

# Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Agriculture

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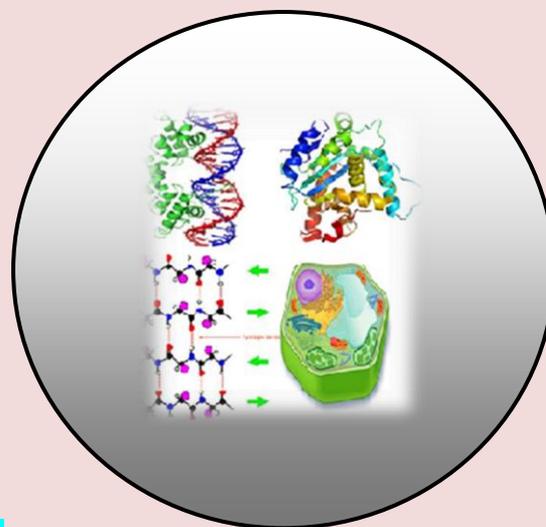
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REVIEW ARTICLE

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## **Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Agriculture**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*India has taken early action to limit the spread of Corona Virus, ordering a 21-day national lockdown for entire population of 130 crore people starting from March 25, 2020. The novel coronavirus has spread widely in India but as compared to other countries, and the number of reported infections is low so far, with nearly 5,300 cases and 150 deaths in the first week of April. However, as COVID-19 cases are increasing fast, there is great concern about the disease's potential spread and impact. COVID-19 is disturbing some activities in agriculture and supply chains. Preliminary reports showed that the non-availability of migrant labour is interrupting some harvesting activities, particularly in northwest India where wheat and pulses are being harvested. There are disruptions in supply chains because of transportation problems. In other words, the overall supply situation of essential food items does not appear to be too worrisome in India at this point. However, with the extension of lockdown, the supply situations become tighter. Coupled with supply bottlenecks, prices have raised. Here, the price curve may begin to look like a U-shaped curve, with a sharp fall in prices in the initial days of the lockdown replaced by a sharp upturn in prices in the later days. Prices have declined for wheat, vegetables, and other crops, yet consumers are often paying more. Media reports show that the closure of hotels, restaurants, sweet shops, and tea shops during the lockdown is already depressing milk sales. Meanwhile, poultry farmers have been badly hit due to misinformation, particularly on social media, that chicken are the carriers of COVID-19.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Lockdown, Agriculture and Transportation Problems.

### **INTRODUCTION**

India is the second most populous country in the world with >1/6th of the world's population. The size of population increased from 102 crore in 2001 to 121 crore in 2011 and expect to be around 135 crore 2021.

The census report also revealed that the proportion of the working age population between 15 and 59 years is likely to increase from 58 per cent in 2001 to > 64 per cent by 2021. The growth in the working-age ratio is likely to be more intense in the rainfed and poorest states, depending mainly on the cultivation of pulses, oilseeds and rearing livestock.

### **Agriculture in practice**

The agricultural sector attained a respectable place as a cause of economic development only after the success of the green revolution in developing countries. Agro-processing units have now emerged as major economic activities in India. The role of agricultural growth not only reduced the poverty but also resulted in better rural infrastructure in India. India's agricultural activities mainly depend on migrant labourers for several operations. It is estimated that 50 million migrant labourers returned back to their native places following the serial nationwide lockdown from March 24, 2020. They account for about 11% of the non-self-employed labour force. Many migrant laborers, from eastern states (Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha and Jharkhand), are working in agricultural fields in the country's west and north. They are mainly employed in fisheries, poultry farms, post-harvest activities, managing livestock, in marketing, etc. It appears that the migrants' return is having a negative impact on agriculturally developed regions like Punjab, with the proximate cause being the harvest of important rabi crops like wheat and mustard, resulting in a higher production cost. If the lockdown continues, even the kharif crop could be affected. Unless compensated for the loss of labour force, many marine fishing and fish processing activities also affected. Further, demand for other industrial and consumer goods would be affected. The migration of labourers also provides an opportunity for local administration to engage the labourers in gainful employment for different agricultural activities like livestock, fisheries and food processing etc. Labourers can also be involved in creation and overhauling of rural infrastructure, godowns, water management and in food and fodder processing. Activities under the MNRGA should be promoted in this context.

Long-term strategies should be focused more on agro-based activities and enterprises. Improving the labour and land productivity would be a critical strategy. While the media has also reported the inhumane condition of the daily wage, migrant workers as they were rendered jobless and homeless by the lockdown announcement. Most migrant workers in cities tend to come from rural farming families. Because of a disruption of transportation due to the lockdown, farmers have been stuck with a larger amount of perishables like milk, fruits, vegetables, poultry and dairy products. Despite some relaxation for agricultural activities, farmers are still finding it difficult to take the produce to the city-mandis for a better price. If most of their produce remains within villages and remains largely unsold, food prices will continue to fall and would be resulted in a great loss to farmers.

The state and Central Government should adopt some of following measures to promote the job oriented agricultural activities migrant labourers and farmers to boost their economy.

#### **i. Supply to local markets**

Farm supply chains can be made to local areas by encouraging farmers to sell more and more of their produce in local cooperative markets. Because of the closure of markets in cities and interrupted transportation facilities, mangoes, watermelons, bananas, dairy and poultry products are going waste soon. Moreover, the poor, local farmers also cannot afford to store their produce in the cold storages.

## ii. Preference of food crops

Farmers should ignore the cash crops (for at least 1 – 2 years) and prefer food crops. “Food crops” largely consist of grains, pulses, cereals, legumes (including dried beans), seeds and nuts, vegetables, herbs and spices, etc. Additionally, both, local and state governments must empower social organizations, NGOs and different civil society members to be allowed direct obtaining of supplies from local farmers.

## iii. Increasing Government Relief

The State and Central Government should increase the allocations for direct transfer to farmers through different schemes to everyone who is actively involved in farming irrespective of where (s)he owns a given piece of land or not, from Rs 6,000 to at least Rs 10,000 per farming family for this year (2020-21). This will immediately help most farming families for the losses seen during the serial national lockdown and shall also give them some relief.

## iv. Mobile vans for food supply

To ensure proper food supplies from farmers to consumers within state, mobile vans can be used. As most weekly markets have now been suspended and may also find it difficult to enforce social distancing norms, mobile vans across each district can allow for food supplies in different societies. Vegetable and fruit vendors too can coordinate directly with these mobile van operators for selling their stock and supplies. This will also allow for retail distribution to be more smoothly. The Public distribution System (PDS) is abundant with wheat and rice, mobile vans can be used for supply chain.

## v. Cash transfers

Unemployed informal workers need cash income support. The government has provided Rs. 500 per month to the bank accounts of 200 million women via the *Jan Dhan* financial inclusion program. But this too is insufficient. We need to have a minimum of Rs.3000 per month in cash transfers for the next three months.

## vi. Migrant workers

There are about 40-50 million seasonal migrant workers in India. The serial lockdown has blocked almost all the economic activities, leading to the widespread loss of jobs and incomes for informal workers and the poor in urban areas and Metro cities. Therefore, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from several states walked more than 1000 kilometers to return to their native places for the food and shelter. They should be given both cash transfers and nutritious food and a suitable job according to their skill in local industries.

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