



# Livelihood Pattern And Health Security Of The Bhumij During Covid-19 Period

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## Purpose of the Paper

This paper is focused on the livelihood pattern and health security of the *Bhumij*, a marginalized group during the period of Covid-19, a virus causes corona. For a better understanding information is also accumulated from the historical perspective regarding the livelihood pattern and life style of the *Bhumij* who live in other parts of the country.

Corona is proved to be a highly infectious disease that spreads from one person to another through all means without leaving a single room for the survival of the human species. Therefore, when the number of positive case went up high and the death toll became beyond control owing to which the Government of India declared lockdown on twenty first March 2020 as the only way to get rid of Corona to maintain social distance. All spheres of human activities banned except some highly essential services of human living like food, health, administration and security services.

The people everywhere felt some kind of instability in life and the unprivileged marginalised segments of society continued to remain hungry. The starved and penniless migrant labourers walked for thousand miles with their belongings after failing to find a way out with the little hope of free ration that their family receive at home. Owing to the misery and vulnerability of such sections of population, a special package of ration with some money were provided by the Government as a kind of relief for the below poverty line card holders.

Now the question arises whether the study population was a part of the security services or what kind of life they would have gone through during the lockdown period ? Did the study population change their previous occupation to cope with the situation? How did they respond to the pandemic? What kind of experience they have gained and how will their experience help them in long run to overcome any kind of contingencies in life? What was their income? Was their income decreased during the pandemic?

## Revival

How did they themselves improve the pandemic situation? How did they handle things to overcome the unexpected misfortune of life?

## Resilience

How did they try to adjust with the misfortune and how did they prepare themselves to implement this experience in any future course of action if it occurs so?

## The Pilot Study

A pilot study for the Post-Doctoral research is already conducted as a trial to answer all these questions put yet like to know the livelihood, income and expenditure of the study population during the lockdown period. An interview scheduled was administered to collect information and the situation in the field was also observed during the field visits. A snowball sampling method was also an option to encourage the respondents to add more number of persons in the process of data collection. Each household had an equal chance to be included in the sample of the pilot study. An adult member of the family was approached to provide household data irrespective of sex whoever was available. The pilot study can now provide the data of the general overview of the *Bhumij* study population during the pandemic.

The study shows that neither the study population is educated nor in a better economic position however, they are confident enough to deal in Corona. Not only they have managed to survive from the Covid-19 pandemic but they also acknowledge that the lockdown has strengthened their will power to handle life's unforeseen circumstances even the super cyclone 1999 of Odisha had not taught them such valuable lessons. The pandemic had left nothing to rely on however, they proved themselves capable and also praise *Panchayati Raj* Institution members especially the *sarpanch* who really stood with them like a pillar against the tide. The Government had provided them a special package of ration and 2000 rupees per household to help them with their expenses. They kept on continuing fishing which is their principal source of livelihood but did not find it convenient in selling their fish, crab, prawn, etc. as they have never found the weekly market and Baliapal Block Headquarters market in a full swing so that they would have got the chance of selling their fish. There were also other issues like the problem of procurement of ice to preserve fish and there was no scope to repair their fishing net and boat as all shops remain closed. The money and ration they got apart from the ration they usually get though were not sufficient to lead a normal life but they praise both the State and Central Governments for providing such safeguards. They also praise the Anganwadi Worker (AWW) and the Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) for the on time awareness about the Covid-19. These two female workers played key roles in the village to aware people to maintain social distancing, washing hands, sanitisation, maintain cleanliness and use masks or cover their faces with a piece of cloth. The main issue was that two of the migrant workers of the community were unable to return to the village when they desired so from the place of their destination. They have to purchase plane tickets which were significantly more expensive than the normal charge and more than sufficient according the young men's financial condition but they eventually reached home. Unlike other migrant workers of the country none of the young migrant worker of the study area walked thousand miles as they reached home well in advance of the lockdown. So far as the health security of the study population is concerned they did not feel like such a situation as no one among them required an emergency service. However, they are aware that the Corona patients were given free medical care by the of State Government. They contend that because of the pristine natural environment that is influenced by sea none of them have contracted the Corona virus. The *Bhumij* despite being a marginalised group has proven to be practical not just by maximising their efforts to follow government's guidelines but also bringing revival in each activity of life to defeat Corona.

