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THE TRIBAL RESPONSE TO COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE STUDY OF GALO TRIBE OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 has engulfed and seriously affected the entire world, bringing a complete halt to the movement of people, and at the same time, equalized all people and countries, both rich and poor. The dichotomy between rich and poor was reduced, and the value and utility of money and other material possessions of people were temporarily rendered worthless or of lesser value. Different countries adopted different strategies to cope with the situation. The Galo tribe, one of the least known tribes in the easternmost part of Himalaya, was not lagging behind in the fight against this virus, and rather they came up with several activities under the aegis of its apex organization, the Galo Welfare Society. Without being scared away by the virus spike, they took up several welfare initiatives for their own community people, especially those Galos who were stranded across the states. This paper attempts to give some information about how the apex organization of this small tribal community, even during the lockdown period, put ardent efforts to do something for their own community people in particular and people of Arunachal in general while firmly obeying all COVID-19 Advisories. It further tries to analyze how practical and useful the apex body was for the people in such a precarious situation like the COVID-19 pandemic. They extended small financial assistance to the students of their community, people stranded outside the state, created barricades and adopted indigenous rituals to protect themselves. And in terms of other people, they successfully organized different activities ranging from mask distribution and meal arrangement to voluntary blood donation program.

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1.0 Introduction:

The novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV), also known as severe acute respiratory syndrome 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was first detected from patients with pneumonia of an unknown reason in Wuhan City of Hubei territory of China to worldwide in December 2019 (Wang et al., 2020). It has been confirmed as the pathogen for the novel Coronavirus and was named as coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) by the World Health Organization. Symptoms of COVID-19 are variable but often include fever, cough, fatigue, breathing difficulties, and loss of smell and taste. Symptoms begin one to fourteen days after exposure to the virus. Of those people who develop noticeable symptoms, 81% develops mild to moderate symptoms up to mild pneumonia, while 14% develop severe symptoms like dyspnea, hypoxia, or more than 50% lung involvement on

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imaging, and 5% suffer critical symptoms like respiratory failure, shock, or multiorgan dysfunction ("Coronavirus disease 2019," n.d.). On 30 January, India reported its first case of COVID-19 in Thrissur, Kerala (Reid, 2020). Gradually, it spreads to various states and union territories, including the state of Arunachal Pradesh, where the first case was recorded on 2 April 2020 (Arunachal Pradesh registers first COVID-19 case, 2020). Thus, this easternmost part of India also had to be locked down and follow the advisories and standard operating procedures issued by the Union Home Ministry, Government of India from time to time.

In this paper, an attempt has been made to underline the proactive steps taken up by a tribal community organization of the Galo tribe in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in all areas inhabited by them across the states of India.

2.0 Nation-wide Lockdown:

Amidst apprehensions and speculations among the citizens of the country, the Prime Minister of India declared a complete nation-wide lockdown for 21 days from 25 March 2020. It was ordered after a 14-hour voluntary public curfew on 22 March, followed by enforcement of a series of regulations in the country's COVID-19 affected regions. The lockdown restricts people from stepping out of their homes. All transport services – road, air, and rail – were suspended, with exceptions for transportation of essential goods, fire, police, and emergency services. All educational institutions, industrial establishments, and hospitality services were also suspended. Only services such as food shops, banks and ATMs, petrol pumps, other essentials, and their manufacturing were exempted ("COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in India," n.d.).

3.0 The State's Response:

Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the eastern Himalayan region bordering Tibet, is geographically closest to China's Hubei Province, where the COVID-19 outbreak began. Nevertheless, it is one of the last and least Coronavirus-infected states in the country. In the wake of the growing threat from COVID-19 and in compliance with the nation-wide lockdown imposed by the Government of India, the Arunachal Pradesh Government ordered a lockdown across all over state by issuing a notification which stated, "No public transport services, including operation of taxis, auto-rickshaws, will be permitted except transport of all kinds to and from hospitals, airport, helipad, railway stations, and goods carriers carrying food and essential commodities" ("Coronavirus: Arunachal Pradesh orders lockdown from Monday," n.d.) The State Government has been swift with setting up COVID-19 control rooms in each district with respective helpline numbers, including the State Control Room and Helpline numbers. Social Networking Sites – Pages like MyGOV Arunachal, Arunachal against Corona, Arunachal IPR, Department of Health Arunachal Pradesh, etc. provide daily updates on the situation of lockdown and COVID-19 in the state in addition to creating awareness among the people to the greatest extent. Similarly, various donation forums have been set up by the State Govt. and other individual organizations to aid in the relief efforts related to COVID-19 and lockdown. Of these, the most prominent is the Chief Minister Relief Fund (CMRF), to which people of the state were appealed by the Chief Minister to contribute their bit ("Tackling the Corona Pandemic: Arunachal Pradesh," n.d.). In response to it, many individuals, Govt. employees, and businessmen came forward and donated generously. Additionally, several voluntary organizations and NGOs also started to help create awareness as well as in assisting the poor and underprivileged by supplying essential commodities.

