

13th Session of the Expert Mechanism on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

1st December, 2020

Statement on

“The impact of COVID-19 on the rights of indigenous peoples under the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples”

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Samanway Manch Bharat

Thank you, Respected Chairperson

The nationwide lockdown was announced by our Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 24th March 2020. The lockdown restricted people from stepping out of homes. All the transport services air, rails, and roads were suspended except transportation of essential goods, emergency, fire and police services. Educational institutions, industrial establishments, and hospitality services were also suspended. However food shops, petrol pumps, ATMs, other essentials and their manufacturing were exempted. Everyday news flashed about the number of infected, cured and dead people due to Coronavirus pandemic. More than death, the ‘Fear of Death’ gripped the peoples. In this situation, the worst hit were the indigenous stranded laborers and daily wages workers.

The lockdown that was implemented during COVID-19 in India, resulted in job loss of daily wage workers and domestic servants/workers in urban areas. Indigenous women/girls’ domestic workers were restrict to move which caused insecurity and fear of uncertainty about the future. They were abused physically, mentally and emotionally in the form of no holidays, long working hours, pay cuts, and sexual harassment. These indigenous women and girls have no idea where to complain, and out of helplessness, they become silent victims to injustice and violence. Indigenous daily wage workers in urban areas returned to their villages barefoot. Those who could not, were dependent on others for their survival.

In the village the community restricted indigenous persons returning from the urban areas. They were excommunicated. Their life became miserable without any job and proper food. There were no proper health facility, hospitals or medical camps in villages. Indigenous women and girls faced sexual violence. They were raped by their own family members at home and by the local people while working in the fields. In this manner they were neither safe outside nor inside house. Movement restriction also intensified these activities.

Due to lockdown indigenous farmers were not allowed to harvest which broke the backbone of their survival that is food. In northeast Assam indigenous labours were laid off from the tea garden and they struggled to survive. Women were exploited in Assam and out of helplessness they traded their flesh for a piece of meal for their family.

This pandemic time was used by the government to bring policy changes in Mines and Mineral Acts, Environment Impact Assessment, and Social Impact Assessment which favoured the individuals and the corporates to do mining and acquisition activities in India.

Despite of these we could see certain practices that were favourable for the indigenous communities. In rural areas and villages one could see indigenous people maintaining social distancing on their own. Even through the impact of Corona-virus was least in the villages yet they practiced using herbs and other traditional medicines to make their immunity strong. Youths lockdown their villages with barricades and restricted the outsiders.

In few district of Chhattisgarh indigenous women invented Sanitizers out of Mahua flower and sold it to other people. It also helped them economically. In urban areas, indigenous youths came forward to distribute rations and provided necessary support and help needed to the indigenous brothers and sisters. The Chief Minister of Jharkhand Mr. Heman Soren who is an indigenous person, also took several measures in bringing back migrant indigenous workers from other state back to Jharkhand.

In this time of crisis indigenous peoples have to come together in solidarity and support those who are badly affected by this pandemic.

Thank you, Respected Chairperson.