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Representing COVID-19 Impacts & Responses on Indigenous People: A Multilingual Media Review in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India

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The 'COVID Observatories: Monitoring the Interaction of Pandemics, Climate Risks, and Food Systems among the World's Most Disadvantaged Communities' project involves working with Indigenous People (IP) and decision makers in 14 countries, including India. In India, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements and Keystone Foundation are drawing on the experiences of Indigenous Peoples in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), across the states of Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala. The project examines how COVID-19 is interacting with multiple stresses to affect the food systems of IPs globally, co-generating knowledge and capacity to strengthen resilience to the impacts of COVID-19 on food systems and support post-COVID recovery. The COVID Observatories (Project Reference Number: EP/V043102/1) is funded by a Collective Fund Award: 'UKRI GCRF/Newton Fund'.

Suggested citation: Kaur, H.; Arvind, J.; Singh, C., Ajay, S., Poonacha, P. Representing COVID-19 Impacts and Responses on Indigenous People: A Multilingual Media Review in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve, India. IIHS and COVID Observatories Project.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24943/NBR12.2022

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Acknowledgements: We thank Anita Varghese, Bhavya George and Jyotsna Krishnakumar at Keystone Foundation for their support in data collection.

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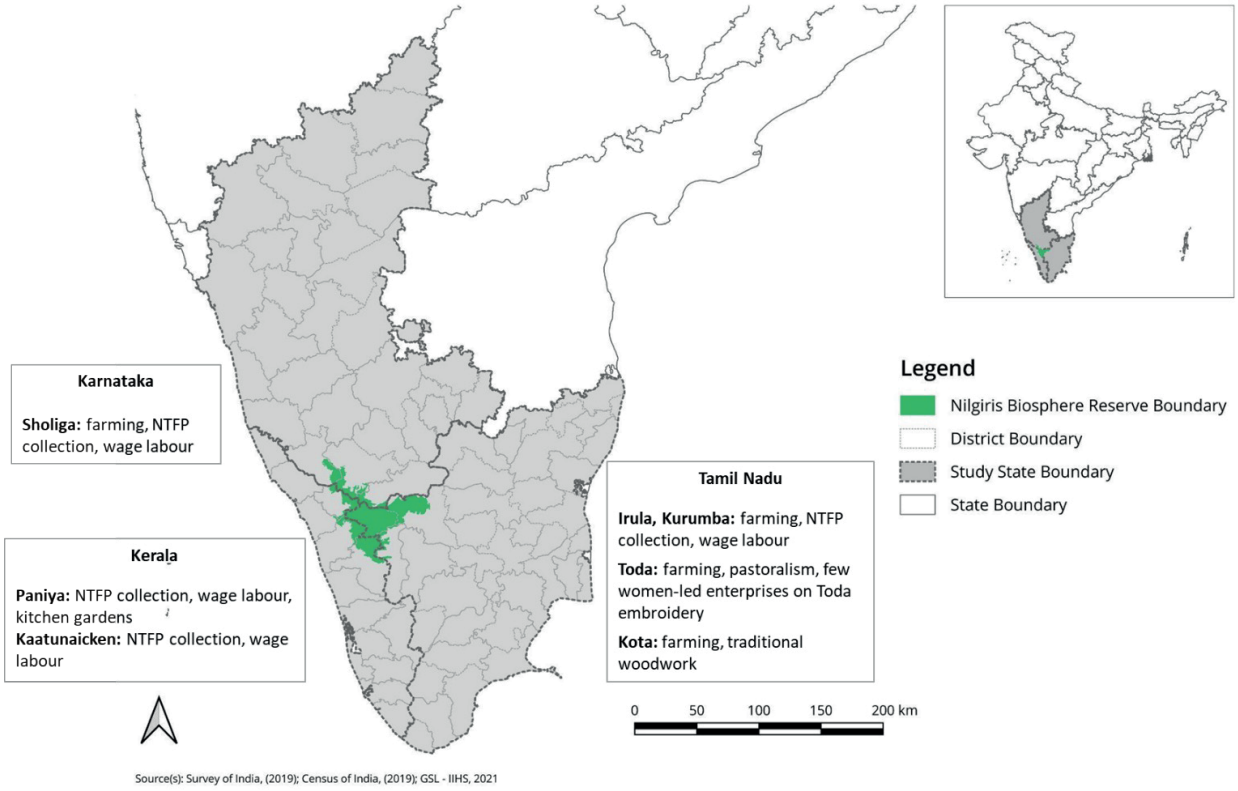
01 Introduction: COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples

As in most countries, the COVID-19 pandemic ushered in a deep rupture in India. The burdens of sudden lockdowns, and associated health and livelihood impacts, have disproportionately affected the poorest and most marginalised. In India, in addition to the disease itself, there has been a range of cascading impacts, mostly because of strict lockdowns, poor information flow, inadequate public health infrastructure, and consequent impacts on livelihoods. Historically, marginalised communities have faced the burden of adverse climatic events and health crises such as the pandemic and ensuing policy choices in multiple, mostly negative ways. However, marginalised communities have also shown resilience to the pandemic, harnessing local practices and knowledge to comprehend and prepare for these new risks, often in the relative absence of the state.

The COVID Observatories project examines the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on climatic risks and food systems among Indigenous Peoples (IPs) around the world. In India, the focus is on the IPs living in the Nilgiri Biosphere, spread over parts of three states; Tamil Nadu, Kerala, and Karnataka, and includes five national parks and two wildlife sanctuaries (Figure 1). IPs are colloquially called 'Adivasi' or tribes and India is not a signatory to the IP declarations laid out by the UN. We use IP in this report to adhere international norms and reflect as media reports that tend to use IP and Adivasi, depending on the media portal.

Although there is relatively little scholarly work on the impacts of COVID-19 on IPs in India, emerging global evidence suggests that the socio-economic vulnerabilities of IPs are compounded by the pandemic (Ford et al. 2021, under review). IPs also demonstrate resilience to the pandemic through various local coping practices. The COVID Observatories project is co-producing knowledge and capacity with IPs to strengthen their resilience to the impacts of COVID-19, focussing on livelihoods and food systems.

