

Press Release

May 13, 2020

## **PM's Atma-Nirbhar Bharat finds no mention of Adivasis despite persistent appeals by tribal groups, experts and opposition leaders**

Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced an economic package of Rs. 20 lakh crores for a "self-reliant" India on May 12, the details of which were shared by the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman minister on May 13. The economic package has made no provisions to support the most economically affected and distressed communities including the 300 million tribals and forest dwellers who constitute a quarter of country's population.

On 12<sup>th</sup> May the union minister for tribal affairs (MoTA) Arjun Munda held a video conference with the heads of around 20 states and state tribal ministers which ended up being a self-congratulatory exercise without any response to concerns and demands of tribals and forest dwellers ([press release](#)). The minister said that the Van Dhan Kendras and the infrastructure facilities required for value addition and marketing of tribal produce are being supported by the MoTA without acknowledging the complete absence of institutional support in the tribal areas which is widely reported. It said, "...the government is making all efforts to ensure that the tribals get true value for their products", and again didn't lay out a plan of action.

The lockdown in the background of Covid19 outbreak was announced on March 24, the stringent lockdown measures impacted a large section of country's marginalised and vulnerable population/s including tribal and forest communities.

To highlight the issues being faced by the tribal and forest communities, netizens [took to twitter](#) on Monday, May 11, a day before the video conference by MoTA and PM's address. They urged PM Modi, Arjun Munda and other ministries to pay attention to the adverse impact of the lockdown on livelihoods and survival of millions of tribals and forest dwellers.

Among those who voiced concerns were members of the political parties- former union minister of MoEF- Jairam Ramesh, and Shashi Tharoor of Congress, Vijoo Krishnan of All India Kisan Sabha (CPI-M), Jharkhand Mukti Morcha (JMM), Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD). Leading environmentalists and forest rights experts Ashish Kothari, Shankar Gopalakrishnan, Kanchi Kohli, tribal rights activist Hansraj Meena, historian and writer Ramachandra Guha, civil society organisations like Human Rights Law Network, Oxfam India, Housing and Land Rights Network (HLRN), National Alliance of People's Movements (NAPM). Twitterati used the Hashtag [#CovidAndForestRights](#) to voice their opinions, recording close to 8000 or more messages. Several environmental and forest rights groups- Save Aravali, Let India Breathe, Save Aarey, Tribal Army, Adivasi Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, Treeroes etc. joined in the twitter storm. International indigenous and human rights groups-Amnesty International, Survival International and others also joined)

Hansraj Meena, a leading tribal rights activist called upon the PM to “pay attention” to the communities dependent on forest produce for their survival. “*प्रधानमंत्री @narendramodi जी, देश के जंगलों में निवासित खासकर आदिवासी जनजातियां जो वनोपजों पर आश्रित आजीविका है, उनके लिए बिना कोई खास इंतजाम किए असमय लॉकडाउन लागू करने से उन्हें तमाम मुसीबतों का सामना करना पड़ रहा है। कृपया सरकार उनकी तरफ भी ध्यान दें। #CovidAndForestRights*”  
<https://twitter.com/HansrajMeena/status/1259746231401807878?s=20>

**Experts expressed their dismay over the failure of the Union government to be able to come up with a comprehensive Covid response plan.** They highlighted that the procurement of the minor forest produce- a major source of income for tribal communities- was impacted and that this may have a long term consequence for communities. “100 million forest dwellers depend on minor forest produces for food, shelter, medicines and income. Still they suffer ignominy, displacement and impoverishment, State has betrayed them. #CovidAndForestRights”, said the National Alliance of People’s Movement (NAPM)- a coalition of civil society and rights organisations across the country.

### **Submission of report to MoTA, MoRD, MoHA and others**

Earlier, on May 4, a group of civil society organisations, activists, researchers and experts working with tribals and forest dwelling communities submitted [a report](#) to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs (MoTA). The report highlights the socio-economic distress situation in tribal areas arising out of Covid19 outbreak and lockdown measures. Some of the major issues highlighted in the report are issues of deprivation and lack of healthcare facilities persisting in tribal areas that may severely limit the capacities to curb the spread of the disease, tribal migrants stranded in cities, lack of institutional mechanisms and access for procurement and distribution of minor forest produce, forest land diversions, issues of plantations being carried on without full consent of local bodies and evictions taking place even as the lockdown is in progress. The report was also submitted to Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC), Ministry of Rural Development (MoRD), Ministry of Panchayati Raj (MoPR), Ministry of Home Affairs (MoHA), NCST, Prime Minister’s Office and Niti Ayog, and to National Disaster Mitigation Authority.

