

## The Marginalized, Christian Gawda Tribe of South Goa: Impact of Covid-19 and Survival Strategies

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**Abstract:** *The Goan society has a high standard of living along with few other states of India, but the tribes in the state still struggle for the necessities of life and work hard every single day to earn a living for their families. One such tribe of Goa is the marginalized minority, the Christian Gawdas of South Goa. They are the Scheduled Tribes of Goa, among others being the Kunbis and the Velips. These tribes are exploited and marginalized in the Goan Society. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed them further to the margins of society, where they found themselves even more marginalized. This paper tries to bring to the mainstream discourse the impact of Covid 19 on the social life of tribes, especially the Christian Gawdas. The worst effect was on their livelihood. Despite these impacts, the tribal people used their survival strategies to deal with the pandemic. For this qualitative research, narratives were used for data collection, and narrative analysis was used to interpret data. The researcher, an insider from the tribal community, provides valuable insights into this sociological research.*

**Keywords:** Tribes, Marginalization, Covid 19 and Survival Strategies

The tribes of Goa are the Kunbis, the Gawdas, and the Velips. Although the state of Goa has a high standard of living along with a few other states of India, the tribes in the state still struggle for the necessities of life and work hard every single day to earn a living for their families. These tribes are exploited and marginalized in the Goan Society. The COVID-19 pandemic pushed them further to the margins of society, where they found themselves even more marginalized. This study is only restricted to the Christian Gawdas of South Goa. I conducted fieldwork for this research at Pedda Ambelim and Cumbeabhat Velim in Goa.

As I belong to the tribal community, I had the opportunity to closely observe my community from a sociological lens as an insider in the lockdown period. These observations are brought together in the writing of

this research paper, along with the narratives through which data was collected to conduct this research. Narratives are a means by which people communicate their experiences of self and the world around them.<sup>1</sup> Through narrative inquiry as a researcher, I found out how people make sense of their changing world with the help of stories.<sup>2</sup> The main objectives of this paper were: 1) to find out the impact of covid 19 on Christian Gawdas and 2) to know the different survival strategies used by them to survive the pandemic.

### **Tribes and Marginalization**

The concept of marginality was first proposed by Robert Park, a sociologist from the Chicago School of Sociology, in 1928.<sup>3</sup> Since then, this concept has continued to preoccupy social scientists and sociological studies.<sup>4</sup> This concept of marginal man proposed by Robert Park has received criticism<sup>5</sup> as being indigenous and only applicable to the West concerning the USA and which cannot be generalized and applicable to other societies.<sup>6</sup> The main characteristics when we try to define marginality in terms of marginal areas include remoteness, an economy that is not developed, unavailability, and inability to use resources.<sup>7</sup>

Mukherji formulates an alternative framework to understand the structural formulation of marginalization in India with the help of basic structures of a social system, which can be explained as follows from the essay titled 'Marginality, Marginalization and the Idea of Justice'

"Since there is no perfectly just society free from hierarchy, stratification, and consequently, relations of asymmetries (except in utopia), it is proposed that we describe a social (societal) system in terms of the structural counter-concepts of (social) discrimination, (class) exploitation, (political) oppression, gender discrimination and eco-environmental asymmetry. These are domains of relations of asymmetry. Understandably, the number of domains depends upon the social scientists' theoretical-analytical perception. I believe that the five domains are consistent with broader sociological tradition."

Suppose we try to apply this alternative framework to the tribes in Indian society. In that case, we will find that the tribes are marginalized and are often alienated from mainstream society. They become socially, economically, politically, and culturally marginalized in Indian society. Guru talks about the various processes of marginalization operating among the Dalits in India.<sup>8</sup>

The tribes are alienated and displaced from their land, which previously was under their control. With the coming of the colonial rulers, the tribal ownership over land, forests, and other resources was passed to non-tribal tribes, and non-tribes were brought under a single political and administrative structure. The tribals lost their land to non-tribals by

fraudulent means.<sup>9</sup> The process of globalization added more misery to the fate of the tribes, where the various developmental projects displaced the tribals from their indigenous land, which was the source of their sustainable livelihood. All these development projects had disastrous effects on their social life.<sup>10</sup> The marginalization also includes discrimination and social exclusion, which denies human dignity and human rights to tribes, which as the right to live.<sup>11</sup>

### **Situating the Christian Gawda Tribe in the Pandemic**

The first initial COVID cases were found among the Gawdas of Pedda Ambelim. They were more vulnerable to being infected with covid 19 as most of them went outside their ward and village as domestic labourers or day wage labourers as masons, painters, farmers, tree cutters, construction workers, carpenters, and others. The women from the community work as cooks or helpers for different occasions such as baptism celebrations (when a child is baptized as a member of the Christian church), birthdays, marriage, and other such occasions, including they are being called by other people to cook food when there is death in the family. The first woman to be infected with Covid 19 was from Pedda, and it is said that she was infected with the virus when she went outside her village for work, which is how it was passed to other women from the neighbourhood who were in contact with her.