Figure 1. Map of Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve across Kerala, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu.
Source: Dhananjayan M, Geospatial Lab, IIHS.



02 Representations of Indigenous People: the role of the media

In times of change, the media plays a critical role in tracking impacts, holding state and non-state interventions accountable, and shaping public discourse. This crucial role as an observer and mediator of change makes the media a critical knowledge broker, especially during a pandemic. The media also wields power by highlighting who is differentially impacted, shining a spotlight on particularly marginalised groups (e.g., media coverage of migrants affected by India's first lockdown). However, silences in the media are also particularly important, showing where data gaps remain or where public attention is lacking.

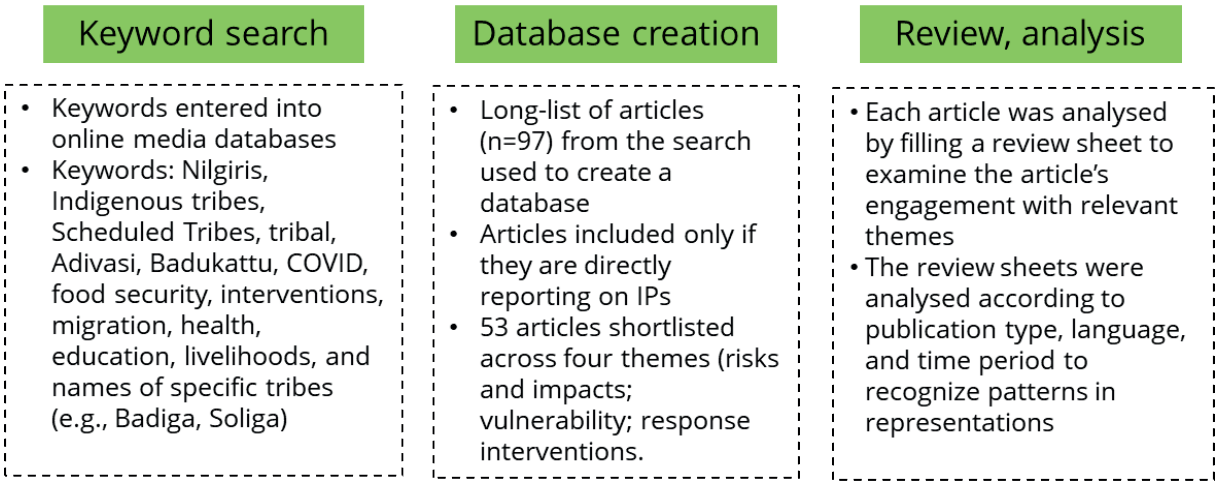
Recognising this dual role of the media (as a reporter of change as well as a driver of public discourse and possibly action), we conduct a media review to understand how the impacts of and responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are represented in the media. We also examine the frames used by the media to talk about the vulnerability and/or resilience of Indigenous People. In examining the reportage on IPs, we seek to better understand how different groups of IPs are projected in the dominant English and vernacular media, and how this projection relates to larger historic and political-economic drivers.

Figure 2. Snapshot of news articles reviewed

03 Methodology

The media review drew on different types of media, including international, national, state and district-level print and online media. Included media articles spanned three periods: pre-lockdown period (late February to early March 2020); first lockdown (25 March to 14 April 2020), second lockdown – zoning, which was when different levels of containment zones were brought into place (15 April – 1 June 2020); post-lockdown (1 June 2020 onwards). The review (data collection and analysis) was done over three steps (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Process followed to identify and shortlist media articles.



Through this process, a total of 53 articles were shortlisted and reviewed (Table 1). There was no mention of IPs in India in the international media.

Table 1: Articles shortlisted for media review

Media type	Name of media outlet	Numbers
International media	The Guardian, New York Times	0
Online, English	Scroll, The Wire, The News Minute	7
Print, English	The Hindu, Times of India	6
Kannada	Kannada Prabha, Udayavani, Prajavani	6
Tamil	The Hindu (Tamil), Dinathanthi, Dinakaran, Dinamalar	5
Malayalam	Mathrubhumi, Deshabhimani, Malayala Manorama	29

A caveat is that in the Kannada newspapers selected, there was no mention of Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve (NBR), and we have inferred that news reports about tribal communities from Mysore, Chamarajnagar and Coorg hold insights for IPs in the Niligiri Biosphere reserve in Karnataka, as parts of these districts

come under the Nilgiri region. Of the 21 articles that mention IPs in Karnataka in these newspapers, only six were related to COVID-19, health, food security and livelihoods, and were chosen for the review. The Malayalam newspapers were from three district editions: Palakkad, Wayanad, and Malappuram. This was based on the assumption that the news about IPs from these districts would be IPs in the NBR, as nothing specifically mentioning NBR could be obtained. In Tamil, only three articles referred directly to the tribes in the Nilgiri biosphere; others spoke more generally of IPs and related pandemic interventions across Tamil Nadu.

The articles were analysed thematically. Keeping the focus on COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples, the review used four analytical themes: risk, vulnerability, resilience, and response interventions (see Annex Table 1). This focus allowed us to interrogate how IPs were affected, what formal and informal response strategies were undertaken, and how narratives of vulnerability and/or resilience are deployed when representing IPs. Further, we examine formal (government) and informal (community or NGO-led) preventative and protective interventions in health, education, livelihoods, and food security.

04 Findings

Globally, COVID-19 impacts on IPs have been under-reported (Fellows et al., 2021), which contrasts with the disproportionate impacts they have faced globally (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, n.d.) and within India (Chadha, 2021; Wakharde, 2021). These global trends have been replicated in India (Agoramoorthy & Hsu, 2021) and were also visible in the Indian media articles reviewed, where only a small number of articles (n=53) directly relevant to IPs were found.

Of the total news articles we reviewed across languages, the dominant themes discussed were interventions, vulnerability, risk, and resilience, in that order. Within these broad themes, we categorised papers according to sub-themes of health, food security, livelihoods, and education. While a two-layered categorisation of articles helped capture dominant media narratives around IPs in the three states, there are multiple overlaps across categories (Tables 2 and 3).

