



Article Type: Research Article

Article Ref. No.: 20112900430CF

<https://doi.org/10.37948/ensemble-2021-sp1-a015>



COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE RIGHTS OF INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

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Abstract:

COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the most recently discovered coronavirus. This new virus and disease were unknown before its outbreak in Wuhan, China, 2019. COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (hereafter referred to as WHO). The virus that causes COVID-19 infects people of all ages. According to the report of the WHO, the total cases reported were 62, 573, 188; 43, 193, 999 recovered, and 1,458,305 deaths (Worldometer, 2020). Its impact can be seen on every corner of the world, most prominently on a specific group of the population known as Indigenous Communities. Indigenous communities are also known as tribal people, Adivasis, i.e., aboriginal communities; and are a significant part of the world's population. They are far from the contemporary trend, economic development and have their own language, religion, cultures, festivals, music, cuisine, etc. Zacharius, T. (2020) mentions that they have lived close to nature, and their way of life is different than mainstream lifestyle. They mostly depend on agriculture and handicrafts and hold a vast amount of Traditional Knowledge. The Communities are economically and socially backward and live in isolation and self-contained groups. Less development and failure to reach the Indigenous communities have made them face various issues during this pandemic situation. The Coronavirus (hereafter referred to as COVID-19) pandemic poses a grave health threat to the Indigenous communities around the world. The absence of proper healthcare, sanitation, other preventive measures significantly increases the danger. This paper describes the impact of COVID-19 on society, especially on the health of Indigenous Communities.

Article History: Submitted on 29 Nov 2020 | Accepted on 9 February 2021 | Published online on 16 April 2021

Keywords: Coronavirus, Pandemic, Traditional Knowledge, Tribal People.

1.0 Introduction:

COVID-19 has made a huge impact on health worldwide. More than 18.6 lakh people have been infected globally, and 1.15 lakh people have lost their lives. The number increases day by day (PharmEasy, COVID-19 Updates, 2020). Apart from thousands of deaths, there are other negative impacts of the virus. The blog, "COVID-19-Its Impact on the World" (PharmEasy, COVID-19 Updates, 2020) mentions the impact of COVID-19 on the economy leading to global economic recession and employment crisis. With the increasing active cases and the failure of the economy, people have become prisoners in their own homes. Though bringing back families together and improving the environment are positive outcomes, but the pandemic has more negative consequences. This article aims to highlight the plight of one vulnerable section of the

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society, i.e., the indigenous communities during this pandemic and the impact of the virus on them.

(Chakraborty, I & Maity, P. 2020) mentions that in December 2019, a new infectious respiratory disease emerged in Wuhan, Hubei province, China, and was named by the World Health Organisation as COVID-19 (coronavirus disease 2019). The COVID-19 pandemic is regarded as the most crucial global health calamity and the greatest challenge that humankind faced since the 2nd World War. It has rapidly spread around the world, posing enormous health, economic, and social challenges (Tammemi A., Akour A, & Alfalah L. 2020).

Singh. J.& Singh. J (2020) in article *COVID-19 and Its Impact on Society*, have explained that COVID-19 has affected the social life of individuals with schools, colleges, universities, pubs, restaurants, cafes, cinema halls being closed. The day-to-day life of the people is affected by the pandemic, yet the virus is spreading at lightning speed. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to human development crisis, the various elements of human development like health, income, education are put to stop. Still, the other impacts are yet to be documented. The pandemic was superimposed on unresolved tensions between people and technology, between people and the planet, between the haves and the have-not (Singh. J.& Singh. J., 2020). According to the United Nations, the COVID-19 pandemic is the greatest test that they have faced since the formation of the United Nations, as not only it is a health emergency but also an economic crisis Antonio Guterres [@antonioguterres] (2020, March 31). With guidelines issued by the WHO, countries around the world have applied the measures to handle the COVID-19 situation. Billions of people have been called to stay at home.

2.0 COVID-19 and its impact on the society:

COVID-19 is not the first pandemic the world has seen. Human history witnessed various crises like the Black Death, the Global outbreak of cholera in the early 19th century, the influenza virus (which lead to one of the most lethal pandemics on record), the 1918 Flu pandemic, H1N1 pandemic also led to thousands of deaths. But, the Covid-19 pandemic has been extraordinary because it evolved from a health shock to an economic and social crisis. Social distancing and pauses in various business activities have stopped human development. The virus has affected all segments of the population and has particularly proven unfavorable to vulnerable social groups, like the people living in poverty, older persons, persons with disabilities, and especially to the indigenous communities (UN, DESA 2020). The people living in slums, without proper housing facilities, access to running water, and health facilities, are highly exposed to the danger of the virus.

