competing Interest Statement

The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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