

The challenges faced by people in rural community during lock down

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Abstract

Rural India is often forgotten by the rest of India, even though 68.84 per cent of India is comprised of villages. When the lockdown was imposed upon India as a measure to contain the spread of the corona virus pandemic, it seemed that rural India was, once again, left to its own devices. But I contacted the students of the P.G.Centre Ramanagara (2019-21), Bangalore University, who surveyed and shared the observations and experiences of the 100 residents of 10 unique village locations across 2 districts during the first phase of the nation-wide lockdown. This is a summary of the study that resulted from the survey.

Introduction

In the midst of the current global pandemic, India's national lockdown and measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 have been effective thus far, albeit at a cost, particularly among women of rural India. In order to gain a better understanding of the immediate impacts the pandemic and lockdown, a phone survey was conducted among about 40 below-the-poverty-line women members of self help groups in Bangalore to assess the situation of their households. The great majority of households reported extreme declines in income and employment. Distribution of free rice rations seems to be working effectively, but most respondents did not report receiving monetary transfers from the government. Additionally, the study demonstrates how universities may engage their students in tackling this contemporary social issue, by offering them opportunities to translate their learned classroom knowledge to practical, real-world settings.

The challenges faced by people in rural India are very different from the challenges faced by people living in cities. In cities, we have grown used to a certain sense of entitlement; we have access to luxuries people in villages can only dream of. Having said that, the challenges faced by

rural India can be broadly grouped into: livelihood challenges (agriculture and allied sector and non-farm livelihoods in the informal/unorganized sector), prerogative challenges (food - Public Distribution System (PDS), work- Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), and relief - state-sponsored, water, and cash), and social and behavioral challenges (awareness, fear/panic, rumours, domestic abuse, and discrimination). This study also highlights initiatives by the three actors, namely the community, the village-level functionaries, and the Non-Governmental Organizations/ Civil Society Organizations (NGOs/CSOs) that can potentially have positive implications in rural India.

The returning migrants

When the lockdown was imposed, migrants from villages and small towns across India who had moved to big cities in search of jobs and better lives lost their jobs. Faced with the difficult decision of staying put and starving, or walking back home to their villages, many migrants chose to walk home, often walking for days, often going without food and water. Many of them had older family members in tow and carried young children on their shoulders. The return of these migrants to their villages posed special problems for the heads of the villages because they had to be quarantined, and many migrants were unwilling to allow themselves to be quarantined.

Migrant workers heading home after the national lockdown imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to curb the spread of Corona virus COVID-19 , at Ashram area, on March 27, 2020 in New Delhi, India. (Photo by Amal KS/Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

Migrant workers heading home after the national lockdown imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to curb the spread of Coronavirus COVID-19 , at Ashram area, on March 27, 2020 in New Delhi, India. (Photo by Amal KS/Hindustan Times via Getty Images)

“The day these 36 members came from Bangalore which was then the hotspot of this virus is unforgettable. It was a tough decision for me to keep them in quarantine or to let them meet their families who are seeing them after a year. Making them understand the severity of disease and the quarantine is for their safety along with safety of family and all villagers.... but, they were not ready to listen and their sole argument was, we have no symptoms of this virus. I had to call the Tehsildar and station-in-charge of the Police station... seeing the officials, they finally agreed

to stay for 14-day quarantine. We made the primary school a quarantine centre because it was situated on the outskirts of the village.” -- Sarpanch of a village in Odisha on 5th April 2020.

Agriculture and allied livelihoods in rural India

The discourse about agriculture in rural India has mostly revolved around the ‘broken supply chain’ conversation regarding crop-based agriculture and horticulture. But we’re leaving agri-allied (forestry, livestock rearing, goatery, sericulture, fishery and aquaculture) and non-farm livelihoods out of the discussions on rural India.

A recurring theme among respondents to the survey was their concerns for their rabi crop. “In the case of rabi crops, mostly wheat, and including mustard, potato, chickpea, jowar, soya, paddy and other crops, the harvest has been impeded due to the lockdown for various reasons. Availability of labour, lack of family labour, availability of machines, practising physical distance, and fear of police have emerged as the major hurdles in the harvest of rabi crops across the states in India.”

