

# **The Impact of COVID-19-related Measures in Tripura**

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In the land-locked and largely non-industrial state of Tripura, all agricultural activities, as in other states, have been severely affected by the measures put in place to combat the spread of COVID-19. The period from February 15 to May 15 is normally crucial for three different agricultural operations. First, this is the peak season for the harvesting of vegetables and cash crops like potato, tomato, pulses, chilli, ginger, pumpkin, cabbage, cauliflower and watermelon that are grown once a year and are harvested only during this period. After these crops have been harvested, the land is prepared for the next crop before the monsoon sets in. Second, this is the season in which pre-kharif (aush) paddy is sown. System of Rice Intensification (SRI), which is a low inputs-based agro-ecological method for increasing the productivity of rice by changing the management of plants, soil, water and nutrients, is widely practiced in Tripura. SRI was introduced under the Left Front government in 2002 and it significantly increased paddy production in the state. And, finally, this is the period during which, in hilly regions, the soil is prepared for 'jhum' or shifting cultivation before the onset of the monsoon.

All three operations have been disrupted due to the government's sudden imposition of a lockdown. It is estimated that almost one-third of the total vegetable crops have been damaged, which especially affects cultivators with small holdings. A delay in the sowing of paddy would impact both yield and expenditure. The worst affected by this would be jhum cultivators, who are mostly from the tribal communities constituting about ten to fifteen per cent of Tripura's total tribal population. The practice of jhum is time-sensitive: the land has to be prepared by the end of March and sowing has to be completed by the middle of April, before the onset of the first monsoon, which usually arrives in the middle of April. Most jhum cultivators have failed to complete their sowing due to the lockdown. This situation could lead to a shortage of foodgrain in the state later this year.

There is also an unprecedented shortage of agricultural inputs due to the policies pursued by the BJP-IPFT government that currently rules the state. The government has phased out almost all the state-level subsidies and grants that had been available for agricultural inputs and machinery during the tenure of the previous Left Front government.

## **Impact on the rubber industry**

Tripura is the second largest producer of rubber in the country and rubber plantations are a major contributor to the state's economy. Though the price of natural rubber has been on the decline for the last seven or eight years, the crop was still considered to be somewhat more profitable in comparison to other plantation/farming crops. Almost thirty-five to forty per cent of Tripura's rural families and fifty to fifty-five per cent of tribal families are dependent on rubber plantations. Apart from this, more than 40,000 labourers work as tappers or in other rubber-related jobs. On top of the long-term neglect of the rubber sector by the central government, the lockdown has hit rubber plantations hard, and the retail purchase of raw rubber in Tripura has been severely

affected. This situation has abruptly affected thousands of small rubber growers and workers engaged in this industry.

### **Neglect of MGNREGA**

During the last two years of the BJP-IPFT government, the MGNREGA scheme has suffered from reduced allocation, gross violation of guidelines, irregularities and delayed payments. On average, man-day generation has been around forty to forty-five days in a year. This is a stark contrast to when the state had once generated the highest number of man days under MGNREGS in the country and had successfully utilized the scheme to help uplift the rural economy. Since the lockdown was announced, not a single man-day has been generated; in fact the wages for at least seven to twelve man-days (on average) for the months of December and January 2019 have not yet been paid.

### **Lack of cash**

Rural Tripura is mainly served by branches of public sector and co-operative banks and there are fewer branches in hilly areas. Restrictions on movement and the lack of public transport have severely impacted people's access to cash. Pensioners and other beneficiaries of government schemes are compelled to walk fifteen to twenty-five km each way in order to withdraw money from their accounts.

### **Negative impact on the economy**

Both the pandemic as well as the BJP-IPFT regime's misrule have pulled Tripura's economy towards a crisis. There is a lack of investment in agriculture, the implementation of MGNREGA has been diluted and there have been no other alternative programs to boost the rural economy. As a result, the state has witnessed terrible incidents the last two years, from deaths due to starvation to suicides, the selling of new born babies by parents due to poverty, the mortgaging of ration cards and so on. There has also been unprecedented, large-scale migration of labourers, including young women, who have left the state in search of jobs. The lockdown imposed after the outbreak of COVID-19 in the country has further aggravated an already precarious situation.

### **Intervention by the government, local bodies and NGOs/civil society**

Since the day the lockdown was announced, the state government has announced several relief measures. These include entirely waiving the prices of food grains (only rice and atta as per the normal scale) for one month to those below the poverty line (BPL) and Antyodaya card holders, the transfer of Rs 500 to each BPL household (in some blocks) and two months' advance social pension payments. Some NGOs and civil society groups are distributing essential items like rice, dal, vegetables, cooking oil and soap. However, the scale of these donations is inadequate given the scale of the looming food crisis.

