

The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Livelihoods in Mahuvar Village (Ballia), UP

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Mahuvar village is situated on the banks of the Ghaghra river in Ballia, Uttar Pradesh. The major caste groups in the village include, Yadavs, Dhobis, Rajbhars, Gonds and Kurmis. Yadavs constitute around seventy to eighty per cent of the population and are the socially and economically dominant caste in the village. They own most of the land. Landowning families engage in cultivation and animal husbandry. The households from castes other than Yadav are either landless or own small plots of land. They engage in agricultural work, construction work and their traditional caste occupations. Poor households rear goats to supplement their regular income.

This report is based on telephonic interviews conducted with three informants: a farmer from the Yadav caste, a landless casual worker from the Rajbhar caste, and a tea shop owner from the Gond Schedule Tribe.

Impact on agriculture

Wheat, mustard, peas and pulses (chickpeas, pigeon peas, latari, masur) are the major rabi crops. No restrictions have been imposed on the movement of farmers and labourers in the fields during the lockdown. Therefore, farmers have not had to face a shortage of labour for harvesting their rabi crops. Agricultural labourers in the village come mainly from the Rajbhar caste in the village; some workers from the Chamar caste come from the adjoining village, Mathiya.

In the last week of March, farmers were preparing to sow sugarcane in their fields. However, due to the lockdown, they were unable to purchase fertilizers and protective chemicals that were needed at the time of sowing, so they have had to sow the crop without applying these. This is likely to have a significant impact on sugarcane yields in the coming year.

Some farmers, particularly from the Kurmi caste, grow vegetables and sell them to traders in the local market. These farmers have also been unable to purchase fertilizers and protective chemicals needed to prevent pest infestation or disease in their crops. Also, the local vegetable market has been closed because of the lockdown and the supply links to the nearby town are broken. As a result, vegetable growers are not able to sell their produce.

Impact on livestock economy

Nearly all shops that sell livestock feed such as oilcake and bran are shut due to the lockdown. A few shops that have stocks of livestock feed are selling this at a premium of ten to twenty per cent over the pre-lockdown price. Farmers sell milk to local milkmen who then supply it to sweet shops, tea shops and urban households of the Belthara Road town. A dominant share of the demand for milk comes from sweet and tea shops. Since these shops are shut due to the lockdown, there has been a drastic fall in the demand for milk; milkmen are now only procuring and supplying milk to households in Belthara Road. As a result, farmers are unable to sell their milk and are

having to dis-tribute it among the villagers for free. There has been no change in the price of milk in the town or in the prices that the milkmen pay to dairy farmers.

The cattle trade, which was already suffering because of the rise in cow vigilantism ever since the BJP came to power, has stopped completely after the lockdown began. Cattle traders cannot travel from village to village to buy cattle that farmers might want to sell. The cattle markets, where farmers and cattle traders would gather to buy and sell cattle, are also shut due to the lockdown.

While peasants in the village own cattle, poor, landless households rear goats and poultry. These goat- and poultry-rearing households have suffered major losses due to rumours that were spread in February about the virus that causes COVID-19 spreading via meat. This fear caused a drastic fall in demand for chicken and goat meat. The price of chicken, which is usually around Rs 160 per kg, plummeted to twenty rupees per kg. One of the respondents, who rears goats, reported that the Holi season used to be the best season for sales as they usually sell their goats at a good price at this time. This year, however, hardly any goats were sold.

Impact on employment and food security

All non-farm activities have come to a grinding halt after the declaration of the lockdown. Construction workers who continued to work in neighbouring villages during the initial days of the lockdown were harassed and beaten up by the police. Those in caste-based traditional occupations, such as washermen, barbers and blacksmiths are the only ones in non-farm work who are continuing to work during the lockdown.

The lockdown has put landless and small landowning households at risk of starvation. The harvest season has brought work for some but members of landless and small landowning households have largely been unable to find any work. Due to the absence of any government intervention at the village level to address the issue of food security, many of these households are struggling to fulfil their food requirements.

During the initial phase, that is, from March 24 to March 27, all shops and establishments except hospitals and banks were ordered to stay shut. Even shops that sell essential goods and food items were shut. The prices of most essential commodities went up during this period because there was a shortage of these commodities, and they had to be bought clandestinely, without attracting the attention of the police. The prices of most food items and essential commodities that are not produced locally rose between twenty and per cent at this time. The price of green chillis went up from eighty rupees per kg to Rs 500 per kg; the price of tomatoes jumped from forty rupees per kg to eighty rupees per kg; the price of sugar increased from forty rupees per kg to eighty rupees per kg. Although there are many reports of corruption in the allocation of licenses, the prices of essential commodities came down after March 27 when the government introduced a system of licenses allowing shops selling essential commodities to stay open. For instance, a shop in the adjoining village, Mathiya, has been given a license to sell essential goods to the people of Mathiya and neighbouring villages like Mahuvar at controlled prices.

The MGNREGA scheme has been dysfunctional for the last six or seven years. Workers' job cards have not been updated and new job cards have not been created for many years. One of the respondents who had a job card six or seven years ago and had found work under MGNREGA scheme reported that the cash transfer to MGNREGA workers announced by the government is availed by well-to-do people who are close to the village head—poor labourers are not benefiting from the cash transfer scheme.

The state government had also announced that a sum of Rs 1000 would be transferred to the accounts of construction workers registered with the labour department, cart owners, small shop owners and rickshaw pullers. However, none of the construction labourers in this village are registered with the labour department and so none of them have received any kind of cash transfer in their accounts. Small owners and cart owners too have not received any cash transfers.

The lockdown, which was declared without any accompanying government policies to address the issue of food security and loss of income, has put a great deal of stress on landless and small land-owning households. Most of the relief measures announced later by the government are yet to have any impact for the inhabitants of this village. The first week of the lockdown was the most difficult, as no work was available during this period. Households had to sustain themselves by buying food items on credit, or receiving them as gifts and alms. The onset of the harvest season has brought some relief. However, the demand for agricultural labour is not enough to provide work to everybody. And, once the harvest season ends, these households will once again face the prospect of starvation.

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