

# Existence of Tribal Communities Before and After the COVID-19 Pandemic; A Historical Outlook

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**Abstract:** Tribes in India are as old as the oldest Indian civilization, in fact they are the oldest existing race of human being. Apparently they are also the carrier of age old traditions and customs. They are the sole preservers of the age old customs and traditions. Paradoxically looking at the existence of the tribal communities across India, these communities could be seen in a different world of their own and being living almost far off from the main stream they receive some particular advantages also, which the mainstream Indian society can never enjoy. Some of the tribal communities are so much alienated from the mainstream Indian society, and few even maintain their age old customs of animism and savagery. However, being separated from the mainstream Indian society, they have developed their own set of organisation and working patterns. In the present day circumstances, these communities are coming more closer to the mainstream society, and being involved with such a society, their mode of existence changed radically. These communities' dynamic growth can be seen in the present day activities of the tribal communities in India. And what seems to be impacting their mode of existence in the present day situation, is the impact of Covid-19. The introduction of Covid-19 Pandemic in India, has shifted their ways of living in a radical manner.

**Keywords:** race and tradition, mode of living, difficulty in existence, suffering, advancement, advantages and disadvantages, pandemic

## 1. Introduction

Tribe is a social division in the traditional society consisting of families linked by social, economic, religious or blood ties, with a common culture and dialect. A tribe community possesses certain qualities and characteristics that make it a unique cultural, social, and political entity. Tribes are also known by the name 'Adivasis' in India. However 'Adivasis' is the collective term for tribes of the Indian subcontinent, who are indigenous to places within India wherein they live, either as foragers or as tribalistic sedentary communities. The term is also used for ethnic minorities, such as Chakmas of Bangladesh, Khas of Nepal, and Vedda of Srilanka. It needs to be mentioned that, tribes living in India are scattered all over the nation. In every state of India there are several kinds of tribes living across those states. The tribal communities are termed so because of their sameness in living pattern and they share among themselves certain characteristics features of their communities, which identifies these groups. But the origin and race of these tribal people are several. There are many differences among themselves also. Each and every tribal community has their own set of traditions and customs. Their rigidity of custom and stern faith of their living mode, makes them a kind of their own. The tribe identity is different from the mainstream Indian society's peoples identity. Their food habit, livelihood earning, education, medication and relationships are very much different from the mainstream Indian society. Their day to day activities are not akin to any other existing group of people, and this is what separates them and also gives them a separate and unique identity of their own. They share a stronger community bond unlike any other community, because of their reliance on each other for living. Their hunting practices, agricultural activities, religious practices are very much unique in a sense because the modern day civilization are unable to apprehend the meaning and concept of these people's age old tribal traditions, which at time becomes savage in nature. From the early vedic age the existence of hunting

communities, people living in jungles can be seen. These peoples are thus a attraction to the modern day, so called sophisticated society. In the modern day, however these communities are advancing with rapidity because of their close proximity with the mainstream society. They are now getting involved in several activities of the mainstream society and as a consequence becoming a part of it. The growth or the rise of these communities to the Indian mainstream society is a crucial point of discussion. It can be seen that, there are plenty of tribal communities in India. In West Bengal, there are tribal communities such as, Asur, Khond, Hajong, Ho, Pahariya, Rabha, Santhals, Savar, Bhumij, Bhutia, Chik Baraik, Kisan, Kora, Lodha, Kheria, Khariam, Mahali, Mal, Orson, etc. Such a diverse range of tribal communities only in West Bengal points out the fact that, these communities are more in numbers and located in different places.

This paper intends to point out a brief history of the tribal communities in India and their race. This paper would also focus on the daily activities of the tribal communities living across India. This article intends to highlight the peculiar mode of living of these tribal communities, scatteredly living on several parts of India. This paper intends to trace a brief history of tribal existence in Indian history. This article would also be focusing on such key aspects of tribal existence being alienated from the mainstream society. This paper would be also looking at the advantages and disadvantages of tribal living in the time of endemics and pandemics. This article would also discuss certain key phenomenon regarding the tribal mode of education, medication and food habits. The article would be also crucial in revealing the developmental growth of the tribal communities. However, apart from this, the key argument of this paper would be to tracing and presenting a brief outline history of tribal existence before and after Covid-19 pandemic. This article would also be crucial in pointing out the difficulties these people faced during the Corona pandemic. This article would also be important because this

article would also provide glimpses of the future of these tribes after the Corona pandemic.