Figure 4: Number of times theme discussed per sector

The dominant themes discussed varied by the language of the media (Table 3). In terms of themes, while all language articles tended to speak about IPs in relation to interventions, Malayalam articles painted IPs as risk-prone, Kannada print media portrayed them as resilient, and Tamil pieces spoke about IPs as both vulnerable and risk-prone. English articles tended to speak about IPs as being vulnerable. In Kannada and Tamil articles, IP resilience was attributed to their reliance on traditional knowledge and remoteness, which resulted in low COVID-19 incidence and better immunity among them or allowed them to cope better with the effects of COVID-19. In Malayalam and Tamil pieces, the risk proneness narrative was largely based on concerns about food insecurity. Vulnerability in Tamil articles was mostly COVID-related and in English pieces, it was mainly represented through second-order impacts on livelihoods.

Table 3: Number of times theme/sub-themes discussed according to language

Themes	**Health**				**Livelihoods**				**Food Security**				**Education**				**Total**
Language	K	T	M	E	K	T	M	E	K	T	M	E	K	T	M	E	
Risk	1		1	1		1	2			2	4				1		13
Resilience	3		2	2			1	1				1					10
Intervention	5	3	4	2	1	1	5	6		1	7	5			3		43
Vulnerability		3		2			1	3	1		3	2	1		1		17
Total	9	6	8	7	1	2	9	10	1	3	15	8	1		5		

***** In table 3, **K** stands for Kannada, **T** for Tamil, **M** for Malyalam, and **E** for English.

Across languages, vulnerability was spoken about in relation to food insecurity and health, and risk-proneness was mainly a result of food insecurity. State-specific areas of sectoral focus in different news media reflected the approach adopted by different state governments by favouring certain policies and programmes over others and also state-mediated public discourse. In Kerala, for example, the government ensured that the supply of essential provisions was not hit and organised food supply and dry provisions through universal PDS and what are called people's restaurants/canteens (Joseph, 2020; Varma, 2020). Their exceptional work in ensuring uninterrupted food supply and health services was rewarded, with the people voting the party back to power in 2021 for another term. The main sub-themes were food security in Malayalam pieces, health in Kannada and Tamil articles, and livelihoods in English articles.

We now detail media narratives across (1) risks and impacts of COVID-19; (2) vulnerability and resilience of IPs as depicted in the media; and (3) the formal and informal response interventions taken. A fourth section discusses the silences in the media, touching upon issues of homogeneous narratives and the discursive focus on IPs as vulnerable and lacking agency to respond.

4.1 Risks and impacts of COVID-19

Nearly one-fourth of the articles (24 out of 53) mentioned the risks and impacts of COVID-19 on IPs, though these were mostly in Malayalam articles and least in Kannada language media. Overall, the reportage on risks and impacts were mostly on impacts on food security (half of the articles), which was expected because the strict lockdowns, especially during the first phase (25 March to 14 April 2020), disrupted household food supply (personal as well as state-provided food rations).

Notably, three articles from Kerala mentioned how the pandemic and concurrent monsoon season led to compounding risks. The month of August was the peak of monsoons where several places experienced heavy rainfall, floods and landslides. As an illustration, one article highlighted, *"COVID which came following the floods has been a huge setback for the Adivasis" [Malayala Manorama, Malayalam Print, 28/3/2020]*. This compounded risk was not discussed in other languages and suggested fragmented reporting with a focus on particular events like the pandemic rather than seeing this as one of many risks IPs face. Along with the general reporting on floods, like the isolation of certain areas, there were also reports on following COVID-19 protocols in the camps and the refusal of people to move to camps.

4.1.1 Health

In the articles reviewed, health was mentioned in 29 articles. These reports either discussed the health impacts of the pandemic or reported on preventive practices such as physical distancing, willingness to get vaccinated, and wearing masks among IPs. Few articles focused on the availability of quarantining spaces and other health facilities in case of a local outbreak. Only one article in Kannada and two in Malayalam reported on the health infrastructure available to deal with COVID-19 cases.

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[Udayavani, Kannada Online, 6/05/2021]

The Irula tribal residents of Siriyur and Anaikatti in the buffer zone of the Mudumalai Tiger Reserve (MTR) have imposed strict rules including a ban on outsiders entering the villages and following protocols to prevent the spread of COVID-19 among residents. Around 200 families reside in the two villages. The residents said they had become extremely concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic, especially as they felt that an outbreak among Indigenous tribal communities could lead to many fatalities. "We have been reading up that in other countries COVID-19 was disproportionately leading to more fatalities among indigenous communities, so our village heads got together and decided to impose a total ban on outsiders from entering our villages," said a resident of Siriyur.

[The Hindu, English Print, 07/07/2020]

These quotes illustrate that not all IP communities were aware of the intensity of COVID-19, and prevention measures such as the usage of masks, physical distancing, and frequent hand washing were still to reach tribal hamlets. Health impacts were also visible through reduced nutritional intake of some IP communities due to insufficient food, as the distribution of provisions under the Public Distribution System was disrupted during the first lockdown, announced in March 2020. Incorporation of millets and other crops native to the region may fill these nutritional requirements, reported one online news article.

4.1.2 Livelihoods

Most articles discussed how people had lost their livelihoods due to loss of daily wage work and the inability to continue non-timber forest produce (NTFP) collection. These livelihoods were directly impacted by the strict national lockdowns, which restricted movement and disallowed people from going to cities, towns, and neighbouring agricultural farms or tea estates (where most wage labour happened) or movement into forests and other areas (where NTFP collection happened). Given the centrality of these livelihoods to IP incomes and culture, the impacts were severe. As various articles mentioned:

> *The countrywide lockdown imposed to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the livelihood and economy of indigenous people living in and around the forests of India. The collection and sale of hundreds of minor forest products (MFPs) – that form the backbone of forest dwellers' economy – are badly affected.*
>
> [Mongabay, English Online, 20/05/2020]

> *With everyone being confined to their homes, members of Adivasi communities are losing out on work.*
>
> [Malayala Manorama, Malayalam Print, 28/3/2020]

These quotes point to deeper challenges of poor protection of NTFP-based livelihoods. The pandemic and lockdowns led to decreasing NTFP demand and unstable markets, directly impacting NTFP trading (Kasi & Saha, 2021). In the absence of livelihood-specific safety nets, IP incomes were directly hit when NTFP collections and trading were affected.