These women and their family members who were detected positive for covid 19 were taken to Vasco Goa and were quarantined for 15 days. The other non-tribal people from the village begin looking at Gawdas as carriers of the virus. People from different wards and villages were not ready to come to this Gawda ward, except for the Panch member and a social worker. They visited the ward to urge people to get themselves tested and, if found positive, to get themselves quarantined at the quarantine centre in Margao, Vasco, and Colva Goa. The tribes appreciate their community service.

### **Impact of Covid 19 on the Gawdas**

Although the pandemic affected all people around the world, the tribes who were previously discriminated against, stigmatized, and marginalized in society, due to pandemic they were even more discriminated against, stigmatized, and marginalized. Their habitat is such that they lived on the periphery of the village, and in times of pandemic, they were even more pushed towards the margins of society.

The shopkeepers denied selling essential goods to the people. There was one case when a Gawda woman from Pedda went to the shop to buy fertilizer for her paddy cultivation. The shopkeeper first denied selling the product to her and then threw the bag of fertilizer outside the shop on the floor, and the poor woman had to bring it since she urgently needed it. At this place, there were other people in line and the shopper sold things to them but this harsh, humiliating, and stigmatized behaviour was shown

only towards the Gawda women.

Some people, including youngsters, especially boys, and middle-aged people, especially women working in hotels in Mobor Goa, were told to take a break from work as their village had covid 19 positive cases. Those selling milk from house to house were told not to sell it, and people stopped buying it. The livelihood of the people was affected very badly.

Their primary source that is agriculture, was affected. The Gawdas are landless labourers. They do not own the fields on which they cultivate paddy, but for ages, they have been cultivating this land. They have to give a share of the produce to the landowner. Sometimes the owner does not contribute to the cost of growing paddy, but the land asset belongs to the owner. They are obliged to give a share of their production; in a few cases, it is half the produce. This kind of agreement is oral. In some cases, the landlord and the landless tribes orally agree to give the landlord ten sacks of paddy.

Tribes, in this case, become more marginalized because their livelihood depends on the assets they do not own. The houses they have built are all on the *bhatkar* (landlord) land. They have been living on these lands for decades but cannot claim this land. They are unaware of their rights, non-literate, or do not have the proper documentation. Most of them respect the landlord and their ancestors for allowing them to live on their lands and do not want to fight and be ungrateful to the *bhatkar*.

In covid 19, they found themselves more marginalized because their day-to-day wages were affected, and they did not have money to put in labour for their fieldwork. Some people started their agriculture out of a few savings they saved in their household. When they called the labourers from other villages to work for them, they denied saying we are not coming to work because your ward members are COVID-19 positive. A tribal girl who was suspected to be positive for covid 19. There was a rumour in the village about her being positive for covid was told by a non-tribal person that she should stop coming to the church, and then she went and shouted at the person and said to him that she was not COVID-19 positive.

In this case, it was easy for others to label the Gawdas as COVID-19 positive without any proof, but it could not be the other way around. If a tribal person found labelling the non-tribal as COVID-19 positive, then there would be repercussions for the tribal person, like the people would have come and fought with them. Here we can see apart from the state having surveillance over its people, the non-tribals in these villages acted as surveillance agents against the Gawdas.

COVID-19 badly hit those tribes who live down the mountain. Unlike the case study of the indigenous people where the "Pastoralists who follow a nomadic lifestyle, ensured that they move away with their herds when faced with this unknown adversary, inadvertently leading to fewer cases or mortalities" in terms of covid 19.<sup>12</sup> The tribals from Cumbeabhat Velim could not move as most of them had sold their buffalos and did not move

to other places to graze their animals, which previously they used to. Although they are close to the forest, they cannot even entire the mountains as the bhatkar owns these mountains, and the non-tribals take the land on the mountains on auction and pay a certain amount of money to the landlord. On these lands, they grow cashew trees and do their business. Some tribals are employed to protect these cashew trees, collect the cashew, separate the cashew from the cashew nut and extract the cashew juice.