In a Joint Statement made by ILO, FAO, IFAD & WHO 2020, (October 13), it is mentioned that the effects of COVID-19 are particularly felt by the countries dealing with existing humanitarian crises or emergencies. The issues relating to the pandemic and providing humanitarian and recovery assistance have become the major need of the hour. COVID-19 pandemic has caused a massive loss of human life and has affected various sectors like public health, food systems, and the world of work (WHO, 2020 para 2). The daily wage workers are facing hardships and are particularly vulnerable because the majority lacks social protection, access to quality health care and have lost access to productive assets. With various workplaces being shut down, removal from jobs has led to unemployment and without proper means to earn income during lockdowns, many are unable to feed themselves (WHO, 2020 para 2).

(Strauss, V. 2020, March 27) posted that apart from the vulnerable sections of the society, the impact can be seen on the middle-class families. Intending to control the spread of the virus

many people have lost their jobs, this has led to serious mental, emotional and physical consequences like depressions, suicide, and drug use. The loss of jobs and no success in developing vaccines for the virus has affected people's well-being. The other sections are the youth, currently, 87% of the world's students, i.e., more than 1.5 billion young people, are not attending school (Strauss, V. 2020, March 27).

(Scott, J. 2020, May 26) mentioned in an article "*What risks does COVID-19 pose to society in the long term?*" that schools in nearly 165 countries are closed. Paris-based U.N. Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization laid down that education officials are providing measures to keep the learning process going on, but many students are poor and lack necessary tools for online courses. This, too, creates inequalities as some gain knowledge whereas others don't. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed put a stop to everything and caused a number of problems. With nationwide lockdown and loss of jobs, thousands of tribal migrant workers have returned to their villages; this reverse migration adversely affects the indigenous communities.

3.0 COVID-19 and Indigenous peoples:

Indigenous peoples are known as First People in some regions, also as Native People in other places. They are a group of people who inhabited the area that they originally occupied. They have faced and are still facing a range of human rights issues. There are various policies framed, yet the implementation of their rights is far from perfect. Indigenous peoples are the most vulnerable ones when it comes to various health issues; most of them have a long history of devastation from epidemics; the Yanomami of Brazil and Southern Venezuela in 1950/60s nearly decimated due to the spread of smallpox and influenza to a measles outbreak that was brought by Europeans in America (UN, DESA, 2020, para.1).

(Mohanty A. 2020) in his blog "*COVID-19 is lethal for the world's indigenous peoples*" discuss the situation in Brazil, where the state of Amazonas, predominantly inhabited by indigenous communities, has the most cases per capita. The (UNHR, Fact sheet No.9 2013) mentions in Chapter 1 "*Indigenous Peoples and the United Nations Human Rights System*" that the Indigenous Communities face difficult human rights challenges relating to their lands, territories, and resources as a result of activities associated with the development and the extraction of resources (UNHR, Fact sheet No.9. 2013). Along with the issues regarding their lands, their cultures continue to be threatened and protection of their rights is still not effective and efficient. The Indigenous Peoples have participated and contributed to human rights legal and policy processes at the international level.

Over 476 million Indigenous people are living in 90 countries and account for 6.2 percent of the global population (Danielle, 2020, para.1). The International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs (hereafter referred to as IWGIA) and the International Labor Organisation (hereafter referred to as ILO) participated in the Indigenous Navigator Initiative and highlighted the impact of COVID-19 on indigenous peoples. The report identified how the pre-existing barrier in access to health, social security, and education is fueling the present COVID-19 impacts on indigenous peoples. (Indigenous Navigator, 2020, p.7) mentions the rise of food insecurity, the loss of livelihoods, and lack of access to land and natural resources has also been identified as the major outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 does not discriminate and has affected the life of every human being, but Indigenous Communities are facing a greater risk. Food insecurity has worsened existing inequalities and added to the problems of those who lack access to well-paying jobs or workable land (Cultural Survival 2020, April 9). Indigenous Communities in many places cannot avail facilities like access to running water. The water that they use is either contaminated and unfit for human and animal consumption. Lack of proper

policy and failure of implementation of available policies has done injustice to them. There is a need to provide support to them; governments, communities, organizations must protect their rights (Danielle, 2020, para.1). Apart from food insecurity, the indigenous communities also face various problems due to a lack of proper medical and healthcare supplies. Staying far from hospitals or any health care centers, they are prone to various diseases. They live in a group and hence participate in various activities together, so it is challenging for them to isolate themselves. This causes problems because if one is infected, the other people are likely to be infected by the virus.

