

Pahari Korwa Tribe of Chhattisgarh: Concerns, COVID-19 and Building Forward Better

Pahari Korwas are classified as Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) by the Government of India. Mostly residing in hills and remote rural areas of Chhattisgarh, they have a distinct cultural history and largely depend on small-scale farming, fishing, hunting and foraging forest produce. As per the [Tribal Research and Training Institute](#) of the Government of Chhattisgarh, the population of Pahari Korwas (numbering 37,472 as per Census 2005-06) has increased to more than 40,000 in 2015-16.

Members of the Pahari Korwa tribe face a number of challenges. Their remote location hinders their access to government schemes and benefits, and as a result Pahari Korwas perform very low on health and education parameters. Economically as well, a majority of the Pahari Korwa households fall below the poverty line

Targeted development of the PVTGs

In an effort to ensure targeted development policies for the benefit of the PVTGs, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs has implemented the 'Development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs)' scheme from 2008. Under the scheme, Conservation-cum-Development (CCD) Plans are to be prepared by State governments based on their assessment of the development concerns of the PVTGs in their state.

As a centrally sponsored scheme, the Central Government provides 100% financial assistance to the states based on their proposals for development of the PVTGs in the sectors of education, housing, land distribution, land development, agricultural development, animal husbandry, construction of link roads, installation of non-conventional sources of energy for lighting purpose, social security or any other innovative activity meant for the comprehensive socio-economic development of PVTGs and to



fill in the critical gaps.¹ Under this scheme, the government of Chhattisgarh is implementing several projects for the welfare of the PVTGs in the state focusing on residential schools, better healthcare, drinking water infrastructure and promotion of livelihood.²

The Government of Chhattisgarh has set-up two district level agencies for the development of the Pahari Korwa tribe- the Pahari Korwa Development Agency, Ambikapur; and the Pahari Korwa Vikash Cell, Balrampur. In Surguja district, there is a dedicated fund under the Fifth Scheduled Area- the Pahari Korwa Vikas Pradhikaran- which is solely for the development of the Pahari Korwas in the district.

Further, the former Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, Mr. Raman Singh, had formulated a 11-point programme in 2015 for the overall development of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups in the state. The programme included housing facilities; drinking water provision; electrification of villages; medical check-ups; provision of food security; nutritious food to 0–6-year age-group infants and pregnant women and lactating mothers; skill development; social security; distribution of land under Forest Rights Act; distribution of caste and domicile certificates; distribution radios to increase awareness and information levels; distribution of blankets and umbrellas.

Challenges

Despite the targeted schemes for the development of Pahari Korwas, their impact has been lackluster. There is limited interaction and engagement with community members for designing and implementing the projects, resulting in a disconnect between community needs and government initiatives. Further, the limited follow-up and project assessments are not oriented towards ensuring effective reach and utilization by the target beneficiaries.

A major challenge is the low allocation and underutilization of funds allocated for the PVTGs which limits the any improvement in their development status. While Rs. 250 crores (Rs. 2500 million) were budgeted for the development of PVTGs in 2020-21, the actual expenditure was only Rs. 140 crores (Rs. 1400 million), a pittance considering the significant socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups.³ Further, the fund allocation for Chhattisgarh for 2020-21 saw a decrease from the amount utilized in 2019-20.⁴

Another key issue that persists is the mis-identification of Pahari Korwas as ‘Korwas’. The Constitution (Scheduled Tribe) Order (Amendment) Act, 2013 recognises Pahari Korwas and Korwas as two distinct tribes, with the former also being identified as a PVTG. There is though, an absence of caste certificates for most of the Pahari Korwas which results in them getting accidentally clubbed with the Korwas and thus be denied their entitlement to special provisions and government benefits.⁵

¹ Press Information Bureau: Welfare of Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups. July 4, 2019. <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1577166>

² Ministry of Tribal Affairs PVTG Division- Minutes of the meeting of the Project Appraisal Committee with the government of Chhattisgarh. June 19, 2020. https://tribal.gov.in/DivisionsFiles/pvtgMinutes/Chhattisgarh_06052020.pdf