Apart from NTFP-dependent incomes, the loss of daily wage work was a significant livelihood impact. It was reported that people who worked as daily wage workers and agricultural labourers lost significant amounts of work and did not have any financial safety nets to meet daily needs. Further, some articles mentioned that a slowdown in

tourism also indirectly impacted livelihoods. In Kerala, this was due to the pandemic-specific lockdown as well as floods from the previous years (2018 and 2019 were significant flood years and IP-dominant districts such as Wayanad were disproportionately impacted). News articles from Wayanad reported how migrant labourers from the neighbouring state of Karnataka, who worked in ginger farms in Kerala, were stuck in their places of work and could not return to their villages, causing mental trauma.

A few articles discussed how predominantly rural livelihoods, such as farming and livestock rearing) meant that IPs were more secluded from urban outbreak hotspots and hence less at risk of COVID-19. For example,

> *Tribal communities in 29 villages of the Gram Panchayat of Nannivala of Challakere in Chitradurga have managed to keep the coronavirus at bay. The area in question has about 900 families and a population of 6000-7000. The people in these villages are involved in livestock rearing and agriculture. They only migrate out of the village in case of need and for livelihood. They eat fruits, vegetables, greens grown naturally and have an active and healthy lifestyle. Their reduced contact with others, low vehicular movement, and natural lifestyle has kept them away from the disease.*
>
> [Prajavani, Kannada Online, 21/05/2021]

4.1.3 Food security

The first national lockdown had particularly severe impacts on food access and food and nutritional security across the country (Mishra & Rampal, 2020). This was exacerbated in the case of IPs who depend on forest produce and/or state food rations through the Public Distribution System. Further, impacts on livelihoods (and hence loss of income) made food purchases difficult. Two quotes illustrate these issues of hunger and food insecurity in the first lockdown:

> *On the announcement of the lockdown, Adivasi communities in the Nilgiris did not have adequate time to procure extra food and prepare for the lockdown (the average family usually needs more than the typical amount given to BPL ration card holders). Many of them were daily wage workers - so it was difficult to procure food from stores, as they did not have wages coming in regularly.*
>
> [The Wire, English Online, 29/04/2020]
>
> *Adivasis driven to hunger due to difficulty in NTFP collection.*
>
> [Malayala Manorama, Malayalam Print, 28/3/2020]

Nearer home, in the Gudalur Valley in Tamil Nadu's Nilgiris district, it's the Adivasis who are most vulnerable. Though the Tamil Nadu government gives free rice to below-poverty-line (BPL) ration cardholders, it is not enough for most families. Usually, by the third week of the month, most run out of rice and buy more for the last week. However, most Adivasis are daily wage labourers. For them, no work means no wage, which means no rice for the evening meal. The announcement of the lockdown on March 25 caught many people unprepared, with no rice in the pot and no way of getting any more.

[The Wire, English Online, 29/04/2020]

4.1.4 Education

Some articles (7) mentioned hampered access to education, primarily because of school shutdowns. While, schools moved to online teaching nationally, children from Indigenous communities were disproportionately impacted because of poor education infrastructure and low internet connectivity in remote areas. Two quotes highlight this disparity based on location and technology:

Children used to walk six kilometres through reserved forests to reach schools in the Badaga tribe's villages. While the children of that affluent tribe will start high school soon, most of our children will miss a year; many might drop out too," remarks Mani, a Gudalur-based Kurumba activist. Floods around their village in Gudalur, Tamil Nadu, in July had already pushed them deep into poverty as they couldn't collect honey, on which they depend for their livelihood, from forests engulfed by the swollen rivers."

[The Hindu, English Print, 18/09/2020]

Tribal students from remote hamlets in the Nilgiris face the prospect of missing out on classes as they do not have access to technology.

[The Hindu, English Print, 10/06/2020]

At times, the articles evoked the image of desperation, as in this quote: *"In the Nilgiris, where education seems to be the social demarcator, the browbeaten Kurumbas lament the shutdown of schools." [Hindustan Times, English Print, 18/09/2020]*

The media represented a range of COVID-19 risks and impacts on IPs, mostly through narratives of food insecurity and livelihood disruptions/loss. Compounding risks, such as the interaction of monsoons with the pandemic, were discussed only in Kerala. Notably, the structural drivers of differential impacts, such as poor healthcare infrastructure, low technology penetration, and inadequate safety nets for particular livelihoods, were rarely discussed. Thus, pre-existing drivers of vulnerability, such as the community's socio-economic marginalisation and the state's inattention to social protection and social safety nets for forest-dependent livelihoods, were conspicuous by their absence. That some of these risks and impacts were acute and especially crippling for IP communities was apparent in a small number of articles, but the structural drivers of such marginalisation and attendant vulnerabilities were glossed over in media narratives.

4.2 Vulnerability and resilience of IPs

IPs were variously represented in the media. The overwhelming narrative was that of IPs being more vulnerable, where images of insufficiency and lack were repeatedly used to depict vulnerability (e.g., low information penetration due to the lack of access to technology and food insecurity because of fragile connections to formal social safety nets). For example, in the Tamil articles, IPs were predominantly referred to as vulnerable, with the pandemic weakening their already fragile connection with the mainstream economy.