Sushma Maurya, 31, farmer, poses with cauliflower at her vegetable farm during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Maurya, born into a farming family and married to a farmer, said "farming is the only thing" she knows and "farmers must continue working so that people living in cities can get fresh vegetables." (PRAKASH SINGH/AFP)

Sushma Maurya, 31, farmer, poses with cauliflower at her vegetable farm during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. Maurya, born into a farming family and married to a farmer, said "farming is the only thing" she knows and "farmers must continue working so that people living in cities can get fresh vegetables." (PRAKASH SINGH/AFP)

In some locations, the harvesting of crops has been allowed. In those situations, there are major challenges in threshing, transportation, storage, procurement and sale of the crops, and this has been described as crucially impeding the gains that would accrue from the harvest. The closure of markets, haats, and mandis add to the woes of the respondents and emerges quite emphatically in the responses received.

Furthermore, in the case of perishable horticultural produce, the challenges have been similar. Labour challenges did not emerge as crucial, as in the case of rabi crops, but problems in the harvest (fear of the police, maintaining physical distance, constrained timings etc.), transportation, storage and sale were common. Additionally, due to the perishable nature of the crops, many locations have reported the dumping of horticultural produce (truckloads of cucumber dumped in Maharashtra, for example), selling at dirt-cheap prices (like the sale of tomatoes in Tamil Nadu), and using crops as animal feed (Rajasthan). On the positive side, many households that were maintaining a kitchen garden, have had a blessing in disguise, because the restricted mobility has impeded sales of vegetables, and kitchen gardens have come to the rescue in many locations (**Odisha, Arunachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Manipur, Chhattisgarh etc.**).

Farmers travel in a crowded boat on the river Ganga carrying vegetables to a wholesale market during a nationwide lockdown in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, on April 26, 2020 in Patna, India. (**Santosh Kumar/Hindustan Times**)

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In the case of the summer, and other summer crops, both problems related to sowing and harvest, as well as post-harvest challenges, has come to the fore. For example, jute sowing in a location in West Bengal has been impeded, as has been the case of sugarcane sowing in Uttar Pradesh. The availability of labour for sowing and harvest, the availability of inputs for crop maintenance (if not harvested) and also the availability of credit has been described as major challenges.

As for tea and rubber plantations, as reported from Kerala and Assam, the halt in farm operations has been described as problematic for the owners, individual farmers, as well as associated workers. Due to a halt in tea plantation operations, several workers have lost income as a result, while in the case of rubber, farmers are reported to be facing difficulties in storage as they are not getting the right prices. A unique problem affecting agriculture and allied sectors is the reported opportunistic behaviour of private traders who are buying farm produce at cheap prices.

Farmers sit on sacks of wheat grains at a grain market in Amritsar on April 26, 2020.
(NARINDER NANU/AFP)

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Animal husbandry has also been impacted severely because of rumours around the safety of non-vegetarian food, especially chickens, as reported from multiple locations across the country. Similarly, farmers in the field of sericulture have been affected by the fall in prices of cocoons in Karnataka, and a farmer growing flowers had to let the entire harvest go to waste in West Bengal. There are also reports of fish sales going down in Odisha and West Bengal, largely due to restrictions on mobility and the restricted timings of markets.

In the case of forests, it is vital to recognise that there are many forest-dependent communities that source food, fodder, fuel, and non-timber forest produce (NTFP) from the forests. Restrictions on movement have affected all these activities of the forest-dependent communities in many locations, including tribal communities in Bihar and Odisha, and this has been reported in our survey. However, there are isolated reports from locations in North-Eastern states and Jharkhand that people were able to access forests for these purposes.

Non-agricultural livelihoods

Something that is emerging from the survey, which is common across the country, has been the severe impact on non-farm livelihoods in the first phase of the lockdown. Considering its substantial and increasing contribution to the rural economy, the negative impact on this sector is a matter of grave concern. People engaged as agricultural labour, the daily wage workers in mines and factories, the small shop owners in rural areas offering goods and services (sweet shops, tailors, barbers, automobile repair etc.), specialised service providers like plumbers, electricians, masons, carpenters, blacksmiths, and so on, have uniformly lost their jobs, and, therefore, the source of their income.

A vendor sells sweets, peanuts, and chickpeas (channa) heated in a small earthen pot at a village fair known as 'Haat'. In the background is a 'talkis', a cheap form of cinema. Nagpur,

Maharashtra, India. (Photo taken pre-lockdown) (Photo by: Majority World/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

A vendor sells sweets, peanuts, and chickpeas (channa) heated in a small earthen pot at a village fair known as 'Haat'. In the background is a 'talkis', a cheap form of cinema. Nagpur, Maharashtra, India. (Photo taken pre-lockdown) (Photo by: Majority World/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The halt in construction has been a major negative impact on workers in the informal rural economy. Adding to their woes is also the fact that several migrant labourers (Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha etc.) have returned to their villages, losing their city jobs and income, only to find no jobs or sources of income in their villages as well. Their survival is quite precarious, and this is obvious from the multiple responses that have been recorded from across the country.

