

Serving the Underserved; Our Collaborative Effort with Lok Shakti Samiti, Raigarh in the times Covid-19 Crisis.

COVID-19, the deadly pandemic pushed the world into an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. Initially underestimated, the Corona Outbreak has affected every one of us in one way or the other. However, consequential decisions taken by the Indian Government, starting with the implementation of a blanket lockdown, have had a disastrous impact on the lives of people from marginalized communities across India. Such communities include that of immigrant workers, sex workers, trans-gender, tribal communities and other poverty struck communities.

Stories in the media reflecting the various kinds of suffering such people underwent in trying to cope with this crisis, has only strengthened feelings of disheartenment. Many images across various media outlets shook the conscience of this nation. Partly, they have served the purpose of building pressure on the government and other civil society organizations to act swiftly. However, there continues to be stubborn ignorance over many marginalised communities living far away from mainstream society. Such communities have often been regarded as politically, socially and economically, “insignificant”.

One such set of communities are Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), called so according to official documents. These are one of the most vulnerable, disadvantaged and diligently ignored sections of people in the country. Apart from being small in number, the PVTGs have been consistently been low on various indicators of Human Development Index (HDI). A total number of 75 tribes have been recognised by the Government of India under this category. Among which 6 of them, namely, Pahadi Korwa, Pando, Birhor, Bhunjiya, Kamar and Baiga belong to the state of Chhattisgarh.

A majority population belonging to the aforementioned PVTGs reside in one of the most interior forest villages in the Dharamjaigarh block of Raigarh district. The respective communities live under severe deprivation of basic facilities like health and education.

Impact of Lockdown on Livelihood:

In this particular piece, we shall focus on the Pahadi Korwas and the Pandos, whom we had the opportunity to meet during our (the Foundation) response measure to the COVID crisis.

The Pahadi Korwas and the Pando tribes derive their livelihood from hunting and collection of Minor Forest Produce (MFP) like Mahua, Tendupatta, Herbs, Chharota etc. Usually they gather MFPs and sell them to middlemen and vendors in Dharamjaigarh. They earn maximum Livelihood during the summer season, where in they get to collect Mahua and Tendupatta. They earn between Rs 250 and 300 a day for about 2 months in the summer. It was during this time in 2020 that the Corona outbreak had occurred and changed their lives in unprecedented ways.

A complete shutdown of socio-economic activity across the country and the state in particular, has severely impacted their prospects of livelihood. Thereby, further reducing their meagre earnings to that of even below the minimum. Through existing market linkages, middlemen and local vendors, they are struggling to make money for subsistence on a daily basis. The

economic crisis has made them even more vulnerable to the changing dynamics of the economy, by the day.

Public Distribution System (PDS), a government welfare measure, has been put in place to supposedly provide these families with dry ration (rice, dal, edible oil, sugar, salt and other necessities) monthly, and more so during times of uncertainty. On the contrary, in reality, the families were provided only rice but no other prescribed essentials. As a consequence, the communities were left with no choice but to put their families, including women and children in starvation and malnourishment.

Our Collaborative initiative with Lok Sakti Samiti:

Lok Sakti Samiti (LSS) is an organisation working with PVTG communities for more than 2 years. It is through members of LSS that we The Azim Premji Foundation learnt that majority of women (more than 90%) belonging to these communities are anaemic. Also, not to exaggerate but almost all the children are severely malnourished. Such a situation is unfortunate and disheartening to see. Children with such tender hearts, ones who were supposed to enjoy the fruits of childhood are deprived of basic food and severely malnourished.

Responding to such an existing crisis, in times of the current pandemic, Azim Premji Foundation has collaborated with Lok Shakti Samiti. Out of 71 families of Pahadi Korwa, Pando, Maajhi, Uraav communities from 5 Gram Panchayats; Vijaynagar, Sonpur, Kadhamdhodhi, Salka and Kumhichua in Dharamjaigarh block. Dharamjaigarh comes under Schedule V areas of with its geographical challenges, containing mountain and dense forest. The 5 Gram Panchayats mentioned which are 40 km from the town of Dharamjaigarh are located in geographically challenging terrains, surrounded by mountains and forests. It's difficult for the general administration to reach the people living in the villages of the Gram Panchayats (GPs). 73 severely malnourished children have been recognised from these GPs. They were provided with nutritious dry ration for 3 months in the form of food packets. These food packets contain various nutrient rich pulses (3kg), soybean (0.25kg), peanuts (1kg), jaggery (2kg), daliya (2kg), Edible Oil (1Lt), rice (10kg), salt (1kg) and milk powder(1kg)).



Pictures: Children weights are being measured during the distribution of food packets

In the first phase, with the support of Lok Sakti Samiti volunteers & staff we have supported the chosen 73 children for one month. Presently, we continue to support them for 2 more months. In addition to the 73 children, we are also supporting 25 other malnourished children from the Pahadi Korwa community, whose names were not furnished in the first phase due to logistic mishaps. A total of 98 children from the above mentioned economically disadvantaged and socially marginalized communities have been benefiting from this initiative.

In the times of this unprecedented, humanitarian crisis, there is a lot more left to do. However, it gives us the immense satisfaction in responsibly delivering our part of the service necessary. Both, The Foundation and Lok Shakti Samiti, have played an instrumental role in not just recognising the problem at stake but by addressing such a serious problem in the times of crisis. Our presence in such a challenging location like Dharamjaigarh gave us an opportunity to know and take an initiative without which we could not do what we have done now. An activity other than considered of having the potential of creating “insignificant” change, has in contrast, made a significant difference in the lives of these vulnerable tribal communities struggling to survive amidst uncertainty and chaos. Though small, this is a remarkable step towards building a *just, humane, equitable, sustainable society*.

While expressing gratitude for the service provided, one of the elders belonging to the Kadhamdhodhi Gram Pachayat, repeatedly mentioned the word daan (donation, charity) and emphasized on the positive blessing of such actions. However, we remained humble in receiving the praise and continue believing in duty and responsibility.

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