³ Ministry of Tribal Affairs, Budget Estimates 2021-22 <https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/doc/eb/sbe99.pdf>

⁴ Ministry of Tribal Affairs PVTG Division- Minutes of the meeting of the Project Appraisal Committee with the government of Chhattisgarh. June 19, 2020. https://tribal.gov.in/DivisionsFiles/pvtgMinutes/Chhattisgarh_06052020.pdf

⁵ In Chhattisgarh, a Piece of Paper Is Coming in the Way of a Vulnerable Tribe’s Rights; The Wire, June 23, 2018. <https://thewire.in/caste/chhattisgarh-pahari-korwas>

Given the limited to no data available specifically on the status of the Pahari Korwas, they remain marginalized and invisible. Absence of data thus results in policies and schemes that are not adequately aligned to their needs and challenges.

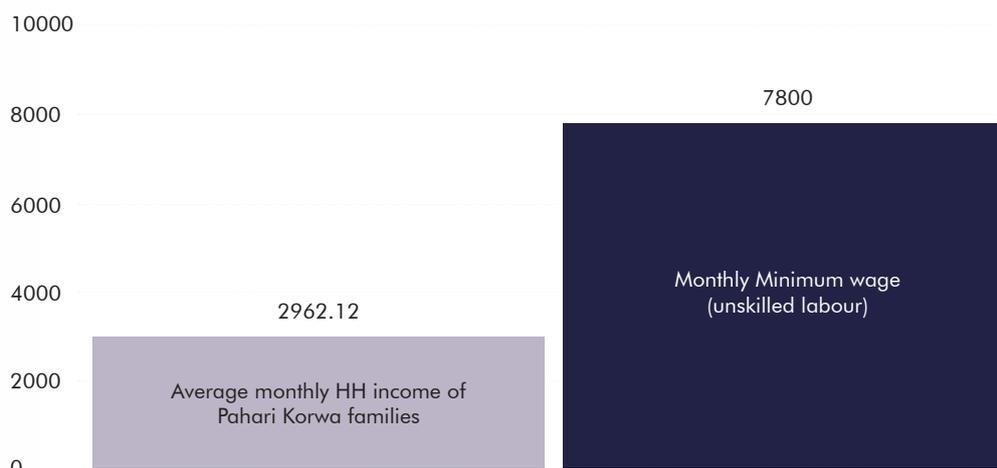
As part of the 100 Hotspots study in 2019-20, primary data was collected from 100 Pahari Korwa households in Chhattisgarh which was further updated and substantiated through community consultations to understand the impact of COVID-19 on the community.

COVID-19 and Aggravated Vulnerabilities

Low Income

The dire poverty indicators of the Pahari Korwas are reflected in the average household income of the surveyed community members. With an average household income below Rs. 3000 per month, they fall well below the poverty line in India. Even the basic minimum wage for unskilled labour in Chhattisgarh (at Rs. 7800 per month⁶) is significantly higher than the average monthly household income of the surveyed Pahari Korwa households.

Income Level (in Rs.)



Food insecurity

While 96% of the surveyed community members possess an Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY) ration card⁷, levels of food insecurity and malnutrition are extremely high in the Pahari Korwa tribe. The nationwide lockdown imposed in March 2020 furthered their food insecurity as government provision of ration was extremely delayed due to breaks in the supply chain and transportation issues. With no support from the government reaching them for months, community members banded together and shared whatever saved up food they had with each other.

With infrequent opening of Anganwadis, inadequate food supply and limited access due to exclusion and discrimination, the food and nutritional security of Pahari Korwa children was under stress even before the lockdown was imposed. Prior to the pandemic, the midday meal (MDM) scheme of the government provided to Pahari Korwa children in schools consisted only of 'dal chawal' (cooked pulses

⁶ Source: Department of Labour and Employment, Government of Chhattisgarh.