## The *Bhumij*

### An Introduction:

The *Bhumij*s are an endogamous group and have four endogamous divisions like *Tamudia* or *Tamaria Bhumij*, *Haladipokharia Bhumij*, *Teli Bhumij* and *Desi* or *Dehuri Bhumij*. George Cambell for the first time had used the term *Kolarian*, *Datton* and others have classified them as *Kolarian* on the basis of the language they speak. It is one of the three languages like the *Munduri*, *Ho*, etc. (Vidyarthi op.cit, 1963:22). Dalton believes that the *Bhumij*s are nothing but more than a pure Munda who have spread towards the East and merged with the *Hindus* and therefore, mostly have intimate affiliation with their parent tribe<sup>2</sup> (Risley 1981: 117). This is claimed to be an observed fact that the *Bhumij*s of Western Manbhum are no doubt pure Mundas<sup>3</sup> (ibid: 117). The *Bhumij* are a branch of *Munda* tribe as there are many instances that they reside in both the sides of the river Subarnarekha. Although they have entirely adopted the Hindu customs and traditions and have become like the Hindus however, there is no doubt that they are descendants of the *Mundas* and might have been identified by the Hindus as they are the autochthons or the original residents of the country who saw them in possession of land. They are no one but the Australian aborigines who are believed to be the earliest settlers of the soil. According to H.H. Risley, the *Bhumij*s do not show any independent tradition of migration and there is no such record to verify the time of their migration. The *Bhumij*s of Dhalbhum also claim themselves as the indigenous people of the locality and do not admit that they have any connection with the *Mundas*, the *Hos* or with any other tribes of the region. The *Bhumij*s of Singhbhum and Manbhum have close racial similarity with the *Zamindars* of the locality that shows the *Bhumij*s are the earliest settlers of the region and are not the migrants.<sup>3</sup> (op. cit. Risley 1981:120) The *Rajas* of Dhalbhum are no doubt are of lineages of the *Bhumij* but the *Bhumij*s of Mayurbhanj are the migrants who themselves admit the fact. There are also certain traditions that show they are the original residents of *Tamulia* in Jharkhand and were descended from a *Munda* man who had four sons. Migration to other regions started when there were number of children, there was a movement to various regions of the country. Some of them moved to the different directions and one among them settled in *Mayurbhanj*. The *Hindus* from whom the *Bhumij*s have borrowed their traditions and customs are the latter settlers of the locality.

### Image and Identity

The *Bhumij* means the one who is born from the soil. This name is frequently used by the elderly non- *Bhumij* people to tease those who seem to be applied with dust on their body basically who remain dirty. Actually the appearance of the *Bhumij*s gives an impression that as if they have spread dust all over their body and do not feel it is essential for them to clean. Hence, anyone looks like this, is called a *Bhumij*.

The word *Bhumij* means originated from the land or soil. This is also very natural that they are much associated with the soil as the literature speaks that they are the cultivators. They are believed to be a branch of the *Munda*, speak *Mundari*, an Austro- Asiatic language, a non- Indo Aryan group and are Proto- Australoid origin of race. They are *Hinduised* and animists as they are still found to be nature worshippers who have still retained some traditions, costumes as part of their original culture. At the same time they imitate the *Hindu* way of life and celebrate some of the festivals of the *Hindus* and are found to be a complete assimilated group. This is what speaks the available literature on the life and culture of the *Bhumij*. However, a study conducted in the year 2000 in Keonjhar district of Odisha found that the *Hindus* of the locality maintains a distance from the *Bhumij* population as because they take beef and carcass of the cattle. Their way of life was also different from their *Hindu* caste neighbours as they were found not to follow a definite pattern of life like that of the *Hindus*. The Hindu women folk perform the daily household chores early in the morning as part of their age old traditions which are mandatory like sweeping, mopping, cleaning utensils, etc. which the *Bhumij* women do not do regularly. They spend their time either in gossiping or somehow pass it by standing here and there before they leave for earning their daily bread. They rather affiliate themselves with the Muslims of the locality but are not yet open to admit it among others.