It needed to mentioned that, the tribal communities in India are existing from the ancient times. They are in fact one of the oldest race of human beings on earth. They are mainly natives people of a land, because most of the tribal communities do not migrate to any other country unless there is a proper threat or danger in their surviving. And most of the places in India are properly accommodated with foods and other essentials for their surviving, with few exceptions here and there. To point out the race and origin of any tribal community, one must go back to the earliest existence of men, when they were searching for adequate places for living, beginning from the stone age to current day. This current article does not have space enough to include the totality of history of such a particular race or the history of tribal communities race all over India. In India there are several kinds of tribal men, who could be differentiated by their skin colour, height, facial features and other kinds of specifications on their bodies. Judging on that basis, one can very easily comprehend that these men does not belong from one single race because of their obvious differences in their bodily features. And several communities living in several parts, geographically separated also points out their differences. Even their mode of life, customs and habits differentiate them from other communities. It is generally admitted that, present day Adivasi formed after the decline of Indus valley civilization harbouring various degrees of ancestry from ancient hunter gatherers, Indus Valley Civilization people (itself a mixture of ancient hunter-gatherers and people related to, but not descended from, Iranian farmers) , Ancestral North Indians (a mixty of Indus Valley Civilization people and Indo-Aryan migrants, formed after the decline of the Indus Valley Civilization), and Austroasiatic and Tibeto-Burman language speakers. Only the Andamanese people seem to be directly related to the oldest inhabitants of India.

In one place the tribes might be a fruit gatherer or hunter community, they might be a wage earners, they might be servants and few tribal communities even practices agriculture. Thus there is a difference between their food habits and activities. And these facts, such as, bodily features, geographical separation, different habits and customs, their differences in living pattern- suggests that there is more than one race of tribal community in India. It is fact that, India has been invaded by many nations with different race, religion and different cultural practices. And this becomes the reason of the amalgamation of race in Indian history. Many a race dominated several parts of India, captured and ruled that particular place for a long time. This makes it possible for the amalgamation of the races and at the time of leaving India, these races left behind their race's features and cultural practices. As a consequence there is so many culture and different kind of men living across India. Pujabis are different from Bengalis and Bengalis are different from people living in the southern part of India. And people living in southern parts of India are different from people living in the Himalayan region. Thus, it could be said that, there are multiple race of men, devided by their appearance, traditions and customs. Such is the case with the tribes of India also. These communities are also a

amalgamated race of men, though these communities are slightly different in preserving their own customs and traditions. Whereas people living in the mainstream socities are diverse in their cultural practices, there are differences in the Punjabi peoples, there are several groups among Bengalis also, there are differences between the southern men also. But the cheif characteristics of tribal communities are that, each community is unique in their cultural practices and there is no further division between these communities. Unlike the mainstream socities, these tribal communities does not have separate groups within their community, they live in cohesion and possesses the same type of living pattern within a particular group of community. Even, these tribal men, marks their body using tattoo or cuts in the body, or wearing a particular piece of artificial jewellery to identify themselves and to bring a feeling of togetherness and brotherhood within that particular community. Tribal communities resistance of their own customs and practices are appreciatable.

Tribal community people live by in various manner. They earn their livelihood in a peculiar manner. There are places in India where tribal peoples are deprived of owning a particular piece of land. People of tribal communities from the ancient times has been living in the jungles far outside the mainstream society. These peoples livelihood depends solely upon natural gatherings of foods. Fruit gathering, herbs gathering, animal hunting are their cheif source of foods in several parts of India. The Kadar tribe of Kerala is one such tribe, which does not own a land. As a consequence they do not practice agricultural activities. This Kadar tribe lives by gathering fruits hunting down animals, and they frequently obtain rice through trade or as wages. They obtain most of their needs such as cardamom and honey from the forests although many Kadar men in work as labourers.<sup>1</sup> The Birhor tribes are forest dwellers and live a nomadic life. Their name itself implies jungle people and they are short with a broad nose. They live a nomadic hunter-gatherer's life and collect forest produce such as honey or sell ropes made from jungle vines in local markets. Their racial characteristics are Proto Australoid and they speak the Birhor language. In the state of Odisha, there lives the Bondo tribes. Attractively dressed, the Bondo or the Bonda tribes living primarily in the highlands of Odisha, they inhabit in picturesque and a ecologically diverse territory in the nation of India.

