Nomadic communities of India have perennially played a crucial role in defining Indian culture. A tribe of artists and performers, the Bahurupi (from Hindu Nathpanthi Davari Gosavi Nomadic group) have a rich lineage of performing arts. Traveling from city to city in Maharashtra, the Bahurupi nomads have spread joy and laughter with their music, art, and theatre. However, in recent decades, their narratives have been excluded from the national mainstream conversation resulting in the exclusion of nomadic communities during policymaking and political representation.

Being a nomadic community, the Bahurupi face unique challenges in navigating life in the 21st century. While the children in the community have been enrolled in schools, the community has always relied on their cultural heritage to make a living for themselves. Given that the nomadic community's occupation requires them to constantly move to different locations, their children do not get an opportunity to educate themselves in proper schools. Even if they manage to obtain any form of formal education through ashrams and hostels, they are often compelled to drop out due to
the lack of finances. Most of them are unable to gain higher education which deprives them of the chance to procure a job with a stable income, leaving them with the only option of doing what their ancestors have been doing since ages.

From a young age, children begin to work with their parents to earn daily meals for themselves and their family. Growing up, the children of the community witness the adults crafting the dholak, performing as tightrope walkers, or roaming city to city with the 'nandi bail' and hone the same skills, eventually pushing them to undertake the same occupation. While being surrounded by the arts can give a culturally rich upbringing, the structural problems with education have forced the entire community to be stuck in this vicious cycle creating a heritage that the community relies on generation after generation.
With the pandemic, these performers face a new challenge. The spread of the virus has attacked their heritage—the backbone of their community—leaving them hungry, helpless, and poverty-stricken.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdowns, the denotified communities in India faced an unprecedented situation of restrictions on movement. For a community whose survival depends on mobility and intra-state travel, this scenario was fraught with consequences. The livelihoods of the communities have been severely affected.

During the first lockdown, they were stuck in the regions to which they had travelled to. Left with no means to earn money, all their savings dried up. Despite facing adverse consequences on their way of life, these communities received little to no aid from the government.

"Hamare upar koi sarkar dhyaan nahi dete, hamko kuch Mila nahi hai, ham aise hi mar rahe hai (The governments don't take care of our concerns. We are left to strive for ourselves and we are dying this way)", says Amit Salunkhe whose family profession has been to travel around to places with their 'nandi bail'.

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Even after various restrictions were lifted, the situation remained bleak for the nomadic community. They were not in a position to carry out their business and trade in a normal manner. Being circus performers and thespians, the closure of live arts has cut off their source of primary income.

Amit and his family had often been verbally abused by people on account of their movement within cities. "Earlier, people used to derive entertainment from our profession, but after the pandemic, they don’t stick around to watch". For Imraaj, who is primarily involved in making and selling drums, stringent actions by the police posed a lot of difficulties.

"Earlier, people used to derive entertainment from our profession, but after the pandemic, they don’t stick around to watch"

- AMIT SALUNKHE
The nomadic communities travel to villages, towns, and cities. Apart from the fact that their livelihood is dependent on it, their mobile occupation is actually a result of their cultural beliefs and values. The pandemic has brought about a complete bar on the practice of their profession which has made their survival tougher than ever. “The present circumstances have left us with nothing, even two meals is a miracle”, says Mauli Sawant, whose family has been involved in theatre for generations.

Covid-19 and the current partial lockdowns in place have only exacerbated the peculiar situation of the nomadic communities. Their culture and art are facing the threat of being wiped out. Governments must pay special attention to these tribes and look after their needs.
JIGNESH MISTRY is a Senior Research Analyst and the Visual Storyboard Team Lead with the Centre for New Economics Studies (CNES), Jindal School of Liberal Arts, O.P. Jindal Global University. He is a freelance photojournalist, who has been working in the field as a journalist for over 11 years. Jignesh started his career as a nightshift news photographer at a daily tabloid during his graduation. Since then, his work has been published at multiple magazines, wire agencies and national newspapers. He is also involved in undertaking photography workshops for students in academic institutions. He has been engaged with the PAIGAM network and is a regular contributor at The Wire, The Press Trust of India and other International Wire Agencies.

THE TEAM

Vanshika Shah
Senior Research Analyst, CNES

Sarah Ayreen Mir
Research Analyst, CNES

Advaita Singh
Senior Research Analyst, CNES