4.2.1 IPs as vulnerable

Multiple articles highlighted how pre-pandemic vulnerabilities exacerbated IP vulnerability during COVID-19, either putting IPs at higher risk due to inadequate healthcare facilities close to their homes or difficulties in children being unable to access online learning as they do not have the required gadgets [Udayavani, Kannada Print, 06/05/2021]. This connection between structural vulnerabilities affected Ips, and ripple effects during the pandemic were most starkly visible and represented through impacts on food security and increasing dependence on state and non-state actors for relief:

> *Many from here (Soliga community in Chamarajanagar) used to work in the Male Mahadeshwara temple but as this has been closed now, they are depending on aid by the district administration and NGOs. Soligas are being provided sufficient food and rations regularly. They get ragi, rice, millets, eggs, jaggery etc. once in three months. But remote tribal hamlets that are close to forests are not able to access these.*
>
> [Kannada Prabha, Kanada Print, 05/06/2021]

Adivasi families are not getting ration supply due to lack of aadhar and ration cards.

[Asianet News, Malayalam Online, 3/10/2020]

Tribes found themselves completely disconnected, blocked off from town networks during the lockdown.

[The Wire, English Online, 06/05/2020]

There were also some instances of articles delegitimising IP norms and values through connotations of their practices being 'backward' or their knowledge deemed unequal. In the context of NTFP-based livelihoods, livelihood impacts were explained by noting that IPs were illiterate, and therefore, more susceptible to middlemen. As an illustrative quote says,

In the Nilgiris, where education seems to be the social demarcator, the browbeaten Kurumbas lament the shutdown of schools. The tribe, whose members are believed to practise sorcery, has recently emerged from the forests and are not familiar with smartphones.

[The Hindu, English Print, 18/09/2020, emphasis added]

Such language often employed narratives of remoteness to suggest that IPs were disconnected from the spread of the pandemic. Some articles reported remoteness with positive connotations, suggesting that having lived in more 'natural environments' with more exercise and less processed food, IPs had higher immunity and more robust practices of using traditional medicine and herbs (also see section 'IPs as resilient').

There was little mention of vulnerabilities in the Tamil articles, and only two articles covered this in passing reference. However, when mentioned, the articles discussed differential vulnerability based on location. For example, an article discussed how many people from the Soliga community in Chamarajanagar worked in the Male Mahadeshwara temple, but with the temple being closed, they became dependent on aid from the district administration and NGOs. While the district administration reported providing regular food rations in the form of rice, millets, eggs, jaggery etc., it was noted that remote hamlets close to forests were unable to access these provisions.

4.2.2 IPs as resilient

A relatively smaller set of articles described IPs as resilient, showcased through examples of their ability to adapt to the pandemic's conditions (e.g., by leveraging existing community-based organisations such as the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam to demand and procure food). For example, in the English language media, IPs as resilient were discussed in four out of the 13 articles through narratives of their ability to adapt to the pandemic and exercise agency through community organisations.

The interventions mentioned were government initiatives such as the direct procurement of MFPs and the prevention of entry to urban traders. Private initiatives were documented as taking the form of community organisations roping in larger national philanthropic organisations for support (such as the Azim Premji Foundation in one case in the Nilgiris).

> *When people were refused rice by the local shopkeepers, Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS), an Adivasi community organisation in the Gudalur valley (which has worked in the area for 30 years) promised the owners to bear the burden of food given on credit to the adivasi people in the region. AMS has improved their resilience, improving the ability of the community to demand food, compensation.*
>
> [The Wire, English Online, 29/04/2020]

> *The role of the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam (AMS) in the Gudalur region in the Nilgiris can be explored further, they seem to have improved social networks and the collective bargaining strength of the community.*
>
> [The Hindu, English Print, 9/09/2020]

Most Kannada news articles highlighted the resilience of IPs through examples of the low incidence of COVID-19 among IPs. Low disease incidence among IPs was attributed to strong immunity, natural lifestyle and nutritious diet, among other factors. The articles further stressed that IPs in these areas consumed fruits, vegetables, and greens directly from farms and forest and were less exposed to allergen from outside due to their reduced contact with others, and low vehicular movement in their settlements, which helped keep the virus at bay. Along with these natural conditions that worked in favour of IPs, it was noted that healthcare workers and local government authorities undertook steps to prevent and treat the disease.

> *The incidence of COVID among Indigenous Peoples is low and this is attributed to their strong immunity.... IPs in these areas consume fruits and vegetables directly from nature. They have at least 80 different types of fruits and vegetables here. Along with this, the honey that we consume is also organic and has medicinal properties. The community is abreast with information on the pandemic and relies on their mobiles for this. Women and children have been proactive especially in making and distributing cloth masks.*
>
> [Kannada Prabha, Kannada Print, 04/08/2020]

> *The people in these villages are involved in livestock rearing and agriculture. They only migrate out of the village in case of need and for livelihood. They eat fruits and vegetables grown naturally and have an active lifestyle...People in these communities have been relying on natural fruits, vegetables and greens from their farms...Due to their reduced contact with others since low vehicular movement, people are not scared about the virus entering these villages.*
>
> [Prajavani, Kannada Print, 21/05/2020]

The main reason for this (low covid incidence) is their strong immunity. They consume nutritious diets comprising fruits, vegetables and greens from their farms and forests. They have been living in natural environments since time immemorial. When they fall ill, they use traditional medicine and herbs. Even before the coronavirus lockdown, their movement was restricted due to low vehicular movement and people from the community hardly moving out for work.

Drawing on narratives of purported differences and isolation from mainstream social and economic life, IPs were mostly depicted as vulnerable in the media. This was ascribed to differential and inadequate access to formal healthcare, food, and education infrastructure. However, this idea was contradicted by some articles that portrayed their difference from mainstream society as contributing to their resilience. Nature-based lifestyles, diets, and medicines were credited with providing IPs with strong immunity and leading to a low incidence of COVID-19. In response to a lack of access to mainstream systems, IPs were also documented forming strong social networks and community groups.

4.3 Responding to COVID-19: formal and informal interventions

A range of interventions, from state-led, formal interventions in the form of lockdowns, social distancing measures, changes in social safety nets distribution etc., to community-led, more informal interventions such as restricting entry into villages, using traditional medicine, among others were reported.

