



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

A Study of Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Rural India

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Abstract:

Life in rural India in normal times has always remained challenging and this COVID 19 pandemic has aggravated the problems in villages in many regions of India. It has resulted in irrecoverable loss to the majority of rural population which is engaged in agriculture and allied activities to agriculture. This research paper is an attempt to examine diverse effects of lockdown as a measure to contain the spread of COVID 19 on the rural livelihood. This study aims to find out whether villagers are aware of this COVID 19 pandemic and whether villages have the facilities to cope up with this unprecedented lock down. This study is an attempt to understand the impact of government measures undertaken to curb the spread of COVID 19 pandemic on rural India.

Keywords: Ramtek Tehsil, Nagpur district, lockdown, COVID 19 pandemic, rural India

Introduction:

COVID 19 pandemic has impacted all the countries across the globe including India. India is a land of villages and majority of the population still lives in villages. Lockdown as a measure to mitigate the spread of COVID 19 pandemic has shown considerably good results but it is also true that this emergent crisis has badly hit rural India resulting in economic losses to all the rural households. The efforts of the government, NGOs and other private companies has helped underserved rural India during lock down period by providing all the essentials required but this highly infectious disease has resulted in irrecoverable loss to the majority of rural population which is engaged in agriculture and allied activities to agriculture.

Life in rural India in normal times has always remained challenging and this Covid 19 pandemic has aggravated the problem in villages in many regions of India. This lock down has resulted in reverse migration as many people became jobless, they could not afford the high cost of living of cities, they returned to villages; their native places probably for never to go back to cities. Unprecedented slow-down of economic activities in rural India has worsened the problem of indebtedness. Students pursuing education in cities have come back to villages as school/colleges/hostels were closed down. People from cities also shifted to villages for the fear of pandemic.

Research Methodology:**Research Design:**

Descriptive research design has been used for conducting this study.

Objectives of the study:

This study aims to find out whether villagers are aware of this COVID 19 pandemic and whether villages have the facilities to cope up with this unprecedented lock down.

This study attempts to find out the impact of lockdown to contain the spread of COVID 19 pandemic on economic condition of rural India.

This study is an attempt to understand the impact of government measures undertaken to curb the spread of COVID 19 pandemic on rural India.

Hypothesis:

It is hypothesized that lockdown to curb the spread of COVID 19 pandemic has resulted in financial loss to farmers and other villagers of India.

Scope:

Ramtek Tehsil of Nagpur district is covered through select representative villages/samples for the purpose of this study. Data has been collected through telephonic interview from the sample respondents during lockdown period ie; March 25, 2020 to June 03, 2020 to contain the spread of COVID 19 pandemic in India.

Need of the study: There are considerable differences in the level of awareness and health facilities in different villages of India to cope with COVID-19 pandemic, so the need is felt to study whether the rural households are aware of this pandemic and safety measures, whether villages are equipped with essentials like health care units, sanitizing, food etc. It is also important to study the impact of lock down on economic activities in Rural India.

Methods of Data Collection:

Both primary data and secondary data sources have been used for the purpose of data collection. Observation and survey methods have been used for the collection of primary data. 50 respondents have been interviewed and Mr. Shubham Chafle resident of Ramtek Village has helped in the collection of primary data. Respondents represented villagers of Ramtek Tehsil which include rich and poor farmers, landless labourers, vegetable growers, villagers engaged in non-agricultural activities and small businesses, learners pursuing education, rural women, villagers going out to cities for employment, they have been interviewed for this study. Data thus collected has been analyzed for the purpose of this study.

Findings:

Case study of Ramtek Tehsil revealed the following about the impact of COVID-19 pandemic during lock down period on Rural India:

