

## Impact of COVID-19 on Baiga Tribe: A Preliminary Study

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### ABSTRACT

*Covid-19 came as a disaster for the whole world, and no one was left from facing its unfortunate consequences. The level of impact is different when it comes to the people living in rural areas and are still living in primitive life; the pandemic and sudden lockdown situation have led to a significant health threat to tribal people around the world. The tribal community already experiences poor access to healthcare, lacking essential services like clean water, sanitation, connectivity to main-city, awareness, education, etc. The tribal life is based on the community life of social gathering, and deforestation has a significant impact on traditional livelihood, which compelled them to eke out a livelihood as migrant laborers in different cities of the country. The main objective of this paper is to study the life of the Baiga tribe who fall under PVTGs during Covid-19 and the impact of lockdown on the livelihood of this vulnerable group who lives in Dhanpuri town under Burhar block of Shahdol district in Madhya Pradesh. Apart from analyzing the socio-economic effects of Covid 19, the paper endeavors to focus on the impact of the pandemic on Baiga tribe of the study area. The universe is a tribal area with 44.65% of the scheduled tribe population. The research design adopted is descriptive using qualitative and quantitative methods, including tools and techniques like observation, interview schedule, case studies, and FGD for collection and analysis of data. The paper's findings are that Covid -19 has a vast impact on the life and livelihood of the Baiga community.*

**Keywords:** COVID Impact, Baiga Tribe

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### I. INTRODUCTION

India ranks second in the list of countries by population, with one of the major populations of the tribal community, almost 1045.46 lakhs which are 8.6% as per the census 2011. The total population of scheduled tribes in India according



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to the ministry of tribal affairs is 104281034. 14.7 % of the total tribal population of India resides in Madhya Pradesh, where 476,008 is the population in the Shahdol district. Madhya Pradesh ranks first among the States/UTs in terms of the ST population as a proportion of the total population of the state. The tribal community is again divided into two categories, ST which stand for scheduled tribe and PVTG which stand for the primitive vulnerable tribal group. Baiga tribe is one of them – a community that comes under the vulnerable group and has the least level of development. Baiga is one of the primitive tribal groups of Madhya Pradesh, mainly found in the region of Maikal hills covering Amarkantak, Dindori, Mandla, Balaghat, and Baghelkhand of Madhya Pradesh, The major population of the Baiga tribe is found in Shahdol, Umaria, Singrauli, Mandla, Dindori, Anuppur, Sidhi, Balaghat, Kabir Dham. It has six major subgroups. Baiga tribes show many similarities with Hindu culture. The tribe's way of life has shifted from its traditional hunting and gathering existence to the one closer to the mainstream, due to improved communications and their touch with the outside community. Baiga people have a strong physique heightened with tangled hair, expertise in the art of personal ornamentation, and in the decoration of their house. It is a tragedy that weaving is taboo to them (Elwin, 1943). They are also called medicine men due to their immense knowledge of ethnomedicine – they treat almost every health-related issue in their community with their traditional medicinal practice and sometimes also by performing a different kind of magic practice, as magic plays an important role in their belief system – they connect magic with many aspects of their life. The person who performs magic is called as guniya. Baiga tribes who still practice their primitive culture and are socially, economically, and politically backward from the outside world are very much affected when something unusual happens. The spreading of any disease, is sometimes a curse for this community, for example the pandemic (covid19) which has ruined the economy and taken the life of several people even in well-developed countries, so we can imagine how much it has affected the backward community. The health status of tribal populations of Madhya Pradesh is very poor and worst for primitive tribes because of the isolation, and remoteness, and is largely unaffected by the developmental process going on in India (ICMR, 1998).

The pandemic Covid -19 hits harder when it comes to a country like India which is still in the developing phase. Three percent of the total cases in the country were from 177 tribal-dominated districts till June 2020 (Hindustan times), Group which is socially and economically not stable like a group which live in poverty or below the poverty line, and the tribal people who were not made to understand the situation well as they live far from mainstream, have to suffer a lot for maintaining their daily livelihood need during the lockdown phase.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

PVTG group of Odisha was at risk due to the spread of the virus Anthropologists and campaigners believe that if the virus spreads further into indigenous tribes, the authorities may find it difficult to halt it. Because many tribes live in small huts, containing and isolating the virus is extremely challenging (Mohanty, 2020).