Behavioral and social

This lockdown has had some rather severe behavioural and social impacts on rural society; the responses to this question were diverse. According to the study, it has accentuated the already existing fault lines within rural society.

Firstly, it has emerged from multiple rural locations that there is a general lack of awareness about the seriousness of this disease, especially amongst adult men and the youth. There is a mistaken perception that COVID-19 is a city disease and that rural areas would be untouched. There have been multiple reported instances of youth and adult men getting together in groups to socialise with one another or to play card games with each other.

On the other end of this spectrum is the fear and panic that has been caused by returning migrants who refuse to get checked up by a doctor or self-quarantine themselves for 14 days. Unfortunately, rumours that people could die in quarantine centres are also quite pervasive.

Rural India is not free of the rumours that float about on social media; they also consume the news just as much as urban India. So they are well aware of incidents such as the Tablighi Jamaat incident, and Muslims have been targeted as a result in rural areas as well. Incidents have been reported from villages in Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and other states. Muslim fruit and vegetable vendors in rural areas are unfortunately facing just as much discrimination as their urban

counterparts. Superstitious beliefs are also rife, with regards to alleged cures for COVID-19, and reports of practices have emerged from states such as Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, and others.

Finally, rural India is by no means free of domestic abuses, and incidents have been reported from villages across the country. Some of these incidents are related to the excessive consumption of alcohol. Moreover, some responses to the survey have uncovered the disproportionate division of labour that this lockdown has brought into many households in rural India. It has emerged that the greater burden of work (childcare, fieldwork, household chores etc.) during the lockdown has fallen on women (unsurprisingly).

Community initiatives

Most villages report that their borders (entry and exit points) have been sealed and that the village youth have been given the responsibility of ensuring that outsiders do not enter the village. Unfortunately, one of the consequences of this has been that returning migrants are stopped at the village borders and denied entry.

Many respondents talked about how vulnerable families in need were helped by the pooling of resources to purchase food. In Arunachal Pradesh, a village community is reported to have collected money and transferred it to students and migrants who could not return home during the lockdown. Similarly, in many instances, wealthier households and individuals donated cash and food to vulnerable households. There are also reports of grocery store owners extending credit, and there is some level of internal policing that prevents richer households from hoarding food and supplies.

Village functionaries

ASHA-ANM-SHG workers have been very active in seeing to the wellbeing of villagers, followed by the panchayat officials of villages. From ensuring that vulnerable families are fed and that mid-day meals continue to reach school-going children, to monitoring the return of migrants and ensuring that sick people get the care that they need, as well as coordinating with healthcare officials, ASHA-ANM-SHG workers have been at the frontlines across the country. The case of SHG workers manufacturing and distributing masks has been widely reported. Finally, as per the responses to the survey, in the awareness drive on the disease symptoms and

its precautions, the ASHA-ANM-SHG's has been reported as the predominant positive influence across rural communities in the country.

Young woman Sarpanch Meera Kumari at her Panchayat office in Bhimana Village in Pindwara, India. (Photo by Pradeep Gaur/Mint via Getty Images)

Panchayat officials have also been reported to be involved in coordinating with the health department and district administrations for relief work and protocol implementation in multiple rural locations. A Sarpanch from Rajasthan reportedly contributed his own savings towards providing rations to vulnerable families in his village. The head of a village in the state of Arunachal Pradesh has reportedly been quite pro-active in arranging community-level mobilisation early on to planning a strategy for the wellbeing of the community. In many cases, the panchayat officials have implemented sanitisation/disinfection of the village by using different sources of funding. Finally, the creation of isolation, or quarantine centres, for symptomatic cases, especially for returning migrants, has been reported to be the work headed by panchayat officials (although SHGs have also been involved).

RESULTS

The results reported are focused on women who were BPL card holders. Out of the 100 candidates shortlisted, only 67% were reachable, available and willing to participate in the survey, the rest were unreachable or unavailable (16% were wrong numbers, another 14% did not answer the calls, and 6% not interested in taking the survey among other reasons). A total of 22 of the 40 shortlisted women who were reachable or available to talk, belonged to the BPL category. During the telephonic survey, the surveyors identified financial and psychological issues affecting respondents during the lockdown period. Among the respondents surveyed, 56% reported a below-poverty-line (BPL) economic status.

