

● TACKLING COVID

Amidst the challenges posed by Covid, a tribal forest village in Madhya Pradesh seems to have reinforced the realisation that farms, forests, village commons and collective knowhow together buffer tribals against vulnerability

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COMPARED TO THE densely populated urban areas, Covid-19 pandemic has not been severe so far among the indigenous communities in India. Physical distancing is any case the norm in these regions, given the remoteness of tribal hamlets and houses located at some distance from each other. Their major occupations are subsistence farming or foraging in the forest, which also ensure distancing by default. The only concern was about migrant villagers coming back from other parts of the country. According to estimates, around 55% of the 10.4 crore tribal population live outside tribal blocks, and many of them are seasonal migrants. When the first national lockdown was announced in March 2020, markets, factories and construction work came to a standstill. Unable to pay rent or buy food, most migrant workers were stranded in the places of their informal occupation. Many of them had begun the journey towards their villages but got stranded due to lack of transport.

In December 2019, when the first coronavirus infection was detected in Kerala, tribal migrants working in the state had little clue about its repercussions. About 50 tribals from a village named Ghughri in the central Indian state of Madhya Pradesh, were part of this 'guest worker' community (as they are called in Kerala). As part of a collaborative action research on adaptive skilling in tribal agriculture [Adaptive Skilling through Action Research (ASAR)], we have been interacting with the people of Ghughri since 2018. Gond community of Ghughri village has been a captive labour force in managing the forests for a century and a half now. These forests lie close to a plant fossil national park and are known for their medicinal wealth. Ghughri villagers picked up cultivation skills pretty fast and now comfortably grow millets, paddy, maize, pulses, oilseeds and some vegetables.



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After two months from the end of the major lockdown, we discussed the impact of such closures, with ten households of Ghughri. Lockdown experience was more or less similar for these families. Seven out of these ten households had someone annually migrating to Kerala after the rabi harvest in January-February. All of them reached home once the transport facilities resumed, spending the required time at the quarantine centre in the government school hostel about 8 km away from Ghughri.

Ghughri villagers grow a highly diverse set of food grains. Common rabi

crops here are sweet peas (*bataraa*), lentil (*masoor*), flax seeds (*aalasi*), and mustard (*rayee*). After February, it is lean season for farming and collection of tendu leaves, chironji seeds and mahua flowers peak in May. Households gear up to prepare the land, gather seeds and other inputs for the upcoming kharif (June-Nov). In kharif, they generally sow paddy (*dhaan*), maize (*makka*), *bodu* (*vodu*), little millet (*lutki*), red gram (*arhar*), niger (*ramtil*) and black gram (*luraal*).

Apart from the inconvenience in movement restrictions and closure of

markets, there wasn't any serious issue because of lockdown. They were anyway not intending to sell their produce. Yet, as soon as the lockdown was lifted, four families sold some surplus produce. Among the produces sold, peas and lentil were in some notable volume (100 kg and 50 kg respectively per household). Paddy, flaxseed and mustard were sold in quantities ranging from 5 to 20 kg. A major portion of their produce was stored for consumption by the family. If that wasn't enough for the entire year, they relied on public food distribution scheme.

Since farming is a family occupation, only a few operations needed outside labour, and that used to be met by the practice of exchanging labour days with fellow villagers. Thus, tribal farmers rarely faced a scarcity of labour. A combination of forest produce collection, farming, seasonal migration and wage labour in the forest protection tasks, maintained diversity of livelihoods and food in Ghughri.

Migrant members of the seven families mentioned earlier reached Ghughri in the second week of April. Most of them are in their 20s. As

migrant labour, they worked in the spice plantations of Kerala for about four months every year. The surroundings of these plantations remind them of Ghughri, apparently. The food there was sufficient but not as nutritious or satisfactory as back home. They were given workers' quarters to stay and ₹12,000 per head every month. Expenditure on food and other essentials came to almost ₹3,000 for a month. Around ₹5,000 to ₹8,000 may be spent on travel for commute and on some leisure trips during their stint as guest workers in Kerala. Each migrant manages to save around ₹30,000. This comes handy to be spent on things like a pair of bulls, an upcoming wedding in the family or a new mobile phone. Usually, plantation owners take care of their medical expenses. During the lockdown, many found it tough to access health services and transport. If some safe and reliable employment was available, they would not think of leaving Ghughri.

In the discussion on Covid impact and how to evade food and livelihood crises in such future scenarios, two things came out clearly—part-time rural employment opportunities and intensifying agriculture sustainably—first for nutritional security. Both of these correspond to the project ASAR. Efforts at sustainable intensification in agriculture and food systems mean that even when local millets and pulses fetch good prices in cities, commerce doesn't take nourishment away from the plates of tribals.

Cultivating millets and pulses is also less demanding in terms of inputs and capital, as also less climate risky than usual commercial crops. But their sustained productivity depends on soil fertility which in turn depends on two things—nutrient flows from the forests and local cattle feeding on the biomass around. People of Ghughri are now trying to rejuvenate their eroded grazing lands and over-exploited forests through collective action.

Tribal welfare and livelihoods depend on the integrity of their agro-ecology more than the freebies received from various quarters.

Maintaining food diversity and soil fertility without financial burden become the planks of sustainable intensification in Ghughri. Amidst the challenges posed by Covid, this picturesque village seems to have reinforced the realisation that farms, forests, village commons and collective knowhow together buffer tribals against vulnerability.