

21 MEMBERS OF VULNERABLE TRIBES INFECTED

Relevant for: Developmental Issues | Topic: Rights & Welfare of STs, SCs, and OBCs - Schemes & their Performance, Mechanisms, Laws Institutions and Bodies

A big crowd at a vegetable market on the eve of the weekend lockdown in Bhubaneswar. BISWARANJAN ROUT

With the second wave of COVID-19 sweeping across the rural heartland of Odisha, infections are being reported among the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs).

As many as 21 tribals across eight different PVTGs in the State have so far tested positive, including two from the Bonda tribe, known for its secluded lifestyle. Bonda people live in highlands, 3,500-feet above sea level, in Malkangiri, the southern-most district of Odisha.

“Three days ago, Malakangiri district administration conducted a mass testing drive at Mudulipada — a Bonda village. Two of them tested positive. Since they live in close proximity, we have isolated the two,” said P. Arthanari, Project director of Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihood Improvement.

To keep tribal communities safer during the pandemic, the State government had earlier stopped weekly markets where tribals come in contact with outside world. “It is difficult to prevent spread of highly infectious coronavirus. But, we are taking utmost precautions to keep tribal communities safe. We are taking help of community leaders to convey messages on COVID-19 appropriate behaviour in their own dialects,” said Mr. Arthanari.

Anthropologists and activists fear that the administration would find it very tough to stop faster spread if virus makes further inroad into tribal communities. Since many tribals live in tiny huts, it makes transmission very difficult to contain and isolate.

According to reports, four members of Dongria Kondh, another PVTG, have tested positive in Parasali panchayat of Kalyansinghpur block in Rayagada district.

Diverse tribes

Odisha has among the largest and most diverse tribal populations in the country. Of the 62 tribal groups residing in Odisha, 13 are recognised as PVTGs. According to the 2011 Census, Odisha's share of the country's total tribal population was 9%. Tribals constitute 22.85% of State's population.

The PVTGs such as Bonda, Birhor, Chuktia Bhunjia, Didayi, Dongria Kandha, Hill Kharia, Juang, Kutia Kondh, Lanjia Saora, Lodha, Mankirdia, Paudi Bhuyan and Saora have been identified on the basis of stagnant or diminishing populations, subsistence level of economy associated with pre-agricultural stages of hunting, food gathering and shifting cultivation, and relative physical isolation.

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