4.0 The Community's Response and Initiatives under the aegis of Galo Welfare Society:

The Galo tribe is one of the largest tribes in the state and they are spread over almost every part of the state. Their apex welfare organization is popularly known as Galo Welfare Society (GWS). Though GWS was formed in 90s, it was registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860, on 10 January 2000. Hence, 10 January is celebrated every year as Galo Day by the Galos living in different parts of Arunachal Pradesh. All Galos, irrespective of their clan or genealogical differences, regional separation, and dialectal variations, come under the purview of this apex welfare body, which works to promote several welfare activities for the community. Precisely, the main objectives of GWS are – unity, peace, and all-around advancement of the community as a whole in every sphere of life.

Many Galos, especially students and employees who are stranded across the country during the lockdown, have become a significant concern for their families at home. Despite the State Govt's measures for their safety and monitoring the welfare of all Arunachalees stranded outside the state by constituting Statewise Coordinators comprise of IAS/IPS/IRS officers, the Galo Welfare Society deemed it fit to intervene at their own to access the difficulties and work out measures for their community people. Hence, at the community level, they initiated a few commendable measures which worth a discussion in detail.

4.1 GWS' COVID-19 Mission for Stranded Galos:

In anticipation of hardship being faced by stranded Arunachalee citizens in various parts of India, Shri Pema Khandu, Chief Minister of Arunachal Pradesh, acted promptly and directed Deputy Commissioners of all districts to deposit a uniform amount of money into the accounts of all students studying outside the state to meet up their food expenses (Paraskar, 2020).

As the apex body of the Galo community as a whole, the Galo Welfare Society has also decided not to let down their community people who are stranded outside state during the COVID-19 lockdown. They constituted Steering Committee to outreach the stranded Galos outside the state and within the state as well. These Committee members coordinated with the Nodal officers appointed by the State Government for the purpose of COVID-19. Whatsapp groups were created by all State's Coordinators, and stranded Galos were added, and their problems were discussed and provided with viable solutions. In this endeavor, Galo Youth Organisation and Galo Students' Union also proactively participated mainly in data collection and giving regular updates of data-related problems. But it is essential to mention here that role played by Galo Gumin (public) as a whole. They positively responded the clarion call of GWS to support them in their endeavor. As such, a collective fund drive was started, and it was supported generously by several Galo officers, officials, businessmen, political leaders, panchayat leaders, GWS District Units, and some Mopin Committees of districts, among others. As a result, within weeks, a total of 734 stranded Galos were provided with financial assistance, and the noble COVID-19 Mission of GWS could be accomplished much to the delight of all stranded students and their family members ("GWS provides financial help to 734 stranded people," n.d.).

In fact, the total numbers of stranded Galos were more than the cited figure, but many well-to-do families expressed their gratitude for timely good gestures and returned the money donated by GWS for poor and needy community fellows. Many Galos stranded in the state, especially medical patients with difficulty in their movement for treatment, were provided timely intervention through GWS Helpline. They were assisted in getting E-Passes from the District administrations. Further, GWS, under the aegis of the Arunachal Indigenous Tribes Forum (AITF), also regularly provided inputs to the State Government on COVID-19 mitigation plans and measures (T. Kena, personal communication, April 16, 2020).

4.2 Mask for Arunachal Campaign and GWS Women Wing Itanagar and East Siang District Unit :

Many social activists, NGOs, Welfare Societies, Voluntary Organisations, besides State Government have started to render different types of assistance to the people during the lockdown period. But unlike them, the way GWS Women Wing rose to the occasion unitedly was somewhat different and praiseworthy indeed. Without sitting idly at home, they decided to spend their time meaningfully making home-made masks at their respective home.