⁷ For households classified as poorest of the poor, i.e., income less than Rs. 250 per person per month.

and rice) and not full meals as mandated by the scheme. With the lockdown posing challenges in access to MDM, children from the Pahari Korwa community face worsening instances of malnutrition. Though the central government had mandated provision of MDM in different forms (packaged meals, dry ration, food allowance directly transferred to bank accounts) to ensure continuity of the scheme during the lockdown, no such provisions were made for the community, adversely affecting the health and nutritional status of the children of Pahari Korwas.

Access to healthcare

With Pahari Korwas residing in interior rural areas, the nearest government hospital is more than 10 km away from the community habitation. Given that only 3% of the surveyed members own any transport facility, accessing healthcare remains a major challenge for the Pahari Korwa tribe.

Pahari Korwas also have a near nil annual expenditure on health (less than Rs 1500 per annum) highlighting an absence of a health-seeking attitude and a preference for traditional methods of healing in the community. Fear of contracting COVID-19 and absence of transportation facilities during the lockdown further resulted in community members resorting solely to jadi buti (traditional methods of healing) as a way of healthcare.

Closure of Anganwadi centres also affected the immunization programme of the government, with no vaccinations taking place even after services slowly resumed. Further, community representatives reported an indefinite closure of some Anganwadis, particularly those covering remote and inaccessible Pahari Korwa habitations.

During a health crisis, access to timely and accurate information is crucial. Awareness regarding COVID-19 and necessary related precautions were extremely delayed among the tribal group. During the initial spread of the pandemic, community members did not receive any personal protective equipment (such as masks or sanitizers) or information from the government, and relied predominantly on NGOs for information dissemination and provision of these items.

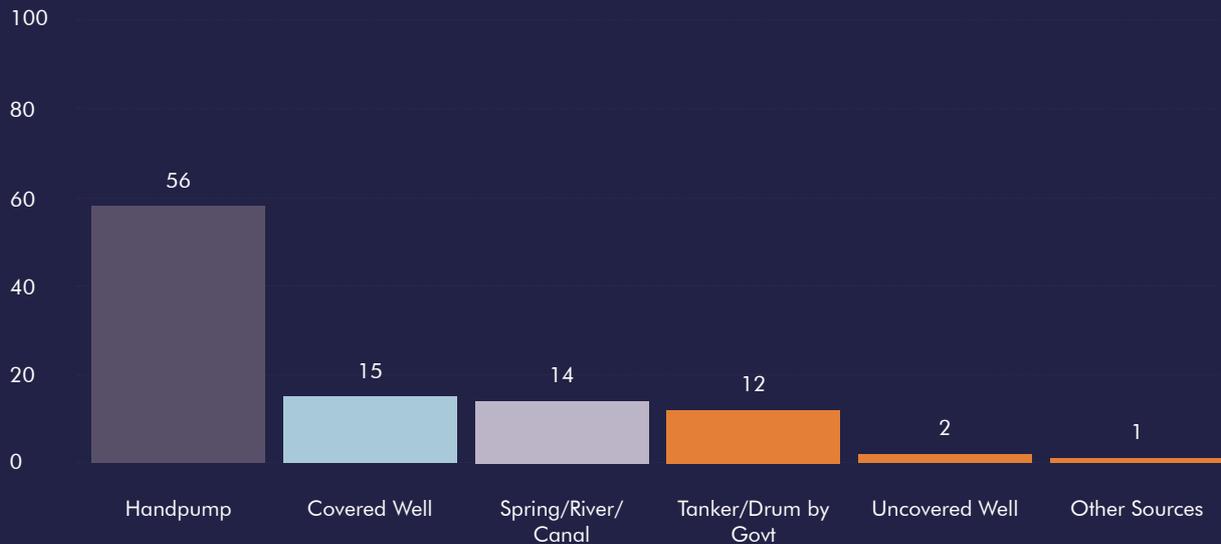
WASH

COVID-19 has further propelled the importance of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) practices to prevent the spread of infection. Access to clean water and toilets has become all the more important with the pandemic. However, primary data highlighted poor access to WASH facilities in Pahari Korwa households.