Across languages, most reportage was around prevention, such as through complete bans placed on outsiders (especially in the first lockdown) or tracing and testing measures (typically by the government but also taken up by communities). There was also reportage of more long-term interventions such as IPs growing their own food and removing invasive plant species with the assistance of the Forest Department in the Nilgiris region in Tamil Nadu. In the Malayalam articles, the most commonly mentioned interventions were cash transfers, and incentives and initiatives to shift to other forms of livelihoods like fishing, livestock rearing among others. Overall, multiple articles reported interventions and methods to improve resilience, discussed through the usefulness of traditional knowledge, Indigenous methods of food procurement, and dietary practice that improve the resilience of IPs.

4.3.1 Health

On health, the Malayalam coverage was mainly around strengthening health infrastructure and creating awareness among IPs on social distancing and other COVID-19 protocols. It is implied from most of the reports that prevention of COVID-19 spread in the tribal regions was given much importance, given how these regions were isolated either by the residents or the officials to prevent the spread.

Formal measures by the state included setting up mobile health units and enhancing the health facilities in the area [Deshabhimani, Malayalam Print, 04/05/2020]; medical camps in mobile medical units for sick, elderly, children and pregnant women [Deshabhimani, Malayalam Print,4/5/2020]; helplines for Adivasis in Chamarajanagar district after the second wave with a nodal officer appointed in every taluk [Udayavani, Kannada Print. 07/05/2021]; and later, conducting targeted vaccination drives.

> *The Panchayat authorities have created awareness about the coronavirus. They have run campaigns about how these communities/hamlets can reduce their risk of infections. The villages have been sanitised 4-5 times, drains have been cleaned. The Panchayat has also provided work under MGNREGA so as to minimise out migration in search of livelihoods.*
>
> [Prajavani, Kannada Print, 21/05/2020]

Across states, government interventions were reported on, often by highlighting the initiative of single district administrators:

> *The Taluk administration in Hunasuru taluk in Mysore has been on the forefront in creating awareness about the vaccinations among Adivasi communities. They have been advocating the benefits of getting vaccinated and urging people to get vaccinated. They are also addressing concerns regarding the adverse consequences of vaccines among certain sections. The officials from the health department along with ASHA workers are helming these efforts.*
>
> [Udayavani, Kannada Print 17/04/2021]

> *As an MLA of Hannoru, I have made a COVID task force for every gram panchayat. The gram panchayat members, doctors, ASHA workers, Anganwadi workers are all working together. The team conducts household surveys and identifies positive members. The patients are then sent to COVID care centres. I have ensured that testing is increased in the constituency. Also, I have used my networks to get donations and oxygen concentrators from the Tata Trusts. I have also made sure that ASHA workers are supplied with enough pulse oximeters and enough masks are distributed in the community. We are creating awareness among the community members. I have also used Rs. 24 lakhs from my MLA funds for ambulances, and there is another 26 lakhs that will be used for covid prevention and treatment in the future.*
>
> [Udayavani, Kannada Print, 05/06/2021]

The role of the district administration has been exceptionally important in managing the pandemic and its impacts, as well as setting up prevention responses. These were enabled by the extra-constitutional rights given to District Magistrates in times of epidemics and disasters (Farooqui & Malhotra, 2020). Notably, Local Administrative Task Forces were set up in each district to coordinate administration and containment efforts through the lockdowns and were reflected in the media articles.

Although these interventions were reported as mostly top-down, where information and actions flowed from the national to state and then district levels, a few reports signalled that there were moves towards coproducing interventions. As one article noted, "efforts are being put forth to make them a part of the initiatives" [Deshabhimani, Malayalam Print, 04/05/2020]. Civil society actors also played a key role in bridging gaps left by the state. For example, citing the Adivasi Munnetra Sangam, an Adivasi community organisation in the Gudalur valley on the Kerala-Karnataka border, it was reported:

> *The people of Paingal are all members of the AMS. Kethan, the Sangam leader, telephoned K.C. Krishnan, the local AMS animator. Krishnan in turn asked the shop owner to give people supplies on credit, and that the AMS would undertake the guarantee for payment. He also got the mandatory police permission needed for people to go to the shop. So, the 17 families of Paingal got their rations. The relief was palpable. No one would go to bed hungry that night…The AMS also sought help from local NGOs they have been working with since 1988. It formed a crisis management team and sent out appeals for funding. Relief money came in almost immediately, with the Azim Premji Philanthropic Initiative taking the lead.*
>
> [The Wire, English Print, 29 April 2020]

The quote demonstrates how community-based organisations that had long histories with IPs and relationships of trust and reciprocity in these areas provided a key bridging role post COVID-19 and were reported as agile actors. Beyond this, IPs themselves undertook a range of responses. Across languages, reportage on how communities took it upon themselves to restrict entry to outsiders and spread awareness about the virus was widespread:

> *They have voluntarily undertaken precautionary measures. They are following the lockdown, are home quarantining and maintaining physical distancing, among other things. Outsiders are not being let inside these hamlets.*
>
> [Kannada Prabha, Kannada Print, 04/08/2020]

> *We have been reading that in other countries COVID-19 was disproportionately leading to more fatalities among Indigenous communities, so our village heads got together and decided to impose a total ban on outsiders from entering our villages," said a resident of Siriyur.*
>
> [The Hindu, English Print, 9/09/2020]

Adivasis are refusing to move to certain safe shelters during monsoons as there are people from outside the colony also coming to the shelters and they fear it might cause a COVID spread.

[Deshabhimani, Malayalam Print, 8/8/2020]

4.3.2 Livelihoods

Interventions for livelihoods were discussed mainly in English and Malayalam articles, and most focussed on MGNREGS, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. There was lesser mention of NTFP-based livelihoods and safety nets for them were few and far between. In some cases, existing schemes were reoriented to provide safety nets. For example, at the centre, there was a call to support forest produce on which tribal communities depend:

The Panchayat has also provided work under MGNREGA so as to minimise migration in search of livelihoods.

[Prajavani, Kannada Print, 21/05/2020]

Union tribal affairs minister Arjun Munda asked chief ministers to prevent movement of traders from urban to tribal areas and procure the MFPs at minimum support price (MSP) from the funds available under the Pradhan Mantri Van Dhan Yojana.

