

Government Strategies to Compensate Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19)

Impact on Agriculture Sector in India

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The Indian agriculture sector is labour-intensive and the 2020 lockdown in the Country adversely impacted agricultural operations amid Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). COVID-19 lockdown restrictions have put tremendous pressure on agriculture as a consequence of the closing of labour movements, limited access to agricultural inputs and markets. This article addresses the crisis of the Indian agriculture sector amid lockdown restrictions and highlights various initiatives and policies adopted by the Government of India to combat adverse effects on Indian agriculture caused by the COVID-19 situation.

Keywords: Agriculture sector, Coronavirus disease, Covid-19, Lockdown, Pandemic impact

Introduction

Numerous coronaviruses are known to result in respiratory infections in humans ranging from natural cold to much more serious sicknesses namely Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS). The virus recently discovered is the cause of Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19). In Wuhan, China novel coronavirus was the reason for a respiratory sickness in a group of people, Hubei, confirmed by the World Health Organization (WHO) on 12 January 2020, and submitted to the WHO on 31 December 2019. In India on 30 January 2020, the first Corona case was registered in Kerala, which increased to three cases by 3 February; all were students who had returned from Wuhan. COVID-19 is now a worldwide pandemic that has affected many Countries.

Hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Shri Narendra Modi asked the Indian citizens to strictly follow the curfew on March 22nd through live,

telecasted on 19th March which was named as 'Janata Curfew'. Further, the Prime Minister said the only option for controlling coronavirus spread to break the transmission cycle is through social distancing. Table 1 shows the lockdown and unlock phases in India.

Impact of COVID-19 in the agriculture sector

The pandemic affects all sectors globally but this article focus on the agriculture sector. The first visible effect of COVID-19 was on the

agricultural supply chain. Nation-wide complete lockdown restricted the movement of people as well as vehicles between States and Districts, as a result, it negatively affected the farm economy. India is an agrarian country where almost 55% population depends on agriculture and its allied activities. In no other developing country, such a large number of populations depend on agriculture. Approximately 700 million people depend directly or indirectly on a livelihood derived from agriculture. According to the

Table 1. Locks and unlocks in India until 31 July 2020

Lockdown phase	Period (2020)	Themes of an announcement by PM	No. of days (Lockdown period)
I	25 March to 14 April	Only if there is life there will be a livelihood	21
II	15 April to 3 May	Both lives and livelihood matters equally	19
III	4 May to 17 May	From an individual to the whole of humanity and self-reliant India	14
IV	18 May to 31 May	More rights to States/UTs	14
Unlock phase			
I	1 June to 30 June	Both saving lives and reviving livelihoods our priority	30
II	1 July to 31 July	Do not be careless	31



Fig. 1. Farmers pouring 80,000 litres of excess milk on the ground due to the lockdown. Source: A Satish, The Indian Express, 1st April 2020.

2019-20 Economic Survey of the Indian Government, agriculture and allied sectors contribute 16.5% to the country's \$2.6 trillion GDP.

Agricultural activities were severely affected by the lockdown as the agriculture sector mainly depends on the labours from sowing to harvesting operations. During the lockdown period, there was a peak in *rabi* crop harvesting in irrigated areas i.e. wheat, mustard, chickpea, lentil, and paddy. Whereas, in South-India crops like banana, pepper and coffee were at the harvesting stage. The unavailability of farm-labours due to migration to their native places caused a significant increase in the daily wage-price during harvesting operations. There was also a shortage of transportation facilities, agricultural implements and closing of the repair centers. The supply chain of milk was interrupted due to the restrictions on the intra-state movements of transportation. During this epidemic, milk was either converted into ghee and other milk products, or milk was consumed by the farm families, and in the extreme case in some places, milk was thrown on roads or in drains (Fig. 1) as there were transport restrictions due to the lockdown and people were afraid of taking milk packets from outsiders due to chance of infection. According to a report prepared by the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT), the COVID-19 lockdown

has placed the marine fishery sector in the deep sea, inflicting a daily loss of approximately ₹224 cr. A telephone survey conducted by the Public Health Foundation of India (PHFI), Harvard T H Chan School of Public Health and the Centre for Sustainable Agriculture (CSA, Hyderabad) during the first two weeks of May 2020 found that 10% of farmers were unable to harvest their crops in the past month and 60% of those who harvested reported loss, and most of the farmers faced difficulties in the coming season. The first flush of tea gardens could not be harvested due to lockdown logistic

issues. It is not known how this impacted the second flush. The entire tea industry based in Darjeeling might have a major drop in revenue. As a result, tea exports could see an annual decline of up to 8% as reported in Business Standard India. In March 2020, India's tea exports dropped by 33% compared to March 2019. Food wastage increased during the lockdown due to the disruption in supply chains, which had an adverse economic impact on the small farmers.