### **Issues plaguing communities: Voices from Twitter**

Questioning the silence of the central government on a relief package that could appropriately address the plight of stranded migrant labourers- many of them from tribal, nomadic and de-notified communities, a Jharkhand based platform of civil rights organisations Jharkhand Janadhikar Andolan [tweeted](#), “150 Santhali and Pahariya workers stranded in Kargil, Ladakh. Not paid since two months. Being overcharged for groceries and essentials. Where is the plan to get them back & support lakhs of Adivasis like them? Silence of central govt continues. #CovidAndForestRights @MundaArjun

Historian Ram Chandra Guha [said](#) that the [tribal and other forest dwelling communities] communities were already disadvantaged and have suffered because of the lockdown. “The

impact of the COVID crisis and the lockdown on our already disadvantaged tribal and forest communities has been immense; the Government must act to alleviate their suffering:"

Shashi Tharoor slammed the government for the proposed amendments in the Environmental Impact Assessment, 2006 . He also questioned the MoEFCC's rush to give wildlife clearances to as many as 11 development projects during the lockdown period- a fact also prominently highlighted by the report. "Streamlining regulation is OK, but damaging environment is not?" He asked "The draft notification reduces the frequency of compliance reports required from project owners from once every six months to once every year. Again, that's fine only if environmental safety is assured. Have experts been asked".

Jairam Ramesh also expressed concern that the lockdown measures have disproportionately impacted tribal areas.

Stephen Corry of the Survival International and Amnesty India also tweeted in support of India's tribal communities.



Experts highlighted how a proper implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA), 2006 could have helped in making the communities more secure and self-reliant. Despite being in force since 2006, the FRA hasn't been implemented in the tribal majority states in India. National Vice President of Adivasi Congress, Shyam Sundar Hansdah [said](#) that in many areas Gram

Sabhas were defunct, which was a complete disregard of the FRA, impeding in the growth and development of the scheduled areas.

Alf Gunvald Nilsen, a Professor of Sociology at University of Pretoria and author of *Dispossession and Resistance in India*, noted that “The Forest Rights Act is one of the most progressive pieces of law in India's recent legal history - and that is also why state governments have been so hard at work to undermine it.”

Expressing concern over the fate of FRA, a tweet by Maadhyam, a Participatory Policy Making Platform, [highlighted](#), “As per Q in #LokSabha, as on 31 Dec 2019, only 46% of claims recd [sic.] under #FRA granted This during normal times Now, govts [sic.] using extraordinary circumstances as reason to dilute labour laws, give quick environment clearance What will be fate of FRA & tribals?”

Huffington Post senior journalist Akshay Deshmane [highlighted](#) how “9 state govts [sic.] rejected more than 13 lakh forest rights claims of Adivasis and other forest dwellers without following due procedures, show minutes of meetings at the Union Tribal Affairs Ministry. #CovidAndForestRights”

Experts also demanded that the huge money collected under the Compensatory Afforestation Fund Act (CAMPA) should be disbursed among the Gram Sabhas so that they could use the money to appropriately address the challenges posed due to the lockdown depending on their local needs.

### **Impact of Covid 19 on forest communities**

COVID 19 outbreak and the unplanned lockdown measures have resulted in loss of livelihoods and economic distress for a large population of tribal communities. Tribals can lose almost 60 percent of their annual income coming from this MFP season due to lockdown restrictions and no govt support in time. No economic package has been announced by the government to compensate this loss. With agricultural activities and wage employment under MGNREGA also affected distress looms large over tribal areas. Till now about 20 tribal districts have been identified as hotspots by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare and more tribal districts are reporting spread of infection. The report submitted to the ministries outlines many such issues and can be read [here](#).

### **Demands**

Tribals and forest dwellers have demanded

1. The Central Government and the Ministry of Tribal Affairs to come up with a COVID Response Plan for tribal communities and issue comprehensive guidelines to State govts to address issues and concerns of tribal communities.

2. The Central government to ensure provision of adequate testing and healthcare facilities in tribal areas even by deploying Mobile Health Units and setting up of COVID Care Centres in the tribal locations.

3. Effective implementation of Forest Rights Act to ensure land and forest security to the tribal and forest dwelling communities and empower the Gram Sabhas to manage community forest resources. This is important to ensure tenure and economic security, generate employment and build community resilience in the long term.

4. The MoEF must withdraw the forest clearance decisions and other guidelines issued during the lockdown period to prevent violations of rights of tribal communities and potential conflicts in tribal areas.

5. The huge CAMPA funds (50000 crores) controlled by the forest dept should be released to the tribal communities and Gram Sabhas which they can use for land and forest regeneration and livelihoods activities to meet with the economic crisis arising due to COVID 19 and lockdown measures.