

# **The COVID-19 Pandemic and its Impact on Theri Village, Punjab**

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Theri village is in the Sri Muktsar Sahib district of Punjab. The village is thirty-four km from the district headquarters (the city of Sri Muktsar Sahib), and 255 km from the state capital, Chandigarh. Telephonic interviews were conducted, first with the head of the village panchayat and then with other informants, to gather information; the respondents include a farmer, a mason, an operator of earthmover machinery, two owners of repair shops, one female worker, a bank manager and three individuals from the Bazigar tribe. The interviews were conducted on March 31 and April 3, 2020.

According to the head of the village panchayat, Theri has 734 households and a total population of about 4000. Like many villages in India, the settlement in Theri is also organised by castes. Jat Sikh households live in three wards of the village while Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe households live in the remaining six wards. The head of the panchayat reported that the caste, clan and tribal groups in the village include Jat, Chamar, Bazigar, Mazhabi, Sunar, and Tarkhan. The Jat Sikhs are the main landowning group and make up about thirty per cent of the population. Mazhabi Sikhs, mostly landless, make up about 20 per cent of the population. Bazigars, also mostly landless, account for about thirteen per cent respectively. The village also has several individuals engaged in non-farm occupations, including carpenters, repair workshop workers, masons, construction workers (such as JCB operators) and those who own or work in spare parts shops.

When the interviews were conducted, the harvesting of wheat had not yet begun. Farmers here harvest wheat using combine harvesters, but they also hire workers to perform operations like loading and unloading, and an influx of migrant workers seeking agricultural work is usual at this time of year. However, the lockdown has prevented migrant workers from coming to the village this year. One respondent, who is a farmer, reported that most migrant workers who were in the village already have left for their home states; the lack of available labour is a source of anxiety for him. He also said there was no clarity about when the sale of wheat would take place or how procurement would occur during the lockdown. The village is eight km away from two towns, Malout and Gidderbaha; farmers typically sell their produce in the grain markets of the two towns. Since the lockdown restricts movement, the farmer is worried about how to store his produce, since he lacks the space to do so. The agricultural markets are also facing a shortage of labour, since they also typically rely on migrant labour.

Many of those involved in non-agricultural work have lost their sources of income. One of the respondents is a carpenter, and he reported that the lockdown has negatively impacted his ability to earn and income to support his household. His family includes his four children, his wife and his ailing mother. Before the lockdown, he found work within the village or in the towns nearby. He also reported that many medications are out of stock at the two pharmacies in the village. When asked about this, the owner of one of the pharmacies explained that he has not received his usual stock due to disruptions in the supply chain. Most poor households in the village do not keep stocks of essential medicines due to a lack of cash and buy

small quantities as and when needed. A fifty-year-old female worker, who is a domestic worker employed by two households in the village, would normally have earned Rs 1700 per month—she has lost this income owing to the lockdown, as her employers have not allowed her to come to work.

Two respondents, who own a shop to repair agricultural machinery in this village, reported they usually undertake a lot of work in the month of March, but they had to shut shop during the first few days after the lockdown was announced. Although they have been allowed to reopen since the second week of the lockdown, they continue to face problems, such as not being able to acquire the tools and spare parts they need to repair machines, since these are usually purchased from nearby towns and cities. Operators of earthmover machinery have been affected by the shutting down of the nearby biomass thermal plants as well as the stoppage of all other construction work. Bazigar households in the village own fifty to sixty tractors and use this to transport goods such as agricultural produce across parts of Punjab and in some parts of Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Rajasthan. They have been badly affected as the inter-state transport of goods has been stopped.

This village has one private bank (AXIS Bank) but there is no ATM in the village. The manager of the bank reported that, under the old-age pension scheme, the pensioners used to get Rs 500 per month, but for the month of March, they have received Rs 750, as the state government has given them an increment of Rs 250 to provide some relief during the lockdown.

According to the head, the village panchayat has spent Rs. 50,000 so far to provide essential food supplies (including salt, turmeric, sugar, tea, rice and ghee) to about 161 poor families. The panchayat head noted that there had been no confirmation yet of what the state government's relief package or measures would be.

The rural economy, which had already been facing a number of challenges, has been badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The most affected in this village are casual workers, migrant workers and other daily wage earners, many of whom have been unable to access even essential supplies. Local government and community groups are playing a very important role in mitigating the problems thrown up by the pandemic and the policy response to it.

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