

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON THE AGRICULTURAL SECTOR IN INDIA

Neeraj V.S^{1*}., Sangeetha. S.Gireesh²

^{1*}PhD Scholar, Department of Chemical Engineering, National Institute of Technology, Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu.

²Assistant Professor, Department of Veterinary Clinical Medicine, College of Veterinary and Animal Sciences, Mannuthy, Thrissur, Kerala

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Introduction

It has been 2 years since the COVID-19 pandemic began to terrorize the world. The coronavirus has changed the way of life of all human beings on the planet. The world nations are still trying to control the spread of the virus. India also plays an important role in this. Millions of people are facing economic and social devastation due to this epidemic. The worst affected are poorer countries and developing countries, which are at the forefront of population growth. India is not far behind either. A large portion of India's population is engaged in agriculture and related occupations. For that, this article discusses the main problem that arises due to the COVID-19 pandemic in the agricultural and allied sectors and the measures taken to overcome it in India.

Why agriculture sector is important?

India is one of the largest producers of agriculture and horticulture products in the world. Agriculture and the allied sector remains an integral part of the Indian economy. It highly contributes to the national income, ensures a high demand for employment and also boosts the secondary and tertiary sectors. For the last decade's agriculture sector also helps in the eradication of poverty in the nation by strengthening the rural economy. During the pandemic, most of the economic sectors underwent huge decline but the agriculture sector and the measurement taken to strengthen the agriculture sector helps from a huge economic collapse.

The impact of Covid-19.

On March 24, 2021, India entered into a 21-day nationwide lockdown for controlling the pandemic which was later extended many times. During the lockdown period, migrant labourers returned to their native place resulting in a lack of agricultural labourers in some places and surplus labourers in some other places. This affected planting, harvest and post-harvest operations in a bad manner causing a critical loss of produce. Closure of rural markets/ mandis and lack of procurement options lead to food shortage. Lack of transportation facilities affected supply chain management and more storage facility was required to keep the extra produce. All these factors resulted in price inflation for agricultural produces. Due to lockdown, restaurants remain closed which in turn caused severe sale losses to the farmers. Perishable products are affected more by this condition. Farmers were forced to sell their produce at a cheap rate by accepting low profits. Farmers faced financial constraints due to the closure of microfinance institutions. Mass return migration of men decreased the women's access to remittances. Sudden competition for scarce job opportunities negatively affected rural life

The distress in the agriculture sector was not uniform throughout the nation. The national wide lockdown was imposed during the harvest season of rabi cultivation, So the production of rabi cultivation was not much affected. But it severely affected the allied sector due to the limitation of transportation facilities, limited availability of labours and the unstable market. The prolonged lockdown but affect the timely cultivation of the Kharif crop. This start affecting the rural economy.

Many countries including India restricted the export of food items due to fear of food shortage. They had given more emphasis to ensure that their countries are having enough food supplies to meet the prolonged pandemic. COVID-19 stay at home increased the demand for food items and start to stock up food supplies leads to panic buying and causes temporary scarcity of groceries. Meantime, many countries imposed import restrictions on India during the peak of the first wave of covid-19. This leads to a decline in the export of Indian agricultural products and creates an economic crisis. . As the Indian economy was in a narrow decline phase during the pre covid period, many economic forums predicted the economic devastation in the country.



Horticulture, poultry farming, dairy farming, pisciculture are the major sectors affected by the pandemic. People fear the spread of coronavirus from poultry which made the life of poultry farmers more miserable. The perishable products of horticulture show a mixed review. In consumer states like Kerala, the price of horticulture products increased, whereas in the producer states like Tamil Nadu the price decline. Also, the supply chain of livestock, livestock feed and medicines were disrupted. Local vendors exploited the situation by claiming high prices for feed, animals and medicines. Doorstep veterinary services were also restricted. Residue burning is considered a low-cost method for removing crop residues from the fields. This resulted in more prevalence of pollution-related chronic health problems. Poor air quality is a major contributing factor for cardiovascular and pulmonary disease among the population of developing countries. This increased the mortality rate of people with co-morbidities affected by COVID-19.

Measures strengthen the Economy.

To overcome the impact of COVID-19 in the agricultural sector, India introduced many relief packages. Atma Nirbhar Bharat scheme was introduced to help empower the poor labourers and migrant workers. It amounts to INR20 lakh Cr which forms around 10% of India's GDP. Prime Minister's Citizen Assistance and Relief in Emergency Situations (PM-CARES) has been set up to provide food assistance and cash to workers in the informal sector mostly migrant labourers. INR 2000 was released in advance from the PM-KISAN scheme to the bank account of farmers as income support. The wage rate of NREGS workers was also raised.

The government of India announced an INR 1.7lakh crore worth COVID-19 social assistance package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PM-GKY) to support the vulnerable population. This scheme provided additional benefits including cash direct benefit transfer to farmers and rural households. Cash transfer schemes made a positive impact in the agricultural sector by improving the procurement of agricultural inputs. Food assistance programmes in rural areas provided basic food and necessities for vulnerable populations. Capitalising on the advantage of information and communication technology like the use of mobile purchasing apps helped a lot to cope up with the COVID-19 pandemic. Many local bodies started promoting backyard and rooftop cultivation by providing hybrid seeds. This



helps in preventing inflation of perishable commodities as well as reduces the mental fatigue caused by the prolonged lockdown. Even people in urban areas started cattle farming, pisciculture, pet farming etc.

Conclusion

Even though India was badly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, through timely intervention in the form of financial assistance and proper supply chain management India was able to overcome a hard time. Both central and state governments provided cereals and pulses as ration throughout the covid period which helped the Indian population to overcome hunger. By providing food kits and direct cash transfers India was able to support its vulnerable population. Farmers produce was collected from their premises and were included in the food kits and vegetable kits. This prevents the farmers from disposing of the perishable goods in the field. Even though we stand second in the world in terms of population and being affected worst by the spread of covid 19, we were able to cope up with the situation through the support offered by many world nations. Backyard farming that got popularised during the lockdown season made Indian households self-sufficient with their chemical-free veggies. In a way, this covid period brought man closer to organic farming and animal husbandry.