## The Residence Locations

The *Bhumij* is a minor tribe in India but a major tribe in Odisha. They are found in the states of Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha, Assam and a few of the *Bhumij* populations also live in Bangladesh. Jharkhand presents the highest number of *Bhumij* population but their number is less in comparison to the Santhals, the Oraons, the Hos., etc. In Jharkhand, they inhabit in the places like Ranchi, Singhbhum and Barabhum, etc. In West Bengal, they are concentrated in the districts of Purulia, Midnapur, Bankura and in 24 Parganas. In Odisha a considerable *Bhumij* population are found in the districts of Mayurbhanj, Sundargarh, Keonjhar, Balasore and a few of them live in other parts of the state. In Assam they work as labourers in tea gardens and found in Assam valley areas after their movement to the state.

## Population

The tribes of India are the indigenous population of the country have been living from the time immemorial. In the present day their representation has gone up higher which counts 8.6% of the total population. There are about 700 tribes reside in this sub-continent whose total population is 10.43 Crores according to 2011 Census. The *Bhumij* is one of such tribes resides in this country having population of 1,306,000. The *Bhumij* population in Jharkhand is 2,009, 448, in West Bengal the number is 3,76, 296, in Odisha they are 2, 83,909, in Assam their presentation is lowest like 2,48, 144 and only 3500 *Bhumij* population live in our neighbouring country i.e. Bangladesh according to the Population census of India 2011. In Bangladesh they live in five states like 2800 in Sylhet, 3600 in Rajshahi, 1900 in Khulna, 1100 in Dhaka and 300 in Chittagong.

### Livelihood of the Bhumij

The *Bhumij*s are found to be a cultivating tribe and the principal crop they grow is the paddy. Surjit Sinha, an eminent writer had carried extensive field investigation in the *Bhumij* dominated areas of Jharkhand has mentioned that the *Bhumij*s are the agriculturists. They are in possession of huge acres of land with the record of rights and yield good crop. Apart from cultivation, they also work as agricultural labourers, fish in open water bodies, hunt animals and collect the minor forest produce available from time to time. They also keep domestic animals like the cows, buffaloes, goats to earn money. The history speaks of the bright story on bravery of the *Bhumij*s. It is mentioned that the kings and the emperors were impressed by the patriotism and bravery of the *Bhumij*s that they had shown on the behalf of the kingdoms owing to which the *Bhumij*s were awarded land by the royal rulers of the region hence, used to have huge acres of land holdings. The *Bhumij* of Manbhum believe that their original occupation was military service but in latter period agriculture was taken as a prime activity of the tribe in the area. A few of them were engaged in petty business and some of them also have migrated to the tea gardens of Assam to work as the labourers. The *Bhumij* population in Jharkhand even today depends on agriculture, fishing, hunting collection of the minor forest produce and the landless among them work as the wage labourers. The Sanskrit word '*Nishada*', the name of a Kingdom which is described in Indian ancient Epic *Mahabharat* in which it is shown that the principal livelihood of the *Adivasis* used to be fishing and hunting. B.S. Guha who has done an extensive work on human races in India liked the term '*Nishada*' for the aboriginal communities as the term was coined by the *Vedic Aryans*<sup>5</sup> (Vaibhav 2022: 41). Surjit Sinha and others have found from their study conducted in South Manbhum that the people had an agrarian economy in the region in common. They have described in detail the various agricultural activities in which the people of the area are involved required for paddy cultivation. Therefore, from the various sources of the literature it is found that the *Bhumij*s were the agriculturists<sup>6</sup> (Sinha et al 1961 : 33). The technological, socio-economic activities and the ritual aspects of some major crafts of south Manbhum and its traditional association with certain groups practiced these crafts are mentioned in this work. The exchange of crafts by the different social groups in the weekly markets was also done that again reflects the relation between ecology, spatial setting of the villages and the caste groups with their goods they produce as part of the traditional occupation. The sell and purchase of the goods shows the interdependence of the people helps to integrate the society and also reduces the social disparity. They have shown that the *Bhumij*s are agriculturists whereas other caste groups are engaged in other craft activities that