"Due to the lockdown, there are fewer buyers in mandis (Agricultural market) at the moment, due to which he was bounded to sell 4 quintals of chilli at ₹10 per kg as against the normal price of ₹40. And I wanted to grab the deal; otherwise, the transport expense of taking back all that produces would have broken his back", the statement was given by a farmer from west Greater Noida village in Khairpur, Uttar Pradesh, told to an IPS officer over the phone. Some villages have reported farmer suicides. A farmer in India's southern state, Karnataka, committed suicide in May 2020 as he was unable to sell his crop due to the lockdown. Another farmer from Jari village in Uttar Pradesh, Rambhavan Shukla, killed himself because of the unavailability of the workers to harvest his wheat. According to Dr Sanket Thakur, an Agricultural



Fig. 2. Fewer buyers in mandis during the lockdown. Credit: Neeta Lal/IPS: Source: <http://www.ipsnews.net/2020/04/covid-19-indias-harvests-also-locked/>

Scientist, 20% decline in vegetable and fruit prices in Chhattisgarh. Fig. 2 showing a picture of a market in Delhi during lockdown where there is less number of buyers as compared to pre-Covid-19 time.

Affected farmers in India

A market transportation and selling of the crop have been an important matter because out of 247 major grain markets, only 125 grain markets were working. “Farmers are finding it difficult to harvest, clean, and sell the crop. They need people to grade the crops, as well. They are currently supporting each other as 40-45% of workers have returned to their home”, said Chairman Babulal Gupta. At least 20% of the banana bunches were spoiled in Tiruchy district, as per a farmer, before the government cleared transport curbs. Rates of agricultural produce have dropped sharply in Maharashtra. Farmers were left with no choice but to dump their produces. “We have seen many viral videos in which grape growing farmers and vegetable growers are dumping their produces, because of the lockdown there was neither a buyer nor a seller,” said Vijay Jawandiyia, an agriculture expert. International cotton prices have decreased, he said, impacting domestic prices, “If the government extended the lockdown further, the situation of farmers will worsen.” Most farmers in Madhya Pradesh do crop harvesting jointly, but their harvesting has been hampered as the lockdown has been prohibited from bringing and carrying the harvester from other districts of the state. ₹ 1,600 price of a quintal of wheat in the state during the lockdown, which is around ₹ 300 lower than the Minimum Support Price (MSP) of Rs 1925 per quintal for the duration 2020-21. Farmers in Ludhiana, Punjab face labour shortages as they start paddy cultivation. “Migrant workers have gone to their home towns due to lockdown and those that are available demand higher working fees. And we cannot work with machines because they cost 10-12 lakh rupees”, Jugraj Singh, a farmer says. It was informed by



Fig. 3. Wheat got drenched with rain water due to a shortage of labourers.

Source: <https://zeenews.india.com/hindi/india/rajasthan/hundreds-of-ton-of-wheat-wet-due-to-rain-in-udaipur/696862>

Surajbhan Singh, Chief Engineer, Ground Water Department that only 30% of the groundwater pre-monsoon survey has been done in Rajasthan due to the lockdown, and this will affect drinking water schemes in future.

Due to a shortage of labourers at Rana Pratap Nagar railway station in Udaipur, many tonnes of wheat got drenched with water. Figure 3 showing the picture of wet wheat due to rain. COVID-19 has impacted severely the farmers' produce sell system. Most of the government-regulated mandis were closed down amid COVID lockdown restrictions. This abrupt lockdown of mandis has put tremendous pressure on the government-owned societies as there was a surge of production brought to sell. It also forced farmers to sell out their produces to the societies where produced is procured/bought at a fixed price which is low compared to the mandis where produce bidding is taking place as per the quality. Another disturbance amid lockdown COVID-19 has caused is drudgery in selling out the farmers' produce. Societies ask farmers from villages to bring their produce on a particular day and it has caused serious trouble as this has forced farmers to stay at societies and sometimes their turn comes after 5-6 days.

Schemes released by the Government of India (GoI) to help people and farmers during Covid-19

The Indian Minister of Finance

immediately following the announcement of the country-wide lockdown declared an INR 1.7 trillion package, mainly to protect vulnerable sections (including farmers) from the negative effects of the ongoing pandemic. The announcement included the advance release of ₹ 2,000 to farmers' bank accounts as income support under the PM-KISAN (Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi) scheme, among a slew of benefits. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (the Prime Minister's program for the security of the poor) has been declared to take care of the vulnerable population. To support job opportunities and salaries to workers, the average daily wage under the MGNREGA was hiked to ₹ 202 from the previous pay of ₹ 182, as of by 1 April 2020. To benefitting the dairy cooperatives a new scheme was launched for subvention at the rate of 2% per annum for 2020-21 aimed at unlocking ₹ 5,000 crore additional liquidity. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR) has provided State-wise guidelines for farmers to adopt throughout the lockdown phase. The guidelines address common activities during the harvesting and threshing of different *Rabi* crops as well as post-harvesting, storage, and selling of agricultural commodities.