### **Cultural Practices**

Gawddas could not celebrate their cultural festivals like *Rakhhenechem Fest* (protector's feast), which is a cultural practice where they worshipped the *Rakhno*, the protector of the village. They have built a cross on the top of the mountain in memory of their ancestor, who was a shepherd. People consider him as their protector. This cross is called *Raknneachokhuris* (a cross in memory of the protector). In earlier times, there was no Eucharist mass to celebrate the fest. They used to pray and say a litany of Our Lady at the Cross as a mark of celebration. Every year on the 26th and 27th of October, there is a Eucharistic mass celebration at two places in Velim, Cumbeabhat, and Goenchembhatt, organized by the tribals, and the priest celebrates the Eucharistic mass. Tribal people pray at this cross and ask for whatever they want in life; for example, married couples who do not have children ask to bless them with a child, and others ask for relief from different illnesses. Dasgupta speaks of how the missionaries depicted the customs and rituals of the Oraons tribes of Chotanagpur in colonial India as unholy and evil.<sup>13</sup>

In the same way, the catholic priests in the tribal areas labelled the cultural traditions and rituals of the Christian Gawddas as evil, saying, "*Tumi kuddea Devachempuzakortat*" (you all are worshipping the evil or demon). This resulted in the vanishing of tribal practices and rituals. The ritual, cultural space called the "Mandd" was declared as the place of evil worship, and in Christianity, the priest proved through the first out of ten commandments that we should only bow down and worship one God, and any other worship is evil or devil worship.

In this way, all the ritualcultural spaces, which were open spaces, were transformed, and small chapels were built to worship the ultimate God in Christianity. While engaging with the people's oral narratives, I learned that people have due respect for their old practices. In one case, a woman told me that their priest banned them from going to the Hindu temple and worshipping Shantadurga deity at Fatorpa Cuncolim, Goa. She said she gets mental peace if she offers offerings and worships the deity. During the pandemic, she said she suffered a lot since she had no opportunity to visit the deity.

### **Religious life During the Pandemic**

The elderly population, especially the women, felt they could not attend to their religious life as all the religious places, like the churches and the

chapels, were closed down. Here I will give an example of my grandmother's longing to go to mass during the lockdown. After the relaxation of the COVID-19 rules, religious places could be opened. Only a restricted number of people were allowed to attend mass, and the elderly were not allowed to go for mass as they were more vulnerable to the infectious virus.

During the pandemic, people said they had only hope in God, who could save them from this pandemic. Their faith was strengthened in times of pandemic. Most older people and other middle-aged women felt that the pandemic disturbed their religious life. The Eucharistic mass was streamed online on YouTube and other local and regional T.V. channels. Most tribal people, especially the elderly and the other middle-aged tribals have no mobiles, and few of them use only simple keypad mobiles for calling and not the internet, so they do not have access to the masses. In the second phase of COVID-19, some people went to their neighbour's houses to watch T.V., participate in the mass, which was streamed on television by the church. This brought some relief to their religious lives.

### **Savings**

About savings, most of the Gawdas earn daily wages, and whatever money was left from their expenditure, they would save this small amount of money not in banks but in their houses. Most of them were of the view that they exhausted all their savings during the pandemic, and they managed with whatever they had with them. With fewer savings and no income during the pandemic, most of them sacrificed their meals example, instead of eating rice, curry, and fish, some of them at *opez* (porridge of rice).

Everything came to a halt. According to the people, during the pandemic times, they did not receive financial assistance for almost four months which they get from government schemes like the Dayanand Social Security Scheme (DSSS) for the most vulnerable sections of society like the senior citizens, the single women and the disabled persons, Griha Aadhar Scheme to provide support to the housewives/homemakers from the middle, a lower middle and poor section of the society, to maintain a reasonable standard of living for their families.

### **Education**

In terms of education, as the schools were shut down, the children could not go to school, and they had to be indoors in the first phase of Covid 19. In the second phase of COVID-19, online classes were started by the educational institution. Here also, we could see a lot of digital divide between the tribals and non-tribals. On the one hand, the tribals were struggling for their livelihood, and on the other hand, online education demanded the requirement of mobiles for their children. They could not afford to buy mobiles for all children, adding more burden to their existing misery. Some did not have money to recharge their mobile for internet pack.