[The Wire, English Online, 24/04/2020]

The Todas are also growing their own saplings and have set up a nursery which will have more than 7,000 saplings of native Shola trees ready to be planted in the landscape in the coming years. "We estimate that it will take around 4-5 years to clear all the invasive plants located from Sandynallah to Pykara and reintroduce native flora," added Mr. Kuttan. The Forest Department has been encouraging the local EDCs to carry out afforestation of native flora during the period when tourism is banned in the Nilgiris.

In a few cases, the role of employers in providing safe travel was highlighted as key, such as in interstate migrants:

Even before the coronavirus lockdown, their movement was restricted due to low vehicular movement and people from the community hardly moving out for work. While some people from the community work in Mysore, Coorg and Kerala's ginger and coffee plantations, the employers arrange for a vehicle for their conveyance.

[Udayavani, Kannada Online, 6/05/2021]

4.3.3 Food security

Thirteen articles spoke on interventions to ensure food security, although none of the Kannada articles discussed food-related interventions. The articles discussed free food kits supplied by the government and the allocation of ration cards. The setting up of community kitchens was reported the most. This focus on food reflects the importance the government had placed on the food supply during the pandemic, and the underlying precarity that poor households faced around food security.

> *In the previous disasters also, ration supply through mobile facilities were ensured to the regions where people faced difficulties.*
>
> [Deshabhimani, Malayalam Print, 06/08/2020]

> *Soligas are being provided sufficient food and rations regularly. They get ragi, rice, millets, eggs, jaggery etc. once in 3 months.*
>
> [Udayavani, Kannada Print, 05/06/2021]

The responses were also tied to non-pandemic interventions that have created a dependency on food rations. For example, many articles reported an increasing dependency on PDS by IPs because of erosion of local food practices and continued difficulties in accessing food in remote areas.

> *The incorporation of millets into the diet of Adivasi communities will help keep them healthy, said Mr. Robert Leo. "As most adivasis have come to rely on the Public Distribution System for their nutritional requirements, they have gradually moved away from consuming crops and foodstuffs that they would grow traditionally.*
>
> [The Hindu, English Print, 30/08/2020]

4.3.4 Education

Only three articles in the Malayalam media discussed interventions related to education (none in other languages). In Kerala, the reports on educational interventions were on bridging the digital divide by providing mobile phones and televisions, setting up community classrooms, and classes in tribal dialects. Access to education was a very debated issue in the state once the online classes commenced. An unfortunate event of suicide of a student belonging to a Scheduled Caste due to lack of digital devices (Koshy, 2020) led to a wide discussion about the access to online education. Another issue reported was how the students who previously used to stay in model residential schools had to go back to their homes and did not have any options to access the online classes.

A range of interventions, from state-led, formal interventions such as lockdowns, social distancing measures, increased distribution of social safety nets, to community-led, more informal interventions such as restricted entry into villages, were reported. Across languages, most reportage was around preventive measures or tracing and testing measures (typically by the government but also taken up by communities). There was also reportage of more long-term interventions such as IPs growing their own food and removal of invasive plant species. Health related interventions received most attention and education-centric responses were reported the least.

05 Silences in the media

In addition to what was said, we identified several omissions from the media archives. There were three types of omissions: (1) homogenising narratives of IP experiences; (2) shallow reporting on the nature of vulnerabilities; and (3) inadequate engagement with IPs' agency around responses. These three forms of silencing, while visible during the pandemic, are emblematic of wider perceptions and discourses around IPs.

5.1 Adivasi, the collective figure

Adivasi, tribes and tribal community were the most commonly used words to describe IPs. For example, in the 65 articles in the Malayalam longlist, only seven mention a particular tribe's name. Let us examine three illustrative excerpts from three different news reports on how the livelihoods of IPs in NBR were affected by the pandemic:

> *Adivasis driven to hunger due to difficulty in NTFP collection*
>
> [Malayala Manorama, Malayalam Print, 28/3/2020]

> *COVID which came following the floods has been a huge setback for the Adivasis.*
>
> [Malayala Manorama, Malayalam Print, 28/3/2020]

> *With everyone being confined to their homes, members of Adivasi community are losing out on work.*
>
> [Malayala Manorama, Malayalam Print, 22/3/2020]

These excerpts describe IPs in a homogeneous manner through collective nouns such as 'Adivasi'. This use of an umbrella term renders the IPs as a collective figure and does not represent differentiated impacts. Given the socio-economic diversity of IPs in the region, this omission homogenises IP experiences. In Kerala alone, the NBR region is home to at least eight distinct tribes embedded within socio-economic hierarchies. Thus, a person from the Paniya tribe might be more sensitive to lockdowns leading to loss of daily wage work than a person from the landed tribes like the Kurichyas. The collective narrative serves to generalise IPs, repeating and reconstructing certain perceptions around them.

5.2 Reporting vulnerabilities and erasing agency

In the previous disasters also, ration supply through mobile facilities were ensured to the regions where people faced difficulties.

[Deshabhimani, Malayalam, 6/8/2020]

Vulnerabilities were reported in generalisations or with ambiguity. For example, the quote above used words such as "difficulties" to talk about the impacts of the pandemic without going into details of what these difficulties were, how they were caused, and who was affected by them. While detailed narratives on historical marginalisation shaping present vulnerabilities might be an unfair expectation of a newspaper article, the vagueness with which vulnerabilities were discussed is linked to the homogenous representation of IPs, which then normalises certain vulnerabilities as being associated with this collective identity. For example, none of the Malayalam reports on the health impacts discussed existing health conditions in the region and precarity in health was suggested as associated with tribal identity. The only exception was a description of existing vulnerabilities in education and the digital gap faced by the students.

Another noteworthy point is how different events occurring simultaneously were reported as disconnected where in reality, they served to compound risks on people. This was visible in Kerala, where the reporting on Monkey fever and monsoons was done as events independent of the pandemic. Only two reports mentioned COVID-19 protocols were in place at some camps.

Most articles relied on interlocutors to speak about IP vulnerability and not IPs themselves, which is important to acknowledge. An exception to this was an article from The Wire where an Adivasi community union's work was mentioned, and the head of the union was interviewed.