Employment and Income Generation

The main occupations of the principal income earner in the family include fisherman (43%), daily wage laborer (33%) and salaried employee (10%).

About 77% of the principal income generators were reported to have stopped working since the lockdown (although they did not lose their job); an additional 12% have also stopped working

but have lost their job. About 10% are still working as usual. Normally, the average number of working days in a week is 5.25, but has reduced to 0.5 days (87% reporting 0 working days) in the week prior to the date of the survey (from 5th to 11th April 2020).

Of the 30 respondents who reported having a small informal enterprise, 10% felt no difficulty in running the enterprise, 26% saw a reduction in customers, 17% could not obtain supplies and 47% could not go out to operate the enterprise.

When asked about loss of income, 20% of them reported a little loss, almost 50% reported large loss, and almost 30% reported complete decline. Only 3% reported no loss in income.

Monetary Support

The Government of Kerala announced financial aid to families in the BPL and Antyodaya Card households a sum of INR 1000 each. When asked whether they received any transfer from the government over the preceding two weeks before 5th April 2020, only 17% said yes. 10% said they did not know and 73% said they did not. Only about 10% obtained a loan or money from other sources.

In their closing comments, the respondents shared their worries related to income and employment. Those who lost their job indicated an expectation of employment support from Amrita.

Majority of respondents commented in the closing remarks of the interview that they feel anxious about the economic loss due to lockdown, but they understood the importance of lockdown during this period and they are ready to stay back at home.

Food Security

From April 1st onwards the Government of Kerala announced free distribution of 15 kg of rice grain to 81.14 lakh ration card holders in Kerala as a part of the State's mission to guarantee a "hunger free Kerala" during the COVID-19 emergency. When the surveyors enquired about the availability of food and water, 90% reported that they received an average of 16 kg of rice from the ration shop; (Normally a ration card holder is entitled to 15kg of rice per month) 90% reported the price of rice was free of cost.

Access to Water

Regarding water supply, 37% of them get their water from a pipe in their home, 33% from a well in their home, and 21% from a public source outside of their house. About 28% of all respondents said they faced some difficulty with their water supply, and that applied similarly to all the sources mentioned.

Social distancing and lockdown were reported to have encouraged altruistic behavior among the respondents. Some respondents explained how they helped their neighbor (particularly the elderly and those that don't have sufficient family support at home) to collect rice from the ration shop, purchase medicine and cook meals. Some respondents reported feelings of life slowing down since non-essential outings and socializing are not permitted in the lockdown.

SUGGESTIONS

An analysis of the responses received reveals that the entire rural production and livelihood system has been severely impacted in the first phase of the lockdown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

- 1) It is important to focus on agriculture and allied, because, quite often, policy directives aim at crop-based agriculture only.
- 2) Using diverse options (procurement of produce by government, extending credit/cash to farmers), the objective will have to be remunerating farmers, especially smallholders, as quickly as possible. If not, this will impact food security in the country.
- 3) MGNREGA was found to be inactive throughout our survey locations. This is a serious issue and it needs prompt activation across rural India, considering the massive loss in income of millions in the non-farm sector (agricultural labour, daily wagers, small service providers, and business owners). With migrants having returned home to their villages, and with mobility restrictions in place, MGNREGA could be a lifeline for many who are engaged in the non-farm sector in rural India.
- 4) PDS has been sporadic and faulty, and this needs serious monitoring throughout rural India. With our food grains stocks at more than adequate levels (national level), efficient last-mile

distribution via PDS will go a long way in attaining food security, and a better prepared rural India for future challenges.

5) Awareness about COVID-19 is still nascent and problematic throughout rural India, although there is overwhelming evidence of village functionaries like ASHA-ANM-SHG doing exceedingly well. Therefore, more efforts on leveraging the credibility of these village functionaries on creating awareness would be quite helpful.

6) A massive overhaul of the healthcare system in rural India should be planned, as PHCs/CHCs are barely functional, and mostly under-staffed and under-resourced.

7) Finally, greater decentralisation of powers to the village level institutions, as announced by Odisha recently, will also go a long way in creating credible and effective grassroots institutions at the village level. It is important to empower village level institutions.

CONCLUSION

Study will be uploaded online in its entirety shortly, and we will link to the study once it's up. In the meantime, if you wish, you can contact the author of the study at prateek@xub.edu.in. Finally, this is a list of all the villages that were surveyed.

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