A delegation of leaders from the All India Kisan Sabha—Gana Mukti Parishad and the All India Agricultural Workers' Union met the state's Chief Secretary to urge the government to take immediate steps to address the crisis. Their suggestions included:

- supplying free food grains to holders of valid ration cards (whether BPL or APL) for three months
- giving a grant of Rs 5000 to all BPL families
- recovering all mortgaged ration cards in ADC areas
- conducting an urgent enumeration drive of all families that do not have ration cards so that they can be given free rations
- providing two square meals, shelter and proper medical care to all migrant workers currently stranded in the state
- providing one month's advance wages to all families registered under the MGNREGA
- designating agriculture and jhum as essential services in order to allow farmers to harvest and sell their produce
- providing standard PPE and N-95 masks etc. along with adequate insurance coverage to all medical personnel engaged in the treatment of COVID-19 patients.

### **Report from Madhya Champamura village (West Tripura district), Uttar Charilam village (Sepahijala district) and Agartala**

Madhya Champamura is a gram panchayat in the Old Agartala (Khayerpur) block in West Tripura district. For agricultural workers like Narayan Shil in Madhya Champamura village (West Tripura district), the sole breadwinner with a family of four, the present situation is dire. Narayan used to be able to get work for about six or seven months in a year and earned about Rs 500 as daily wages during those months. However, the lockdown has halted agricultural operations and thus he now has no source of income. Work under the MGNREGA scheme has also stopped. Since Narayan does not have a BPL ration card, he is not eligible for the rations announced by the government, and there has been no support forthcoming from any NGO/civil society group or political party either. His savings are running out and he is finding it difficult to provide for his family. He currently procures essential goods on credit from a shopkeeper in his area to survive.

The stoppage of MGNREGA work during the lockdown has hit women workers like Tapti Ghosh in Uttar Charilam village (Sepahijala district) severely. Although she has a BPL ration card, the fact that the government is distributing only rice and nothing else is not helping much. There is no support from other organizations in her area either.

In addition to agricultural workers and daily wagers, workers in the state capital of Agartala are also facing an uncertain future. Bishu Saha works as a mechanic in a Tata Motors dealership in Agartala to support a family of four. Although he received his full salary for the month of March, he is not sure what will happen in April.

Although he does qualify to receive rations, they are not sufficient—he has to buy essential items over and above the rations provided by the government.

### **Report from Gandacherra and Ratan Nagar villages, Dumburnagar block, Dhalai district**

The lockdown has been particularly difficult for tribal communities in the interior of the state, in places like Gandacherra and Ratan Nagar villages in the Dumburnagar block of Dhalai district. Most of Dhalai district is hilly and people mainly depend on shifting cultivation for their livelihood. According to the 2011 census, about ninety percent of the district's 3.6 lakh population lives in rural areas and tribal groups constitute about fifty-six per cent of the district's total population; Dumburnagar block has a rural population of about 60,000, and tribals constitute eighty-one per cent of this.

Shifting cultivation is the primary occupation for the tribal people in Dumburnagar block and February to April is generally the main season for it. In this mode of cultivation, all households in a village would work together on a selected patch of land for few days. Owing to the lockdown, the police have refused to let people come out and work.

Ratan Nagar village, has a total population of 1600 (almost ninety per cent tribal). The lockdown has led to the stoppage of both shifting cultivation as well as MGNREGA work here. A few days ago, a team of government employees visited the village and found that almost none of the households had any essential items, including rice. There is no market in these areas, and the nearest market is Gandacherra bazaar, which is fifteen to sixteen km away. People had been surviving on bamboo shoots, potatoes, banana stems and other items foraged from the forest by the heads of households. The team of government employees then gathered some money out of their own pockets and purchased rations for the families.

It was reported that the quantity of rations being provided by the government was simply not enough—and that it was not reaching several areas as well. A day after the lockdown began, the government announced that it would give five kg food grains per person and one kg of pulses per household under the PM Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana for the next three months. However, the quantity of grains is not sufficient, and in many parts of the state, it appears that only rice is being distributed—and some parts of the state have not received any rice either.

**\* With inputs from Narayan Shil in Madhya Champamura village, Tapti Ghosh in Uttar Charilam village, Bishu Saha in Agartala, Kabil Hossain in Gandacherra and Ratan Nagar, and Jitendra Chaudhury in Agartala. Saqib Khan is a PhD scholar at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai.**