These masks were collected, and 1000 masks were donated to Indian Medical Association, Arunachal Chapter (see Fig. 1(a) and 1(b)). Besides, they distributed hundreds of masks, cold drinks, and biscuits to security personnel, staff of Tomo Riba Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (TRIHMS), Naharlagun, on 10 April 2020. On 11 April 2020, again, they distributed masks, cold drinks, and biscuits to more than 360 security personnel of 18 Nakas (checkpoints) of Itanagar in the presence of the Superintendent of Police (SP), Capital Complex (M. Ori, personal communication, April 12, 2020).

They have also advised common people, mainly shopkeepers, vendors, and labourers, to regularly put on masks whenever they move out of their homes and maintain proper social distancing, especially in the markets and other crowded places. While sticking to COVID-19 Protocol, the whole affair was well-managed by the Galo women warriors without taking any assistance from the menfolks. Their contribution was deeply appreciated by all (ibid.).

Similarly, GWS Women Wing, East Siang District Unit, also distributed masks, sanitizers, and package drinking water to COVID-19 warriors and volunteers of Pasighat Township and Ruksin Checkgate. These included officers, officials, doctors, nurses, police personnel, and other volunteers (G. Chiram, personal communication, April 15, 2020).

4.3 Performance of Indigenous Rituals:

Every society has its own belief system on which its worldview thrives. And it is very true with several tribal societies of Arunachal Pradesh. In the past, whenever there is an epidemic or pandemic outbreak of a disease, the tribe considered it as a bad omen and after it is ascertained through hepatoscopy (either pig or chicks) they carry out rituals to mitigate and save themselves from it.

The Galos of West Siang led by GWS West Siang District Unit, had to resort to and fall back on their traditional practice since medical science has failed to develop medicines to deter the spike of pandemic COVID-19 all over the world. Thus, they performed indigenous rituals popularly known as Alii-Tvrnam followed by Arr-Rinam to ward off COVID-19 infection in the district, particularly for the people of Aalo Township. Literally, the word 'Alii' means epidemic and 'Tvrnam' to prevent or forestall, so Alii-Tvrnam means 'to prevent or forestall epidemic'. 'Arr-Rinam' is a broad concept that includes several varying taboos or restrictions obeyed by individual, family, village or even whole circle (banggo) depending on the type of rituals performed. Generally, most of the rituals have set taboos or restrictions which have to be followed mandatorily (M. Doye, personal communication, May 25, 2020). In context of Alii-Tvrnam, the Arr-Rinam may be considered as a lockdown for all people of the area concerned. In the past, as a convention, the Galos performed Alii-Tvrnam whenever an epidemic broke out that infected and killed many people. They had to rely solely on their age-old belief system and practices because medical science was not known to them then. In addition, such ritual was also performed by them periodically to protect livestock, mithun, etc., that are prone to several contagious diseases. Before performing Alii-Tvrnam for COVID-19, a hepatoscopy was

conducted by the Nyibo to determine and confirm if it is advisable to go ahead with the ritual, and the result was positive. After a few days, Alii-Tvrnam was performed under the guidance of Nyibo (shaman), two Bo (assistant) and a few community people. Only a few people had participated in the ritual performance by strictly adhering to the State Government's Advisory and social distancing guidelines (K. Sora, personal communication, April 20, 2020). Having performed Alii-Tvrnam successfully, Nyibo issued obligatory directives, which are the most important components of Arr-Rinam, for two days (Karmakar, 2020):

- To seal all entry points of Aalo Township,
- Community people to stay at indoors and avoid visiting forest for all kind of works,
- Abstain oneself from using tools and implements,
- Refrain from all sorts of argument, quarrel and gossip among family members,
- Avoid taking bath and washing clothes,
- To avoid eating chicken, ginger and variety of local green vegetables such as jook-raar, oj-obar, paapuk, luuqqe, oxor, etc.,
- Women folks should avoid weaving, knitting and using cloth needles.

The purpose of organizing such rituals at Aalo, the largest and oldest Galo town, is to pass the message loud and clear for the rest of the Galo areas. The precedent was well-received by some Galo areas like Basar in Lepa Rada and Kamba in West Siang, where similar rituals were conducted successfully. In fact, GWS Upper Subansiri District Unit also conducted Alli-Tvrnam in collaboration with Tagin Cultural Society (TCS), the Apex body of the Tagin tribe (G. Basar, personal communication, April 16, 2020).