The lack of proper access to sanitation, lack of proper food, clean water, and health facility contributes to an increase in high mortality rates and has caused the spread of COVID-19 in indigenous communities, with various others problems. Data indicates a rise in the number of COVID-19 cases among vulnerable groups such as older persons and those with underlying health issues; however, the data on the rate of infections among indigenous peoples are often not available. The impact of COVID-19 is generally severe on them as compared to the general population. "Indigenous peoples are recognized in United Nations instrument as the guardians of planet's biological, cultural and linguistic diversity". Yet, their living conditions are still among the most vulnerable in the world. As reported by the APM Research Lab on September 16, 2020, in the US, one in every 2,300 indigenous Americans has died, as compared to one in 3,600 white Americans (APM Research Lab Staff, 2020). There are various examples of how the indigenous peoples in Asia are struggling with social marginalization, racism, and contentious relationships with the governments. In some countries, they are not given an identity cards and, in some countries, their rights are not recognized. Their rights to access the most basic needs for food, education, and public health are denied. Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations mentioned in an article 'COVID-19 and indigenous peoples' that in India, indigenous peoples have stated that "racial attacks and discrimination have spiked since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic" (FAO, 2020, pp.1-9).

(APCEIU 2020) indicates in para. 2 that inequalities faced by the Indigenous peoples in the enjoyment of human rights such as access to health care, information in languages that are best understood, and participation in decision-making, cultural life, national education, and the economy have been discussed. Indigenous peoples, like any other individuals, are entitled to all human rights. It is imperative to safeguard their rights during this crisis, like the right to self-determination, the rights of indigenous peoples to participate and be consulted on measures that affect them, including the requirement to seek their free, prior, and informed consent (UNHR, COVID-19 Response, 2020).

The article "*Rainforest Foundation US'S Response to COVID-19*" clearly highlights the conditions of the indigenous peoples. Their rights were already at risk as they lived in a vulnerable situation as compared to other people living in the society. With limited access to health care, they are likely to be most affected by the virus. The older indigenous persons, the indigenous women, indigenous persons with disabilities are at higher risk as movements are limited due to various lockdown guidelines. They live close to nature and eat what they can gather and grow around them, so with failure to gather or grow crops; they face issues like scarcity of food leading to poor nutrient intakes. The long history shows that the indigenous peoples are particularly vulnerable to pandemics; infectious diseases like dengue fever and malaria have caused problems to indigenous communities for decades. The said article also mentions the incident faced by the Yanomami in northern Brazil, who suffered the devastating measles outbreak introduced by illegal gold miners in the year 2018 (Rainforest Foundation US, para.2 2020). During the H1N1 pandemic, indigenous peoples in Canada in 2009 were

disproportionately affected, accounting for 10 percent of the hospitalizations when they only represented about four percent of the country's population. (Danielle, 2020, para.2) mentions the recent statement made by the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues Chairperson Anne Nuorgam (Sami). He urged States to "take immediate steps to ensure that Indigenous Peoples are informed, protected and prioritized during the COVID-19 global health pandemic. As the Indigenous Communities are left behind in the distribution of resources and mostly not able to avail facilities hence, it is important to take steps to help them. (Curtice ,K. & Choo, E. 2020, para .4) mentions that first, all data on disease or death rates must be disaggregated to show what is experienced by Indigenous groups; similarly, data on the availability of testing, medicines, vaccines, healthcare providers, and other resources used in this time should be tracked and used to ensure distribution meets the needs of the indigenous population. Government must aid the indigenous peoples. Indigenous communities have vast knowledge and we can learn a lot about how to live sustainably and communally (Curtice ,K. & Choo, E. 2020, para .4).

4.0 Coronavirus in India:

India has been severely affected by COVID-19. With immediate and initial lockdowns, the spread was controlled, but today the situation is worsening day by day; many lost their lives, their jobs, homes, and most of them migrated back to their original homes. The movements of the people have been increasing, and so is the spread of COVID-19. Apart from the people living in the society, the tribal and the indigenous communities are the ones who are facing major problems. Almost 90% of the tribal population of the country lives in rural areas. The tests for COVID-19 are expensive, and such facilities exist only in metropolises. Indigenous Peoples are unlikely to have access to even test to determine COVID-19 infection. In an online article "*COVID-19 In India: Reverse Migration Could Destroy Indigenous Communities*" Chakma Dilip and Chakma Paritosh discuss how COVID-19 has threatened the survival of some of the world's most endangered indigenous communities, namely Great Andamanese, Jarawas, Onge, Shompen, and the Sentinelese of Andaman & Nicobar Islands whose combined population is less than 1,000 and are on the verge of extinction. Food insecurity, lack of medical facilities makes them vulnerable to infectious diseases (Chakma, D., 2020 para.6).