Only 11% of the surveyed community members reported access to individual toilets, while 1% reported using community toilets. As per NITI Aayog's SDG India Index 2019-20, 100% of rural households in Chhattisgarh have access to individual toilets – grossly unrepresentative of the on-ground reality of the Pahari Korwa tribe.

In terms of access to drinking water, 56% of the surveyed community members use handpumps as their primary source. However, with increasing levels of groundwater contamination in the villages, community members are forced to travel up to 3 km to collect freshwater. Not a single surveyed household reported having access to piped tap water. In times of lockdown and with the propagation of physical distancing measures, access to clean drinking water has been adversely affected for the Pahari Korwa tribe, making them more vulnerable to diseases and infections.

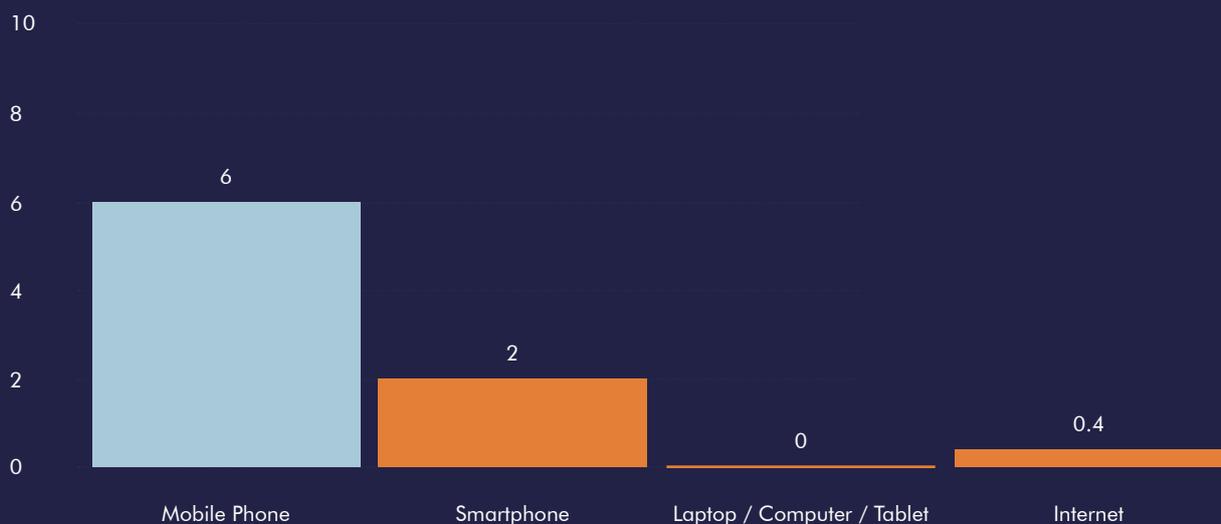
Source of Drinking Water (%)



Education

With a literacy rate of 23.6% (significantly below the average national literacy rate of 78%⁸), the burden of illiteracy is high among the Pahari Korwas. With already limited access to education, the shift to virtual forms of learning has dealt a huge blow to Pahari Korwa children's educational prospects. Only 6% of the surveyed households reported owning mobile phones (of which only 2% have a smartphone) while access to internet connections is even more dismal at less than 1%. The massive digital divide resulted in Pahari Korwa children being unable to attend online classes since the closure of schools in March 2020.

Access to devices (%)



⁸ National Sample Survey (NSS) 75th Round on Household Social Consumption on Education in India (2017-18)

Though there were individual efforts on the part of a few teachers to take physical classes in villages, such instances were few and extremely erratic. While the beginning of 2021 saw a gradual reopening of schools for high school students, classes only took place for an hour a day which is insufficient for children to learn or finish their lessons – especially considering the nearly year-long break in education. The sheer distance at which middle and high schools are located (nearly 5-10 km away from the community habitation) coupled with the fear of contracting COVID-19 deterred parents from sending their children to school, increasing the dropout rate and instances of child labour in the community.