the *Bhumij*s require during the agricultural operations. This study is supported by an article written by Vivek Vaibhav in 2022, in which he has mentioned the various implements used for cultivation have occupied a place in *Vedic* literature like an wooden implement used for *hala* (plough) combined with *phala* an iron made sharp implement with two bulls and a man digs the land for cultivation of paddy. In agricultural operations *Kudala* or spade is used to keep weeds out of the way and preserve boundaries between neighbouring agricultural properties. These are the etymological words origin of the *Munda* tribe which is a cultivating tribe and as the *Bhumij*s are a branch of the *Munda* tribe are also the agriculturists. The cultural and economic way of life of the tribal communities in India is the symbolic expression of the initial development of our socio-economic life at the beginning of human civilization. Therefore, it is essential for the proper protection and conservation of the ritual practices, arts, crafts, means and ways of living, dances, festival celebrations, etc. of the tribes for the betterment of the society<sup>7</sup> (Vaibhav 2022:41). There are also other instances to support the literature available on the *Bhumij* however, the studies conducted in the year 2000, 2010 and 2021 by the same author in different geographical settings in Odisha show the differential livelihood pattern of the *Bhumij* tribe. These studies show that not only the tribes of India are a heterogeneous group but the *Bhumij* tribe itself is not a homogeneous group. A comparative study conducted in Gopinathpur Shashan of Keonjhar Block and in *Bhumij* Sahi of Keonjhar town in 2000 found that the *Bhumij*s in both the places were either engaged as the wage labourers or they used to go to jungle for firewood collection. A very few rural households used to have some patch of agricultural land for cultivation that is a maximum of three acres. After they come back from the jungle they sell the bundle of firewood in the District Headquarters market and buy the bare necessary items for their household consumption. They primarily buy rice, red chili, salt, potato, turmeric powder and mustard oil, etc. The earning was meant for the day only and rarely they get a chance of having any delicious food of their choice in order to avoid expenditure. It is observed that they eat fermented rice or watered rice with boil vegetables that they grow in their homestead land. They cannot buy the essential items like oil, ginger, garlic which are being used for making curry. A small thing in life seems to be a dream for them. Therefore, they manage their life within their income however, they spend maximum of their earning on *Handia*, their favourite beverage. *Handia* or rice beer is an intoxicated drink is prepared indigenously using the wild herbs at home with the over boiled fermented rice. *Handia* or rice beer is not only a favourite drink of the tribal communities across the country but also it is believed to be auspicious. Hence, it is always being an essential item to be listed at the times of marriage, death, festivals and feasts.

Another study conducted in Naranpur village of Nilagiri Sub- Division in Balasore District of Odisha found that the study population either work as wage labourers in the paddy fields of their Hindu neighbours mostly of the *Teli* or oilmen caste or go to the nearby forest that is part of Kuldiha Sanctuary to collect fresh *Sal* leaves which are used for making leaf plates. They prefer to engage themselves in the paddy fields as labourers and in agricultural off seasons go to the forest for leaf collection as single cropping is the practice in that study area. Since employment opportunities are scarce they try to maximise their efforts to get a chance to be engaged throughout the year. They also cultivate the land of the high caste people as the share croppers for which they have to give one third of the crop to the land holders. Though all the households in Naranpur are the BPL card holders and the beneficiaries of the Public Distribution System however, they realize the reality of life and do not miss any opportunity to make money. However, the *Bhumij* population in Naranpur village has a strong affinity for rice beer and have become so accustomed that even during the lockdown the customers visited households who prepare rice beer when the sell was prohibited. It is one of the prime reasons for the backwardness of tribal groups as it spoils the socio-economic life of the tribes. In addition to doing nothing they sit idle, fight among themselves for no apparent cause, ruining social relationships and punished by others for which they cannot even realise. The present study population do not prepare and take rice beer even though it is sold in the Amchua weekly market by the *Santhals* of the locality where the *Bhumij* sell fish.