It is important to protect the indigenous peoples as one positive case can wipe them out as they live in close-knit communities and have low immunity. (Chakma, D., 2020, para.13) mentions that apart from a threat from COVID-19, the tribal of Northeast India living in various cities and towns across the country are facing racial discrimination based on their Mongoloid features. As many indigenous peoples of the Northeast come to mainland India for education, employment, and medical treatment, they were either called names or were removed from the rented home (Chakma, S., 2020 para 1). Apart from the effects of the virus, other issues have also taken place. On 26 March 2020, the Rights and Risks Analysis Group (hereafter referred to as RRAG) stated that at least 22 cases of racial discrimination and attacks took place against the Northeast people in various parts of the country from 7 February 2020 to 25 March 2020. Apart from being called "Corona", "Chinese", "Chinki", or stared while walking in the streets or shopping or sitting in trains, India's Mongoloid looking people were spat on and called "coronavirus", forcibly quarantined despite showing no COVID-19 symptoms, denied entry into apartment complexes, forced to leave apartments, threatened with eviction from their apartment, forced to leave restaurants to make others comfortable, none wanting to share transport, etc. (Chakma, D., 2020, para.13). On 21 March 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an Advisory to all states directing them to take appropriate action when such cases of harassment are reported. Yet, not much was done by the leaders. (Chakma, S., 2020).

To add to the issues relating to medical facilities and racial discrimination, the other negative affect was the migration of the tribal laborers; with no jobs, they returned to their homes. This, too, has created fear as this can lead to more spread of the virus. (Chakma, D., 2020) mentioned in a post titled “COVID-19 in India: Reverse migration could destroy indigenous communities” that on 27 March 2020, it was reported that over 30,000 tribal laborers’ from Jhabua district in Madhya Pradesh have returned from Gujarat, Rajasthan, and Maharashtra and another 30,000 from this district were left abandoned in these States.

5.0 Measures for protection:

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is drastically changing the lives of people, including the lives of young people. Living in this type of environment can be tough for young people for their social, physical, and mental wellbeing. Some states, while adopting measures to deal with the COVID-19 health crisis, do not consult or seek the participation of the indigenous peoples. Hence, guidance released by the Officer of the Human Rights Commissioner, title COVID-19, and Indigenous People’s Rights, recommends the following actions for States and stakeholders:

The State should ensure the participation of indigenous peoples in decision-making regarding the planning, development, and implementation of programs and the development of preventive measures against COVID-19.

Everyone, including those living in urban areas, women, youth, older persons, and LGBTI members, must be considered as fundamental partners in addressing the pandemic. Their rights to free, prior informed consent must be applied during the pandemic. Only if their rights of free, prior, and informed consent are recognized, they will be protected. The UN guidance advises government across the world to ensure “timely, accessible and accurate information about prevention and care, about methods to seek help and things to be done to address the pandemic in their ancestral territories and urban contexts in as many indigenous languages and formats either oral or written must be provided (CJP,2020, 28 August).

The State must also see that the information is received by the indigenous peoples. Youth can be a great medium to spread awareness within the communities with the help of social media. Restrictions on movements have resulted in an imbalance in their livelihoods as most of the indigenous people depend on agricultural production, seasonal jobs in agriculture, fishing, or pastoralism. With frequent lockdowns and restrictions on movement, the right of indigenous peoples to adequate food, as well as their right to land, natural resources have been adversely affected. The indigenous peoples have faced different problems before the COVID-19 crisis hence it is important that their rights are safeguarded and protected. They are one of the vulnerable sections of the society and it is necessary to protect and ensure indigenous territorial protection. (UNHR 29, June 2020)

The article “*Coronavirus: APIB Articulates Strategies with State Governors to protect Indigenous Peoples across Brazil*” mentions how various countries are taking initiatives to deal with the issues of COVID-19 and the protection of the rights of the vulnerable groups. Brazil took a step to combat the pandemic, and on April 3, 2020, the Coalition of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (hereafter referred to as APIB) sent a letter to the governors of all 26 states and the Federal District requesting the adoption of special measures to protect indigenous people in case of threats from the COVID-19 pandemic. (APIB, 2020)