Income loss and rising expenses

The nationwide lockdown resulted in an economic crisis for Pahari Korwa households in Chhattisgarh. Predominantly engaged as agricultural labourers, members of the Pahari Korwa tribe were unable to go to the fields for work facing an immense loss of income. Employment as well as payments under MGNREGA was also at a standstill, with work resuming only from January 2021. However, even then, MGNREGA was unable to accommodate the increased demand for work.

Given the poor availability of employment pre-COVID as well (only up to an average 3.5 months/year), Pahari Korwas would supplement their income through sale of items made from forest produce. However, with lockdown restrictions limiting their ability to sell forest produce and no alternative employment opportunities available in their villages, income of Pahari Korwa households gravely decreased.

Though incomes decreased, expenses increased. None of the schemes or direct benefit transfers launched by the government to alleviate the impact of the pandemic were made available to the community members, even though 96% of households with a bank account have Jan Dhan accounts, thus qualifying for government support.

Civil Society Support

Gyan Sagar Chhattisgarh Sarwagin Vikas Sangathan – a civil society organisation with a history of working with the Pahari Korwa tribe in Chhattisgarh – anchored the data collection process of Pahari Korwa households during the 100 Hotspots study.



The organisation has been extremely active in COVID-19 response and recovery and provided immediate support and relief to the community members post the onset of COVID-19 and nationwide lockdown. They were directly involved in awareness-generation around COVID-19 precautions and distribution of masks and sanitizers among the community members. It was only after the organization started distributing masks that the Panchayats followed suit.

Policy Recommendations

Immediate Recommendations

- Map and assess the impact of COVID-19 on their livelihood, employment, income, healthcare, education, access to basic services and – based on the assessment – formulate and/or revise schemes and provisions in conjunction with the community to adequately mitigate the impact of the pandemic.
- Ensure access to adequate and nutritious food, cash support to partially compensate the income loss and generate decent employment and livelihood opportunities in their villages. Opt for alternate, accessible modes of education, facilitate access to educational materials and ensure targeted support to overcome the learning loss due to school closures.
- Extend information on COVID appropriate behaviour in local languages through dedicated government functionaries and make provisions for masks, sanitizers, soaps, clean water, etc. Health camps may be set-up for awareness-generation about health-seeking behaviour, following proper sanitation and hygiene protocols and vaccination.
- Create facilities near their habitations (managed by government functionaries and trained community volunteers) for the community to access medication, COVID vaccines, nutritious food, health monitoring equipment, isolation centres, etc.

Long-term Recommendations

- Build a robust framework for generating disaggregated data and undertake regular quantitative and qualitative monitoring of the development status of Pahari Korwas with special focus on women, children, youth, persons with disabilities, elderly, etc. to update data and document intersectional vulnerabilities.
- Ensure local governments have capacities and resources to plan and implement need-based schemes in consultation with the community and create mechanisms to ensure accountability of the local government and district administration to recognize, respect and support the community. Allocate adequate budgets and ensure effective utilization of funds for projects meant for the improvement of the development status of Pahari Korwas.
- Improve access to pre-school and 12 years of free and compulsory quality education tracking retention and drop-outs, ensuring mid-day meals, scholarships, text books, uniforms. Improve the quality of hostels and residential schools to accommodate all students who require such facilities. Strengthen the participation of the community through engaging the school management committee members.
- Expand and improve economic activities and livelihood opportunities (including under MGNREGA) available in the villages, expand irrigation facilities to small and marginal farmers, build supportive mechanisms for information dissemination and marketing. Design vocational and skill development programmes to improve the community's self-employability, wage employment and entrepreneurial capacities to break the cycle of poverty.
- Protect the right to habitat of the Pahari Korwas as prescribed under the Forest Rights Act and ensure the protection of not just their land and livelihoods, but encompassing their whole culture and way of life.
- Facilitate engagement of community-led organizations and community members in the district-level development agencies to centre-stage the Pahari Korwas in development design, planning, programming and reviewing.

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CSEI is concerned with deepening democracy and developing our body politic by enhancing the enjoyment by excluded communities of their social, economic and cultural (SEC) rights. Education, employment, entrepreneurship and governance are the key intervention areas keeping “Exclusion – Equity – Inclusion” as our watch words.

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