The Coronavirus virus has infiltrated the Baiga tribe's village in Madhya Pradesh, endangering the future of one of the world's most endangered

indigenous communities. They have very little immunity to viruses and novel pathogens (Naveen, 2021). According to the authority, it's the migrant who are returning to their hometown carrying the virus with them, normally Baiga People don't live in their homes but in the last few years they are moving to other states or cities for doing work as daily wage laborers (Chaurasiya, 2009). People who are still untouched by the rail trains even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, completely connected to nature (and so called as Baiga or nature's son) like Bhumia Baiga and Bharotiya Baiga (sub-castes of Baiga), are the ones still practicing all their cultural practices and have the least interest to change, tattoo their whole body starting from the forehead as their identity and are well trained in hunting animals. Tattoos on the body of Baiga people have a special cultural meaning that can be seen in both males and females. Different tattoo designs are created for various purposes and at various stages of life, and women often view tattoos as fashion accessories. Body inking is a symbol of their culture that is also linked to their religious beliefs, social standing, and health care needs. In addition to protecting individuals from various natural disasters, tattoos offer therapeutic benefits that can be used to treat common illnesses and arouse sexual urges (Mohanta, 2015).

The Coronavirus virus has infiltrated the Baiga tribal settlements in Madhya Pradesh and poses a threat to the survival of one of the world's most endangered indigenous groups (Tomar, 2021). According to sources, they have essentially no protection against this virus, even though there are also cases where tribal people deny taking vaccination shots. There are different reasons for the same. Vaccination resisting behavior was quite common in tribal communities and convincing them was harder. The main reasons are that S have a belief that they have immunity to fight this virus and the tattoos in their body are their strength, they trust their natural herbs, the liquor they make of Mahua is their energy booster and also believe that gods will cure them.

The Sabar tribal community was affected severely in terms of life and livelihood, and their major economic activity – collecting mahua flowers and Sal leaves was also hit badly (The New India Express, 2020)

The lockdown has hurt the tribal economy in addition to the spread of COVID-19 among tribal youngsters. The tribal people in India had to deal with heavy loss of income, restrictions on the collection and sale of minor forest products, living in remote areas, lack of doctors and healthcare workers, lack of awareness, reliance on herbal and forest-based medicine, and the implementation of projects for forest acquisition without informing the village council.

#### *Health status of Baiga village*

- Severely malnourished pre-school children are found because milk is not available
- Drinking water availability is there but the content has high fluoride
- The consumption of calcium, thiamin, riboflavin, iron and other micro-nutrients is lower among Baiga
- Sick cell anemia is the major morbid condition and goiter is common.
- Malaria cases are highly reported
- The use of medicinal plants is found to a larger extent
- They depend on primary clinics as access to PHC and SHC is difficult
- Cases of anemia and RCH among the women are found (Debnath, 2014)



**Figure-1: Map of Madhya Pradesh****Figure-2: District map of Shahdol District**

### III. OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this study is to find out the change in the life of the Baiga community of the Dhanpuri area due to the spread of covid-19 and sudden lockdown in the country:

- To investigate the level of awareness of covid-19 among the Baiga community.
- To understand the change in their socio-economic life due to the lockdown.
- To find the role of government during a pandemic.

### IV. DATA AND METHODS

The present study is based on descriptive research design. The universe of the study are 70 households in ward Silpari, which is one of the wards inside the

town of Dhanpuri of Shahdol district and a tribal populated ward from which 30 households were taken as samples for data collection. Both primary and secondary data have been collected by using an interview schedule, observation, and from nagar-palika and councilor of the ward.

## V. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

All the respondents were above the age of 25, from which 20 respondents were female and 10 respondents were male. 93% of respondents are engaged in the work of brick kilns.

Most of the big tribes were uneducated, and only a few of them have studied to class 5<sup>th</sup>. Although there is a school in their area children are least interested in studies. They are more inclined towards earning as they get married at an early age in some cases before 18 also. Mostly their primary occupation is working in brick kiln factories which is a seasonal occupation, and their secondary occupation is selling forest products.

**Table-1: Sample Characteristics**

Characteristics of Respondents	Proportion of total (in %)
Proportion in age group 25-35	6.7
Proportion in age group 36-45	70
Proportion in age group 46-55	13.3
Proportion in age group 56-65	10
Female respondents in the total sample	66.7
Proportion of Illiterate	76.7
Education upto primary class	16.7
Working in the brick kilns	93.3
With monthly family income < Rs 3000	23.3
With monthly family income Rs 3000-4000	66.7
With monthly family income > Rs 4000	10
Monthly family income < Rs.1000 after lockdown	60
Monthly family income Rs-1000-1500 after lockdown	40
Heard about covid 19 in the month of March	83.3
Heard about covid 19 in the month of April	16.7

Source: Compiled by the authors

The Baiga tribe of researched area Silpari don't have much knowledge about covid-19, the only thing they know is the 'Corona'. The first time they heard about covid-19 was in the month of April 2020. They have no in-depth knowledge of how it can spread, or why are we asked to follow social distancing, or use masks and sanitizers. Their source of information about the virus was



through TV and the local nagar -palika who told them to stay inside their home and not to come in contact with others.