Indigenous Peoples are the living proof of humankind’s resilience, and they have survived pandemics, invasions, and outbreaks for centuries. Even today, many of the indigenous groups are relying on their traditional knowledge to face COVID-19. With an increasing number of

COVID cases, their livelihood, their practices have been affected. Hunger has been identified as the main outcome of the COVID-19 pandemic. Isolation, remoteness, lockdowns, the disruption of the food chain, and the absence of income-generating activities have led to food shortages. Public policies and social protection packages must be planned to reboot the economy, and benefits must be awarded to vulnerable groups. As there are many instances of the third parties taking advantage of invading indigenous people's lands, measures should be adopted to protect indigenous peoples' rights over their land. (FAO, of the United Nations, 2020)

6.0 Conclusion:

Indigenous people, unfortunately, are the ones who have been hit hard by the novel coronavirus and the associated lockdowns and economic downturns. The virus has led to the deaths of many, and its danger to indigenous communities is extreme. The elder members who have traditional knowledge who can lead the communities are specifically vulnerable and their death could cause significant loss to the community as a whole (Global Environment Facility,2020). The Indigenous Peoples are regarded as the knowledge holders and are resilient with knowledge and traditions that have protected and healed them from various diseases. Many indigenous communities instituted their lockdowns and prohibited the movements of people in or out of the community. They also applied their understanding and knowledge to stop the spread of infectious diseases. The Indigenous Peoples live close to nature and are key to conservation and sustainable developments; much research shows that indigenous peoples, with their knowledge and understanding, have helped in the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Indigenous communities might be in less number but they have from ancient times provided efficient ways to protect, conserve and sustainably use biodiversity. It is the other section of the society that has attacked the areas of the indigenous communities and started mining, industries, and other large-scale projects in the name of development. This action has infringed their rights, forcing them to leave their home (Global Environment Facility,2020)

COVID-19 has variously affected human beings. Firstly, it has caused a systemic human development and affected the health, economy, and other social dimensions of development. The closure of the industry, inaccessible health facilities, and a stop on education have adversely affected the life of the people. Secondly, without proper and appropriate policies, the indirect effects of the crisis can be taxing or even more taxing than the direct health effects. The Impacts of crises, even ones that are short-lived, have an everlasting effect on human development. COVID-19 doesn't discriminate against anyone, and all beings feel its impact. The virus has left no option to discuss or develop better facilities for future crises as the future seems too dark and far with the present pandemic. However, with the world fighting together to combat this pandemic, people all around the world must stay strong and positive. Along with the pandemic, other issues are still unresolved, and this could, in turn, lead to shaping a new generation of inequalities. But, this pandemic is an opportunity to plan about how to deal with all the issues at hand and to plan for future emergencies (UN, DESA, 2020).

Everyone in the world has and is facing the impacts of the COVID-19, but the indigenous peoples have been affected most; this has added to prevailing inequalities and discrimination. These serious impacts need to be specifically addressed in response to and the aftermath of this crisis. They hold vast traditional knowledge and, in many instances, it helps them find their solutions that are related to health crises. Their knowledge and understanding have been recognized by many (IWGIA, 2020, para 2). Indigenous Communities are entitled to all human rights, and their collective and specific rights must be protected. The Government must see that their rights are guaranteed and protected. The Government must consult with them on matters

that are affecting them and also encourage their participation in decision-making. States must take affective measures to deal with the COVID-19 crisis (Fontanesi, L., Marchetti, D., Mazza, C., Di Giandomenico, S., Roma & Verrocchio, M.C. 2020). In collaboration with institutions, local civil societies, and indigenous community-based organizations, the Government should work to strengthen the indigenous communities and provide them with health care services that are helpful for their well-being. Mohanty (2020), on his blog “COVID-19 is lethal for the world’s indigenous peoples” mentioned the recommendation made by Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, UN Special Rapporteur on the Rights of indigenous people. According to her, States need to acknowledge the cultural, spiritual, and religious rights and responsibilities of indigenous peoples when considering measures to respond to the virus. She also added that culturally acceptable healthcare, food, and humanitarian relief without discrimination should be provided.

It is indispensable to develop and adopt long-term strategies that are sustainable to address the challenges faced by the health and agriculture sectors (GOARN, WHO 2020). Importance must be given to addressing underlying food security and malnutrition challenges, tackling rural poverty, in particular through more and better jobs in the rural economy, extending social protection to all, facilitating safe migration pathways, and promoting the formalization of the informal economy (IWGIA, para 2, 2020). With no proper cure to the disease, it is best to practice social distancing and wearing masks.

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