Most of the children missed their classes since their siblings had online classes simultaneously. Only a few children could get notes from other children in their neighbourhood if they were from the same class.

### **Survival Strategies: A way forward**

The people used many survival strategies to survive in times of the pandemic. As the Gawdas are farmers, they had a lot of grains stored from the previous year from the pre-pandemic period. They could not only survive with rice. Other essential things that were part of their diet, like fish, were unavailable to them during the lockdown in the market. So they went fishing and satisfied their needs. They grew vegetables and fruits, which helped them to survive in times of pandemic. Their source of livelihood in terms of money depended on day wage labour, which was severely affected by the pandemic.

In this lockdown, people were told to maintain distance physically, which was not possible for the Gawdas as they live near each other. Their houses are very close to each other, making it difficult to maintain that distance, but still, people followed the Covid 19 norms given by the state to safeguard themselves from the virus.

This proximity, which was their weakness in terms of the virus spread, also became their strength. The tribals could talk to their neighbours who were staying close to their house. Some tribal people said that this communication with others during the pandemic helped relieve them from the stressful life in a pandemic. In the past, tribes lived their lives in the community. They also gave a share of whatever they produced to others. For example, if somebody grows vegetables, they will ensure they share them with their neighbours. This concern for each other helped them during the pandemic, where they shared whatever they had grown with others. They shared vegetables, fish, and other things which are necessary to others. If the people in one household were infected, they kept essential things for them at a particular place where they could collect them or just outside their house. In this way, the community bond among the people became stronger. This social solidarity helped them to survive the pandemic.

They made use of their medicinal plants and herbs to survive the pandemic. They said their knowledge about these medicinal plants and herbs helped them more than others to cure themselves of cold, fever, and other illnesses, which cost them nothing. During the pandemic, they did not have money to use expensive hand sanitisers. Most of them just used soap.

The norm of Covid 19 to maintain social distancing was to protect the people from the virus, but this social distancing strategy also socially distanced the tribals from the non-tribals in society. Before the pandemic, there was a lot of distancing of the tribals from the non-tribals, as the tribals were viewed as dirty, and their bodies were seen as polluting others.

### The Functional Space

The relationship between the tribals and the non-tribals is all about a functional relationship as the tribals work for the non-tribals as daily wage laborers. The work includes cleaning the houses, removing weeds from the garden and surrounding areas of the house, grinding masala, cleaning fish, and even cooking. In these cases, when the tribals serve the function of non-tribals, there is no problem with them, but the moment they move out of their houses and wards or the so-called functional space as I would label it, the same notions of tribal people being dirty, untidy, polluting and other stereotype notions come to play a role in society which then result into the humiliation, exploitation, and discrimination of the tribes.

The tribes also depend on the functional space in the non-tribal areas as they earn their livelihood by working for the non-tribals. When the tribals come out of that functional space, most have these anguish narratives about a few non-tribals being arrogant and egoistic. Both the tribes and the non-tribals are aware and conscious about their social position in the societal hierarchy, as tribes are subordinate and non-tribals are dominating. In spite of this kind of relationship, they both have a reciprocal relationship where they both depend on each other only for the specific reasons mentioned above in the functional space. During the lockdown, this functional space was disintegrated. The tribes were out of this functional space. Both the tribals and non-tribals suffered.

The pandemic made the tribals realize the importance of assets like land, which are not under their control. The government controls these resources. Even the government has taken the land of the tribals for the development of different projects. Although laws are passed for the betterment of the tribals, the laws are just in books, not implemented at the grassroots level. These laws are, in turn, the cause of the marginalization of the tribes. Simmons comments in his essay 'The Silencing of the Other in Human Rights Law' and says,

"Rarely is the law applied evenly or universally or even intended to do so. The law protects specific individuals and leaves others unprotected without a voice and therefore sustains previous partitions in societies. Law serves the hegemonic system."<sup>14</sup>

Although Covid 19 had disastrous effects on the lives of the tribals, it also brought back to life the 'we feeling' among the community members. People shared everything. Although non-tribes think that there is no discrimination or humiliation against the tribes, there is a need to discuss these discrimination issues and the marginalization of tribes which results in the humiliation of tribes.

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