As already mentioned, almost every society, especially tribal society, has its own set of belief systems, which is also one of its identity markers. All Tani tribes (Adi, Apatani, Galo, Nyishi, and Tagin) and many other tribal communities of state do have their own epidemic or disease mitigation and eradication mechanisms, but none have thought to recourse to it except the Galos during COVID-19 lockdown. Though the effectiveness or result of these indigenous rituals cannot be ascertained, such recourse during a trying time may well be taken as a positive step because faith works wonders as believed by many.

4.4 Village Level Lockdown:

In consonance with the rest of the country, almost all villages of Lower Siang District, particularly those located in the foothill region bordering the neighbouring Assam, have self-imposed a complete lockdown of their villages. People of these areas have created barricades and confined themselves within their village, and denied the entry of outsiders. Only those with serious ailments were allowed to move out of the village for medical treatment.

As an instance, the lockdown of Seren village may be taken up for brief discussion here. Seren village is one of the most populous Galo villages in Lower Siang District, with over 100 households. Almost every household has at least one or two family members working in Itanagar, Naharlagun, Pasighat, Aalo, and other parts of the state. With the declaration of lockdown in Arunachal Pradesh, Gaon Burahs and Panchayat leaders in consultation with village folks had imposed complete lockdown of their village and directed the Seren Youths, a voluntary youth organization, to work out the modalities of the village lockdown for prompt implementation (K. Riba, personal communication, May 26, 2020). The COVID-19 modalities of the Seren Youths as mentioned in their Village Circular are :

- Creation of barricades in all entry points of the village to ensure complete lockdown,
- Complete compliance of COVID-19 Advisory of the government especially use of mask and

proper social distancing among the village folks,

- Strict vigilance and checking of all entry points by patrolling day and night on rotation basis,
- A kind of 'back to nature' survival strategy was adopted to procure and consume all kinds of edibles available in the forest than to buy them from the markets,
- Generation of self-employment by taking up different kinds of works like hair-cutting and clearing of orchards and gardens. A few youths having hair-cutting skills started to render the much-needed services to many village folks. Similarly, some have also started to do almost all kinds of work in the village on a daily wage basis fixed by the village elders.

Though creating barricades and restricting the movement of people have been the common strategies of lockdown in all places, but strict adherence to and implementation of complete lockdown was not complied with in its entirety in the way the inhabitants of Seren village did. With the classification of the country into three zones and implementation of partial lockdown, inter-state movement of stranded people were allowed by gradual restoration of all means of transportation. But it was a different case in terms of Seren village. Village people stranded in several parts of the state were not allowed to come back to their sweet homes and stay with the rest of their family members. Rather they were asked to stay back where they were. Such a rigid and strict framing of rules for adherence to complete lockdown made it a different kind of fight against the COVID-19 in this salubrious foothill hamlet. But considering the urgency in view of spiked in virus infection, village folks have tried their best to break the chain. And such measure seemed more urgent and was also incongruent to the circumstances of the rural areas. With the non-availability of doctors, nurses, and lack of medical facilities like quarantine centers and care centers in the village, COVID-19 infection would be perilous for the poor village folks.

4.5 Highway Meal:

Another very interesting step taken by the Galos during the lockdown period was the arrangement of a special meal that may be better termed as 'Highway Meal' for all the travelers passing through their area (see Fig. 2). When the State Govt. permitted partial inter-district movement, people from different districts working at Capital Complex started to move towards their home districts. But they preferred to travel through the roads within the state by avoiding the national highway that passes through the State of Assam. In fact, another reason for this was the continuance of complete lockdown in Assam then. So a drive-through it was not preferable to most of the Arunachalees. The state highway from Papum Pare district through Lower Subansiri and Upper Subansiri districts was the only inter-district road for the people of several other districts of the eastern part of Arunachal Pradesh. The Galos of Upper Subansiri showed their great sense of hospitality by serving delicious meals to all hungry and exhausted Arunachalee fellows who pass through their area. They put on their traditional Taaqgo (men's local jacket), and Gaalv (women's local skirt) invited all travelers to relax and hospitably served them a special meal. Undoubtedly, it was much-needed succor for the travelers who were traveling on one of the longest roads without any food available on the way due to lockdown (M. Hali, personal communication, May 28, 2020).