The *Bhumij*s are not the only tribal community who are found to be a heterogeneous group as the livelihood pattern and culture are found to be different from each other. The *Shompen*, a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group of Andaman and Nicobar Islands are found to be distinct from each sub-group in dialects, appearance and group identity. The *Bhumij* population who live in Dagara Gram panchayat of Baliapal block in the district of Balasore, Odisha on whom the pilot study is conducted are a fishing community. This study group

solely depends on fishing for livelihood and are different from all other *Bhumij* groups studied yet so also the livelihood pattern of the *Bhumij* population available in the literature. Their way of life fascinated the researcher to research on them in detail. There is not a single household found in the village that never goes to the fishing sight. At times they may go for other ways of earning or domesticate animals to earn some money but all of them irrespective of age involve themselves in the fishing expedition. The pilot study conducted recently on the study population found that the educated young migrant workers when they come back from the places like Banglore, Surat, etc. surely visit the fishing sight of the locality and also catch fish. The *Bhumij* of Dagara in most cases are landless except a few households who have one to two acres of land with an exception of a school teacher who has a sizeable agricultural land. The livelihood of the *Bhumij* is fishing who carry their fishing expedition following a suitable time table depending upon the lunar cycle of each month. Once in a fortnight in each month they have a better chance of catching a bulk of fishes as the new moon and full moon days are suitable time that enhances the intensity and frequency of the tides in the sea. The study population shares their fishing experience with the researcher that fishing is a pastime activity though it is a vital source of living. They enjoy fishing so much that feel to fish constantly. All of them continue the hereditary occupation of their forefathers however, they have imagined a bright future for their children and do not want them to follow in their fathers' footsteps to become fishermen.

They do manage to catch crabs the consequences of their lack of attention are far reaching. There is every chance that the crabs can bite to protect themselves from humans which in turn will be more difficult for wounds to heal. Crab catching is an art, though both men and women are involved in this challengeable work but some women in the village are found to be experts in crab catching. Therefore, they impart training to the young women to carry on this traditional occupation of crab catching as they are the coast dwellers. Like the suitable time table of the month for fishing, they also follow up the same pattern in catching the crab. When they catch a good number of crabs they sell them in Amchua market besides household consumption. These days the *Bhumij* of Dagara bring fish and crab to Baliapal Block Headquarters market to increase profitability. The *Bhumij* is a popular name in the locality to crabs as they have expertise in crab catching. Therefore, when there is no weekly market, they come to the *Bhumij* households to buy crabs to meet the occasion of speciality.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This has been determined that the report which is based on a pilot study conducted prior to the actual study intended for the Post-Doctoral research sponsored by ICSSR, New Delhi is feasible and appropriate for the study population and the study universe.

Education and awareness of any human group can confront and triumph over any natural disaster in case of the study population though they are not educated but are aware of the consequences of Corona, a contagious disease that can kill a person with a single moment of negligence. The study demonstrates that all parties involved in the Corona pandemic including the government, Panchayati raj Institutions' members, Accredited Social Health Activist, Anganwadi Worker and the community at the large have been instrumental in disseminating the message about the spread of Covid-19 virus for which the marginalised community even survived. They acknowledge that the emergency scenario during the lockdown period had reinforced their will power to battle against any similar circumstances in life. The remarkable comeback they have made during Corona is very impressive mostly due to electronic media, particularly smart phone and the presence of the ASHA and AWW who live in the village itself. Ultimately the study shows that pollution free environment, healthy habits and community co-operation are factors required to win over Corona. They believe that the safe atmosphere of the locality was a major factor for which the Covid-19 was unable to infect them. The residential location and health security of the *Bhumij* during Covid-19 period are two paramount paradigms of the present study. The abundance of the natural water features Bay of Bengal and Subarnarekha River as well as beautiful surrounding and the community itself are the main attractions to

make frequent visits to the study area. The community maintained social distancing from both the surrounding people and from one another with some exception of a few very important conversations. They kept on collecting the highly essential commodities from the market following the guidelines of the government. They are being a fishing villagers and that rice and fish curries make up a substantial portion of their diet hence, food security was guaranteed. This was made possible by the Government provision of the food through the Public Distribution System. They had experienced hardship throughout the pandemic and a major aspect of their problem was with their source of income as they always faced hinderances in selling their fish. Though fish was an essential food item during the lockdown period but there was no opportunity for them to sell their fish. The police administration constantly put restrictions for which it was difficult for them to go to market for fish selling. Besides they were facing difficulties in getting ice to preserve fish and there was also no shop open to repair their fishing net and boat. How difficult the pandemic scenario was, how severe the problems were but the marginalised study group overcame them and are prepared to face similar situations in future.

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