Several financial relief initiatives have been declared for the poor on 26 March 2020 to total more than

170,000 crores. The next day, the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) has announced a range of interventions that may make the financial system of the country available for as many as 374,000 crores. The RBI has also proposed concrete steps to tackle the “Debt Servicing Burden” caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Agricultural term and crop loans were provided with a three-month moratorium (up to May 31) by bank institutions with a 3% waiver on crop interest rates up to ₹ 300,000 for better repayment behavior borrowers. PM Modi declared a ₹ 20 trillion (₹ 20 lakh crore) Economic program for ‘Atma Nirbhar Bharat’ (self-reliant India) in a live television broadcast on 12 May 2021. There were certain guidelines released by the Government of India to farming sectors to get back to their feet during pandemic situations. Based on GoI’s policy guidelines, different government departments/ministries released implementation guidelines for the continuous operations of agriculture and allied sectors. According to the agriculture ministry, GOI, during the lockdown period from 24 March 2020 to today, approximately 9.55 crore farming families profited from the central government’s PM-KISAN scheme, with the amount of ₹ 19,100.77 crore has been given so far. NAFED (National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India Ltd) procured a sum of 5.89 lakh tonnes of gram (chana), 4.97 lakh tonnes of mustard, and 4.99 lakh tonnes of toor (arhar) during the lockdown period.

Discussion

We could contribute or participate in ongoing campaign/donation in India like PM care funds (The Prime Minister’s Citizens Assistance and Emergency Relief Fund were formed on 28 March 2020 amid the Covid-19 disease outbreak in India), Rang De India.

Rang De India Telethon campaign: The goal of Rang De is to influence its peer financing platform to generate a massive citizen’s movement to assist farmers. Rang De partners with farmers producers’ groups and credible organizations at

the field level to help small and marginal farmers impacted by the current situation caused by Covid-19. Rang De India is an appeal to the common people of India to come together with open hands to support small and marginal farmers (One who has landholding below 5 acres).

- Distribute cards to farmers, transporter, or retailer (It will reduce problems in traffic checking).
- Ensure a supply of required fertilizer, pesticide, seeds for the forthcoming cropping season.
- Prepare for possible natural calamities; many times it has been observed that after famine drought occurs. ICAR has been developed a lot of drought-tolerant crops. The seed of such crops needs to multiply and keep ready for the possible occurrence of natural calamities.
- Relief of standards by Agricultural Produce Market Committees (APMCs), enabling farmers to sell their commodities outside the mandis set would certainly decrease the pressure on farmers. State governments must start preparing their machinery to obtain marketable surpluses smoothly for farmers at MSP or through other price support systems.
- Central and state governments should be taking care of farmer’s needs in mind when they are preparing or imposing any Ordinance for agriculture so that there is no misunderstanding or disagreement between governments and farmers. For example, farmers are protesting against three ordinances in Ludhiana. Thousands of farmers under the banners of different organizations took out a “tractor march” in Ludhiana on 21 July 2020 in protest against three ordinances introduced by the Central Government and the fuel price hike.
- The agriculture sector can be taken in a new direction by inviting investors to agriculture, attracting them to invest in the agriculture sector, as the PM’s said while addressing India Ideas

Summit 2020 that the opportunities to invest in India are wide. In India, you are invited to invest in our farmers’ hard work. In the agriculture sector, India has recently made historic reforms. Investment opportunities exist in Ready-to-eat goods, agricultural inputs and machinery, management of the agricultural supply chain, fisheries, and organic products. By 2025, it is estimated that India’s food processing sector is expected to exceed half a trillion dollars. To develop more sources of revenue, the best time to tap investment opportunities in the Indian agriculture sector is now!

Conclusions

As we all know that the first prevention from this pandemic is to keep social distancing. But some essential activities should continue parallelly by following all the guidelines of COVID-19 like allowing transportation to food and dairy products, allowing the farmers for the machinery and agricultural implements from one place to other places, etc. State and Central Governments have taken a number of initiatives to extend all possible supports and that resulted in a comparatively lesser impact on agricultural activities. We should learn from the crisis so that better planning can be done in the future to prevent hardships for farmers and agricultural labourers. Due to the pandemic, farmers and labourers have been affected all over India. However, the govt. has made significant efforts and still trying to restoring the damage and giving relaxation to the sufferers.

When the lockdown was announced none of us rushed to buy cars, gold, land, or many other things. But, all of us rushed to buy edible items. Farmers are the soul of our planet. THANK YOU FARMERS.

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