4.6 Pan Arunachal Voluntary Blood Donation Programme by GWS

Amid the pandemic COVID-19 lockdown, the Galo Welfare Society wisely decided to do something for the greater cause of Arunachal Pradesh's people. With that sole objective, they organized a Pan Arunachal Voluntary Blood Donation Programme to commemorate the 1st Death Anniversary of one of its most dedicated, dynamic, and popular former President Lt. Dr. Minge Loyi from 11-13 May 2020. Due to lockdown, many blood banks in the state run short of



Fig. 1 (a) and (b) GWS (Women Wing) distributes masks, sanitizers, etc



Fig. 2. A woman serving meals to travelers

blood in their stocks for needy patients. Hence, taking the opportunity, GWS appeal all to donate blood and directed all President and General Secretary of the district unit to do the same in their respective unit, and it was fully complied with. In the twin Capital Complex, it was organized at Tomo Riba Institute of Health and Medical Sciences (TRIHMS), Naharlagun and Ramakrishan Mission Hospital, Itanagar, and at several District Hospitals across the state. It was successfully organized in compliance with the COVID-19 Protocol issued by the Government of India and the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Many people from different tribal communities joined the program, and a total of 221 units of blood were collected during the three days. These were collected from different districts like 146 units from Papum Pare (56 TRIHMS and 90 RKM), 23 units from East Siang, 15 units from Tawang, 13 units from Ziro, 10 units from Daporijo, 7 units from Tezu and another 7 units from Aalo. Because of time constraints and lack of storage, many willing donors' names had to be recorded and kept in reserve for future collection. The record of total reserve donors is 137 units (T. Kena, personal communication, April 16, 2020).

4.7 Mask Distribution and Lunch Arrangement by GWS Tuting Unit and Lepa Rada District Unit:

Owing to COVID-19 lockdown, all Mopin Celebration Committees across the Districts have canceled the Mopin celebration in 2020 though they did gear up for the festivity until the GWS President issued a notification in this regard. While rest of the Mopin Committees remain silent

and dormant, the Mopin Committee of Tuting under the aegis of GWS Tuting Unit diverted the unused fund towards a better cause. They used their fund judiciously to procure masks and sanitizers for the frontline warriors and volunteers of their area. These were distributed to COVID-19 warriors and volunteers of the Additional Deputy Commissioner's office, Community Health Centre, Police Station, Powerhouse, academic institutions, and other service providers of Tuting. Additionally, they have also arranged a grand lunch program for all warriors and volunteers for their relentless duty during the lockdown. Such commendable steps were not only inspirational to other communities residing there, including the local community of the area but obviously, act as a morale boost to all COVID-19 warriors and volunteers. It is more a kind of collective acknowledgment and appreciation to all warriors and volunteers for everything they have done for the safety of the people of the area (R. Nyodu, personal communication, 6 June 2020).

Similarly, GWS Lepa Rada District Unit, in collaboration with Galo Students' Union (GSU), Lepa Rada District Unit also showed their thankfulness to the District Administrations, COVID-19 officers and officials, doctors, nurses, police personnel and volunteers of the District. They came forward in support of COVID-19 warriors and volunteer working day and night for the safety of the people of District. They distributed masks, hand sanitizers and arranged lunch for them (N. Nyodu, personal communication, 6 June 2020).

5.0 Conclusion:

The COVID-19 crisis and the accompanying continuous lockdown have greatly affected every citizen of our country in one way or the other. While the lockdown imposed by the government helped in breaking the chain of virus effectively, many individual activists, NGOs, community-based organizations, etc. were equally proactive and engaged themselves for the cause of the poor and needy. One such CBO is the Galo Welfare Society of Arunachal Pradesh. Initiatives taken up by them during the pandemic time for its members in particular and people of the state as a whole were not only laudable but novel too. And definitely, such noble initiatives carried out by them can well be put on record, and it shall surely be reckoned with pride by the posterity in the years to come. The leaders of GWS have used innovative approaches and put up a timely and comprehensive response in collaboration with the state government. Their engagement with community people resulted in successful and effective measures such as financial support to all stranded Galos across Arunachal Pradesh and India, Pan Arunachal Voluntary Blood Donation Programme, distribution of masks, sanitizers, drinking waters, and cold drinks, etc. to frontline workers, arrangement of meals for travelers to the conduct of traditional rituals inter alia. These measures have positive impacts not only on the Galo people but on other community people of Arunachal Pradesh too. In fact, all these collective efforts of GWS were also duly acknowledged, immensely valued and deeply extolled by the State Government, especially State Health Minister.

On the whole, it may well be concluded that the Galo community though small in terms of the population, can be a good pathfinder and torchbearer in any emergent exigencies. And likewise, any community of India though small can also shoulder greater societal responsibilities instead of being silent observers only awaiting the government's intervention in their predicaments.

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