They do follow the guidelines of lockdown in their area. There was a strict rule not to come outside, and they stayed at their own houses without any social gatherings. The only time they use to go out was in the morning as there is no facility for a washroom inside the houses. And even if Government approaches them for making toilet inside the houses, they are more comfortable to go out in the field near the forest and while returning they also collect wood and coal not for selling purpose but for their personal use as they prepare food in chulha which is a traditional stove made from mud, and they uses wood inside it to make food. Some people even prepare food inside which is also a traditional stove made from iron or sometimes with mud also, and in this they fill coal and burn it inside to prepare food. Here the tribal people sometimes collect coal more than their actual need and sell it to other community members or native area people, as the area in which they leave is a coal mines area (though they and other people in that area do it illegally).

The lockdown has affected their economic life badly as these are the people who work in brick factories almost half of the year from the month January to June, and the rest of the month they go for selling wood and coal which is their secondary work, but this time due to lockdown in the month march they lost their jobs before their actual time and faced a financial problem. The only thing they got during the first lockdown was food which included rice and sugar from the local government so that they can survive. They were not even allowed to go out during the month of March, April and May to sell their forest product. These are the people who work on daily wages so there was no chance of having savings.

Tribal people love to celebrate their functions and rituals by dancing and singing together. They are always found in groups, they love social gatherings. But during the lockdown phase, they stayed at their home without celebrating any kind of functions of marriage, rituals of funerals, and festivals as they used to do. There were no such cases, because in the Baiga community, Baiga women are equally responsible for everything in the family and their advice plays an equal role as men while taking any important decision of the family.

The local nagar-palika members informed them about the condition of corona and lockdown with the help of mikes and speakers. They also distributed free masks and hand sanitizers to the families but the masks and sanitizers were distributed only once in the month of April. After that, no masks or sanitizer were given to the people. All the people according to the size their families were getting rice and wheat every month during the lockdown at the provision of 5 kg grains per person. For example, if there is a family of four, they will get 10 kg rice and 10 kg wheat, and in between they may also get turmeric powder, salt, sugar, and spices. Besides this, sometimes people from the main city visited their area and distributed essential food items and grocery products even though the government provided Rs. 500 in the month of complete lockdown in the bank account of women. Approximately every woman got Rs. 500 except a few who had some issue with their bank accounts.

With a face-to-face interaction with the councilor of the ward (research area), I could understand that the female came from the Baiga community and was

herself very less aware about her power and rights. She is a widow living with her son who is 16 year old and married with a 17 year old girl and had a daughter of 7 months. Her son was working as a daily wage worker for construction at a primary school near by his school. The head master in the school was taking work from that boy without even motivating him to study. No source of motivation or awareness was seen among the students or adults for education.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The researcher drew the following conclusions from the findings of the study and theoretical propositions of the related literature. The study area is economically backward; the basic amenities of life, like housing, safe drinking water, sanitation, and electricity are not so much available to common people. Working in brick kilns is their main source of livelihood. As there are no irrigation facilities and less water supply people mainly don't go for agriculture. Lack of alternative sources of livelihood is the main reason for their poverty the only secondary work they have is selling wood and coal.

The people of the study area are mainly uneducated and have very less awareness about the value of education, the children don't go to school after 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> class the school in that area have school till class 5<sup>th</sup>, having only 3 classroom and 3 teachers which I felt is not sufficient for the school Marrying between the age of 16-18 is very common now also, the men and women both share equal status in family normally women are more hardworking than men because women do both the work as manual labor in brick kiln to all the domestic work of house even during the time of my fieldwork women were more active in responding. There is no difference seen between a girl and a boy child many of the families have only two daughters and were very happy with the daughters, and there was no such wish to get a boy.

Taking tobacco and liquor are still in the waves in Baiga customs but now they are not allowed by their local police to make liquor at home for their personal use and if they got caught by the police or local owner of the liquor shop, they have to pay a penalty of 1000rs.

They still follow their traditional culture and norms though they are connected with the cities the difference was – the nose pin, Baiga women never used to get their nose pierced. but now many women were seen wearing nose pins. The reason behind this change was due to the interaction with other communities they found women wearing nose pins that looked attractive to them.

All the people were aware of the corona and also call it Hawai in their local language, they also followed rules during the first phase of the lockdown due to the fear of the police. but after that, they started coming out. And do all their work.

Many of them lost their primary jobs and depended upon secondary work to fulfill their financial need, after the month of June the help they were getting from the government had stopped. now they are only getting items that are given to the people below the poverty line by BPL card.

These people are underdeveloped and economically weak, their daily routine is eating-working-sleeping and this is so without any further change in life. The sudden lockdown has affected them financially because they may get wheat and rice from the government but they also need some other basic items like



vegetables, milk, tobacco, liquor, clothes, and many more. The one main problem with them was they were sitting idle as they cannot go anywhere, and this was making them more sorrowful. Due to lack of money they were not able to celebrate any festival like they used to. During field visit though there was no covid-19 in that area, still, the safety protocol was mandatory to follow yet there no one was wearing a mask or using sanitizers, and there was no social distancing.

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