The appearance of Covid-19 pandemic introduced a new sort of living pattern and mode of existence for this people. Before the appearance of Covid-19, their lives were going in that particular age old manner. But the appearance of the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequent circumstances brought a particular challenge in their mode of living. The resistance that these communities had seemed to be breaking down slowly after the pandemic situation. There mode of living changed slightly because of the introduction of several new rules and regulations to combat Covid-19 pandemic in India. People were barred from coming out of their own houses. The introduction of lockdown has put a stop on their daily life activities carrying on from centuries. Introduction of lockdown means people cannot go out of

<sup>1</sup>Encyclopedia Britannica, 2018

their home, either for work or earning livelihood. After a long gap of centuries such kind of a situation occurred in their lives. Many of the tribal communities struggled for survival and many of them died because of not receiving proper treatment and even food. Cases of the people dying because of some trivial diseases rised in the time of Corona pandemic.

In this point of time, government intervention to help this poor and needy men, became a crucial phenomenon to look at. There are tribes in India who are below the poverty line and they are unable to gather their livelihood because of the impact of Covid-19. It is thus point of time, that the existence pattern of the tribal communities changed significantly. Indian government and helping peoples of the mainstream community reached this communities in order to help them survive. It is a fact that, many a tribal community in the present day has to come in close proximity with the mainstream society for survival because of regular shortages of food and other amenities. They has to come out from their cottages and shelters to gather their livelihood. Constant changes in climate and deforestation resulted in less spaces for this communities. It is not possible now a days in the mass media or digital world to hide in a secluded place. People going out for adventure gets in touch with this communities living in jungles or in hills and this becomes fundamental ruining or even improving their conditions. The rise of tribal communities consciousness about their circumstances resulted in a much want for better conditions. And it is a fact that, living in jungles and struggling to sustain life in the present day, is not a good condition anymore. Life will cease to exist if these people do not come out of their seclusion and these communities are well aware of this fact. Many a species of animal and plants are getting it registered in the red data book and many a species of animal and plants diminished because of pollution and other environmental reasons. And in such a condition it becomes mandatory that certain communities mainly depending upon the natural resources, such as fruits or animal hunting, must come out of their shelters to be able to survive. And it is this reason which made them come out from their seclusion and they had to enrol themselves as workers and servants of the mainstream societies in order to live.

A working paper, pointed out such facts regarding male-female workers in rural and urban areas before lockdown,

Pre-lockdown work status by region and sex (%)

	Rural		Urban	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Self-employed in agriculture	30	35	1	0
Self-employed in non-agriculture	10	6	15	15
Regular wage/salaried	11	8	31	40
Casual workers in agriculture	16	18	1	0
Casual workers in non-agriculture	26	25	48	39
Unemployed	5	4	3	3
Out of labour force	2	4	1	3
N	1330	1513	932	1108 <sup>2</sup>

Thus, deforestation and species natural resources extinction resulted in their coming out of their communities. They had to come in close proximity of the mainstream society to live properly. In this situation Covid-19 becomes fundamental in furthering their cause to come out and amalgamate with the

mainstream society. The social workers working for the betterment of the society, reached this men with foods and other necessary amenities by crossing rivers, mountains and jungles. This phenomenon resulted in their coming in more closer to the mainstream society. Thus this tribes had to forsake their own kind of living in order to survive. The impact of Covid-19, not only on the house hold earning of the tribes but also on the house hold of several other communities can be seen, in the statistics given below,

Impact of households by income levels and identity (%)