- **Number of infected People:** 3 persons from Ramtek Village (returned from Nagpur), 2 from Hiwrabazaar (returned from Mumbai), 2 from Mandasar, one from Nagardhan (returned from Pune) were diagnosed with Covid-19 (corona virus) and they all recovered from illness.
- **Implementation of Health Advisories:** Villagers are aware of COVID-19 pandemic, they are strictly following the social distancing norms, wearing mask or cotton cloth for covering their face, sanitizing, washing hands, home quarantine and other advisories issued by the government from time to time. Migrant workers from other places are quarantined for 14 days before allowing them to enter in the village. Social gatherings were restricted, marriages postponed till unlock phase is announced.
- **Access to Health Care:** Basic health infrastructure and facilities are available in villages. Prathmik Arogya Kendra with all facilities in Ramtek Tehsil covering the health needs of 8-10 nearby small villages is functioning properly. Villagers are made aware about the pandemic, the lockdown and health advisories for washing hands, social distancing, using face cover etc. through announcement using loud speakers. TV, Radio, Internet and Social media has helped in spreading the relevant information about the pandemic and the village panchayats and ASHA workers played important role in dissemination of information.
- **Loss due to forced local sale:** Vegetable growers have to opt for local sale as they could not go to urban wholesale market during lock down period. Local markets also remained closed for some days every week which resulted in heavy losses to the suppliers of perishable farm produce; to minimize the loss they have to sell their produce for prices below cost. Even then their produce remained unsold owing to low demand by consumers. One of the chilly growers reported that chilly trucks are sent to Nasik could not be sold in Nasik except for loss and the grapes brought from Nasik to be sold in Nagpur were sold for Rs. 30-50 per kg which is sold for minimum Rs. 100 per kg in normal times.
- **Availability of labour:** There was no shortage of labour for harvesting the crop yield and sowing in villages as migrant workers have returned to villages, farmers are employing their own family members as they cannot go out of the village during lock down period. Children of age 14 years and above are used for farm activities. This has also resulted in bringing the wage rates down and led to loss of livelihood for many landless labourers which further resulted in increase in indebtedness per head per household. Rojgar Hami Yojana is being implemented in villages which could provide employment to 10-15 people for plantation work @ Rs. 283 per day.
- **Distribution mechanism for essentials:** Government has distributed 5kg rice, 3 kg wheat, 1 kg dal and 1 kg oil per head per household, to all the villagers and sugar was distributed to Antyodaya card holders per month during lock down period through public distribution system. Ultratech company distributed kits, Aamdaar and Panchayat Samiti members were seen distributing Ration and other essentials to the villagers. Ujjwala Yojana beneficiaries are still getting cylinder by the government.
- **Shortage of machines and labourers:** Farmers faced shortage of machines as harvestors were to be brought from Punjab but lock down has an impact of forced closure/sealing of inter-state borders. They also faced shortage of labourers initially as the land owners could not employ them because of fear of spread of COVID. Rs. 1200 per acre is required for reaping wheat but it cost Rs.1500-1600 this season of Rabi harvest.
- **Loss to employees of small-scale industries:** Village small-scale industries are locked down & no payment is provided to their employees. One such example is of Suryalaxmi Cotton Mill in

Nagardhan Village, operating for more than 20 years, has not released payment to workers and dues of salary. There are more than 800 people working on contract basis and about 400 permanent employees who are not paid remuneration.

- **Loss to cereal growers:** Wheat which is sold for Rs. 1800 per quintal in normal times could fetch Rs. 1580 per quintal on its sale but payment on time was not received. Vinayak Mohare is a Rice Grower owning 4.5 acre of land in Chitala near Ramtek talks about the pity condition of Paddy sellers who have not yet received payment from rice mill owners. Urea, insecticides, tractors and tools for sowing were not available. Increased Diesel price resulted in increased cost of machinery on hire. It was increased to Rs. 1600 per acre from Rs. 1200 per acre in normal times.
- **Problems in learning:** When the whole India is claiming to be learning through virtual platforms, in villages there is no internet network for even knowing the results of the students' last year's/ semester's examination. Parents/children have to go out from Ramtek village to check results of various examination. There are admissions in schools for next class which show that students want to study, books are available in schools but students don't have money to pay for, use of virtual learning platforms and their accessibility to all students is again a big question mark?

Suggestions:

It is high time that measures should be taken to revitalize agriculture sector and MSMEs in villages so as to absorb the surplus workforce and provide gainful employment to stop reverse migration to urban areas where economic activities have not yet raced up. Strengthening health infrastructure and public distribution system for better provisioning of food and other essentials is an urgent requirement for the development of villages. There is an increase in use of internet in mobile phones but when it comes to using the same for online education, online market or online banking, their numbers are not praiseworthy. Access to internet facilities for imparting e-education should be enhanced in rural areas.

Conclusion:

Nation-wide lockdown was announced due to COVID-19 and resulted in unprecedented challenges and opportunities in all the areas especially in agriculture sector, when Rabi harvest was taking place. The Central Government procured every grain produced in the country during this pandemic. There was an increase in agricultural and allied activities due to reverse migration of workers to villages. The Union Government ensured accessibility of credit to farmers by announcing the Agriculture Infrastructure Fund. Government is providing training and bank loans to enhance the skills of the migrant workers thereby creating more opportunities for them in the villages so that they don't have to go back to the cities thus severely affected rural areas will be benefitted by these migrant workers if their potential is tapped in the right manner. This pandemic has once again proven that majority of the population can be provided with source of livelihood, if villages are developed in India, the land of villages.

Acknowledgement:

My sincere thanks are due to ICSSR/IMPRESS for the sanction of research project entitled "A Study of Innovative Measures for Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development in India (With special reference to Nagpur Division)" under the domain of Agriculture and Rural Development and sub domain: New Developments in Rural Economy with proposal reference number: P2322. This research paper has been carried as a part of the project sanctioned by ICSSR/IMPRESS. I hereby declare that no part of this research is published in any form earlier.

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