"Even in the heavy monsoons, the tribes are following the lesson repeated by the Government to fight the pandemic"

Several articles used patronising language to portray IP as passive receivers of relief without any agency. This was closely linked to a relative silence on the value of Indigenous knowledge systems and food systems in the suite of responses (seen in Kannada and Malayalam reports as compared to the English media which discussed participatory forest management in Tamil Nadu).

06 Conclusion

In November 2021, while responding to a question in the Lok Sabha on the impacts of COVID-19 on Adivasis and predominantly tribal districts, the Ministry of Tribal Affairs noted that it had not maintained any disaggregated data, making it difficult to delineate if tribal communities had been affected disproportionately by the pandemic. This apathy and erasure of IP experiences and responses are telling and mirrored in media representations of the pandemic and IPs.

In order to understand this under- and misrepresentation better, we assessed English and vernacular language media content across online and print in three Indian states (Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, and Kerala), focussing on the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve as a geographical unit that is predominantly home to Indigenous peoples such as the Badigar, Soliga, Kurumba. We assessed 53 news articles from February 2020 to May 2021. Overall, we found that IPs were represented homogeneously and grouped under one broad category of 'Adivasis' or 'tribals'.

The dominant themes discussed varied by language: impacts and responses to health were most prominent as expected, while education was least discussed. Notably, Malayalam articles painted IPs as risk-prone, Kannada print media portrayed them as resilient, English articles tended to speak about IPs as being vulnerable and Tamil articles spoke about IPs as both vulnerable and risk-prone. In Kannada and Tamil articles, IP resilience was attributed to their reliance on traditional knowledge and remoteness, which resulted in low COVID-19 incidence and better immunity among them or allowed them to cope better with the effects of COVID-19.

Across languages, vulnerability was spoken about in relation to food security, and health and risk-proneness were mainly a result of food insecurity. State-specific areas of sectoral focus in different news media reflected the approach adopted by different state governments by favouring certain policies and programmes over others and also state-mediated public discourse. The English media articles engaged with vulnerability and resilience. The former was spoken about in terms of access to food and livelihoods as the IPs in these areas were wage workers, and the latter (resilience) was spoken about in relation to community-led interventions. In stressing the resilience of IPs, the English print media, in particular, highlighted the role of long-term community-led interventions, which drew on Indigenous knowledge and networks (e.g., communities collaborating to organise food and help members find work). The general sense from the Kannada media was that given their particular conditions— natural lifestyle, strong immunity, nutritious diets, low vehicular movement in tribal hamlets— the incidence of COVID-19 was less among IPs, rendering them more resilient. This narrative seemed to romanticise IPs in a certain sense without adequate evidence presented to make these claims of higher resilience.

Overall, several articles touched upon the impacts of the lockdown on livelihoods and food systems, explained through reference to the functioning of NREGA or aid to communities. There was sporadic reportage on other secondary impacts such as loss of livelihoods and children's inability to access online learning due to low ownership of mobile phones and inadequate internet bandwidth required to attend online classes.

A range of response interventions undertaken as a response to COVID-19 in tribal hamlets were reported. Institutional actors such as panchayats and healthcare workers (ASHAs), sometimes in association with community members, were shown as leading efforts to create awareness about COVID-19, address misinformation, and advocate for the benefits of vaccinations. There was strong reportage on communities stepping up efforts to curb disease spread by restricting entry to outsiders and, in one case, sewing and distributing cloth masks.

In conclusion, media coverage on the pandemic and IPs in the Nilgiri Biosphere Reserve was small and focused on certain risks and responses, mainly around health and food insecurity. Themes of livelihoods and education were less reported on, possibly because impacts on these were less visible and accrued over longer time periods. The reports discussed several response interventions, both formal, state-led and informal community-led ones. While collectively, the media reports give a broad idea of the impacts on and responses of IPs in the NBR during the pandemic, silences around pre-existing vulnerabilities shaping differential impacts and certain livelihoods remain.

This review does find that IP concerns have been represented in the media, albeit unevenly. In this sense, the media tracked COVID-19 impacts, communicated response actions, and in some cases, held state and non-state interventions accountable. However, the articles often fell back on homogenising narratives of IPs as vulnerable or resilient, falling into easy discursive traps that either romanticised IPs and their ways of living or took on paternalistic tones of IPs requiring handouts and being unable to understand the gravity of the pandemic. Both these extremes caricatured Ips, and we did not find evidence of reflective media coverage that took its role of shaping public discourse seriously.

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Annex Table 1: Media review template used for data coding

SOURCE (reference and date)
Type of item (opinion OR news OR feature/documentary)
Type of author (journalist OR role/organisation of other)
Timeline (Beginning - Late Feb, early March, First lockdown, Second lockdown, Post-lockdown)
Notes on Risks, Resilience, Interventions
Impacts on food systems 1. What is the effect of COVID and lockdowns on food systems? 2. How did it affect physical/economic access to food systems? 3. How did it affect access to natural resources? What were the changes to hunting, fishing, and other livelihood activities? 4. How has the pandemic affected food sovereignty? 5. How did COVID impact access to food in remote areas?
Impacts of COVID 1. How does the article talk about impacts of COVID, e.g. on food availability and access, nutritional security, health, marginalisation, exposure to climate extremes, land dispossession, livelihoods, income, gender, knowledge systems. 2. Are the differentiated impacts of COVID-19 discussed? E.g. on women/men, children, youth, elders in the community? 3. Are any positive impacts of COVID-19 reported?
Resilience of Indigenous People 1. How does the article talk about IP (vulnerable/resilient)? 2. Is there any mention of the broad factors affecting vulnerability, historical marginalisation etc.? 3. Does the article mention coping mechanisms such as through Indigenous knowledge systems, social networks, etc.?
Interventions and activities as a response to COVID 1. What COVID-related interventions are mentioned? 2. Who are these initiated by and who is involved? What is the response of the people? 3. Was food aid received from the government? How did COVID impact school food programmes? 4. What warning/preventive systems were in place? 5. Are there any insights for scaling up?
Other themes? (e.g. specific livelihoods, migration, etc.)

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