	Consuming less food than before	Cannot afford a week's worth of essentials	Had to take a loan	Cannot pay rent
Caste				
SC	86	58	43	90
ST	68	36	22	68
OBC	77	43	38	79
General	84	48	40	88
Religion				
Hindu	79	46	36	84
Muslim	89	63	49	86
Others	72	39	24	93
Migrant Status				
Not a migrant	79	45	36	86
Intra-state migrant	80	58	42	87
Inter-state migrant	88	64	28	87
Main income source of the household				
Self-employment in agriculture	66	25	28	62
Self-employment in non agriculture	81	44	38	75
Regular wage/salaried	83	57	37	87
Casual labour in agriculture	86	42	42	78
Casual labour in non-agriculture	86	58	40	86
Other	88	64	39	90
Household income (Rs.) in February				
Less than Rs. 2000	77	54	35	83
Rs. 2000 to Rs. 10,000	82	50	37	87
More than Rs. 10,000	69	34	33	79
N	4653	4580	4930	923 <sup>2</sup>

Consuming less food than before Cannot afford a week's worth of essentials Had to take a loan Cannot pay rent

But, it needed to be mentioned that, Covid-19 pandemic did not only created suffering and pains only, there is also another positive side of the impact. The consequence of the lockdown may well have been detrimental in their way to cause them suffering and disaster came into their communities, but there is another important thing which demands notice. The fact that these communities living far off and detached from the mainstream community are less affected by the Covid-19 pandemic in some places. Few tribes in India and other parts of the world did not even registered a single case of Covid-19. Because of living far away from the mainstream society, these people has less chances of coming into close proximity of Covid-19 affected person. And many a communities across the world did not even know the existence of Covid-19 pandemic. Being

living in a far off distance some communities never really suffered any pangs of Covid-19, it is their mode of living in a distant place which made it possible for them not to get affected by the virus. Lockdown intended for the people living in their own places and not to come out, in other words in meant secluded living of these peoples.

Several tribes across the world lived and continuing to live without any effect of the Covid-19 pandemic. Their mode of living made it possible for them. Many a tribes, even in the present day survive and rely totally on the natural resources. Consequently this people had no concern for the fatal virus spreading all over the world and increasing the rate of fatalities everyday. The peculiar advantages that these tribes are not available to the mainstream societies, not only in India but across the world.

But to mention some of the odds and difficulties, which several tribal communities faced because of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is noteworthy to point out that, the chief aspect that is severely affected by the Covid-19 across India is the rise of the tribal communities in the mainstream Indian community. The education of the tribal communities is severely effected by the Covid-19 pandemic. It is point worthy to mention that, these tribal communities are recognised by the constitution of India under 'schedule 5' of the constitution. And that there are around 645 distinct tribes in India. Article 366 (25) defines scheduled tribes as "such tribes or tribal communities or parts of or groups within such tribes or tribal communities as are deemed under 'Article 342' to be scheduled tribes for the purposes of this constitution". And there is a particular reservation for these scheduled tribes student in the academic section in Indian education system. These tribal communities are rising in the academic field with tremendous pace and vitality. But the impact of Covid-19 and the consequent lockdown became a curse in their lives. Schools, colleges are closed since March 2019 and students are falling apart in meeting the current need of education.

Since the lockdown, education took a different turn and the conventional mode of education changed significantly. Education became online and most of scheduled tribe student suffered because of their inability to attend classes online or giving exams in the online mode. There is a multifarious problem regarding online education of this scheduled tribe students, who are one of the most backward students in the academic fields. Many of the students' families are below poverty line and buying a electronic device, such as smartphone, laptop or desktop is unimaginable. Problem does not only lie on the purchase of such electronic devices, many of the houses are deprived of electricity connections, many houses can not even afford electricity. These families of schedule tribes are not even in the contention to stand in the digital world of the modern day existence. Even if these students borrow smartphones, they are unable to use it properly because of their lack of proper knowledge to use such smartphones. The difficulty that these candidates are facing is unimaginable. These is the worst impact that these students are facing at the current moment. Students are failing to meet the need of the hour and thus education is effected most for this category of community, and for this reason drop out rates are

increasing.<sup>2</sup> Thus their growth hampered in a worst possible way. These communities future in living in such a pandemic situation seems to be effecting their future endeavours. If such situations continues in this way, they will not be able to prosper with that amount of speed and integrity. Government need to come forward with specific plans for such kind of situations in order to maintain equality among all category of classes and students in the academic fields.

To sum up on the discussion it can be said that, tribal communities existence shifted in several centuries. The diverse range of tribal communities across India and othe parts of the globe seems to be evolving day by day. Even though these communities are the best preservers and maintainers of age old traditions and customs. They are made to change or accommodate themselves with the existing pattern and mode of survival in the age of digital media and increasing pollution affecting the environment. These communities thus, altered their mode of existence in order to survive in the world. These tribal communities are left with no options but to come in close proximity with the mainstream so called sophisticated society. These communities had to leave their past behind and change their ways of livelihood to adjust with the present day scenario, specifically at the time of pandemics and other endemics. Thus there is a dominant shift or visible change in their approach to life before the Covid-19 pandemic and after it. People of ont only these communities but other communities also had to change their ways of life in order to adjust themselves with the present day world. The Covid-19

<sup>2</sup>Muzna Alvi, Manvi Gupta, *Learning in times of lockdown: how Covid-19 is affecting education and food security in India*, International Society for Plant Pathology and Springer Nature B.V. 2020. see in details, " According to UNESCO, approximately 0.32 billion students in India have been affected by school closures due to the Covid-19 pandemic (UNESCO 2020). Of these, almost 84% reside in rural areas while 70% attend Government schools. As of 2015, the average dropout rate across secondary schools in India was 17.06% with higher numbers for rural areas (NUEPA 2016). Past evidence suggests that short term disruptions in schooling often lead to permanent dropouts among the poor (Reddy and Sinha 2010). One reason for this is the loss of parents' employment for which child labour is leveraged as a substitute. The inevitable economic backlash of the lockdown is likely to reduce the earning capacity for many poor households and may increase the opportunity cost of sending children to school, especially in rural India. As a result, children may be pushed into the labour market (Bharadwaj et al. 2019). Dropout rates are likely to be even more severe for girls who are often left out of household resource allocation decisions (Prakash at al. 2017). Girls may also be required to undertake additional household responsibilities as parents increase their own labour hours to cope with economic distress. Similarly, these economic shocks are likely to have a greater impact on children from communities that are marginalized on the basis of their caste, tribe and religion, and already experience higher dropout rates (NUEPA 2016). Dropping out, in turn, may lead to increases in child marriages, domestic violence, early pregnancies and a plethora of other development issues (Birchall 2018). Without school fee waivers in the interim, dropout rates are likely to get further exacerbated as educational expenses become unaffordable for many. Although some state Governments such as those of Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh and Jharkhand tried to initiate waivers for tuition and other school expenses during the lockdown period, private schools were unwilling to implement these measures."

pandemic shuffled their order of existence. Before such a pandemic people of these communities were less concern with their surroundings but the impact of such a magnanimous pandemic, people of these communities are getting more and more aware about their surroundings and these people are now thinking about a shift in their ways to prosperity and future. And there is a severe introduction of inequality between the classes of students.<sup>3</sup> Keeping in mind the advantages and specifically the disadvantages of the Covid-19 pandemic, the particular situation can be considered as a border for separating the tribal communities existence before and after the Covid-19 pandemic.

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<sup>3</sup>MuznaAlvi, ManviGupta, *Learning in times of lockdown: how Covid-19 is affecting education and food security in India*, International Society for Plant Pathology and Springer NatureB.V.2020.seeindetails," A key step taken by some educational institutions to ensure continuation of curriculum has been to shift lectures online, requiring both students and teachers to use personal home computers and reliable internet. If school and university examinations happen as scheduled, without compensatory classes, it is likely to disadvantage students who cannot access these computer and network resources. However, postponement of examinations can cause a delay for students in entering the job market. The discourse on education during the lockdown period has been essentially focused on online or televised learning. In fact, the only mention of education in the Government of India's USD 260 billion fiscal stimulus package is the context of online and digital learning platforms. A number of Indian states including Mizoram, West Bengal and Kashmir have implemented daily televised lectures as the Human Resource Development (education) Ministry ties up with television service providers to allocate specific channels for this purpose. However, these measures preclude the rural and urban poor with limited or no access to electricity and network resources. Moreover, online classes are being facilitated largely for students who attend urban private schools, and already outperform Government school students on most indicators of learning (Annual Status of Education Report 2018). The higher use of online learning platforms by private schools will increase this disparity.