



Indian Journal of Hill Farming

June 2020, Volume 33 Issue 1, Page 1-4

Lockdown (COVID-19) impacts agriculture and livelihoods in the Indian Himalayan Region

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received December 10 May 2020

Revision Received 17 May 2020

Accepted 18 May 2020

Key words: Agriculture, Covid-19, Lockdown, Livelihoods, India Himalayan region

ABSTRACT

Year 2020 has become catastrophic due to Covid 19 pandemic, which transformed the lifestyle and livelihood standards of the humans in the planet – Earth. The disease has forced many nations to completely shut down their economy and implement lockdown (a state of isolation at home). India too witnessed this pandemic and is managing the disease spread through nation-wide lockdown. This has impacted the routine economic activities including agriculture. Although, in the Indian Himalayas, the disease is not as severe as in rest of the parts of the nation, but the farmers of the Himalayas have also been affected by the pandemic as most of the state are agri-dependent and produce raw materials for the big industries that are situated majorly outside the Himalayan states. Agriculture has been most-affected in the rural areas, as most crops were on harvest stage and the land needs to be prepared for the next cropping. This article highlights the status of agriculture owing to pandemic in the Indian Himalayan states, particularly due to nation-wide lockdown.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 disease, caused by SARS-CoV-2 first came into highlight in December, 2019 in the Wuhan City of Hubei Province in China. Gradually, the disease was reported from all over the globe, hence declared as pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO). Currently, around 213 countries have reported a total number of 4,722,233 cases of Corona virus with 313,266 deaths and 1,813,020 persons recovered reportedly (Worldometer, May, 17, 2020). The most affected countries by the pandemic are United States of America (with maximum number of cases i.e. 1,50,773), Italy, Spain, France, Germany, United Kingdom, Turkey, Iran and Russia. In India, the total number of confirmed cases by May, 17, 2020 are 90813 with 2878 deaths and 34224 people recovered (The Hindu, May, 17, 2020). The states like Maharashtra, Delhi, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh are the most affected in the country by the pandemic. In our efforts to control this pandemic in the country, India

has undergone lockdown since 25th of March, 2020 restricting human movement out of home. Stay Home and Stay Safe became our lifeline to combat the spread of this virus.

Agriculture in the country too has suffered to a considerable extent due to lockdown and restrictions, as we come to know through several media reports. The effect is somewhat of more serious nature when we analyze the farmers' linkages with market. In many areas of the country, the farmers could not even harvest and/or dispatch their produce in the market. Restrictions on movement and maintenance of social distances had to be obvious factors putting farmers at exorbitant loss. This kind of situation had to happen as the market places are generally far away from the villages, in the urban areas. In this article, we have attempted to narrate the scenario of agriculture in the Indian Himalayan region owing to COVID-19 situations in the country.

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Scenario in the Indian Himalayan Region

The Indian Himalayan region which consists of 11 states (Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and West Bengal) and union territories (Ladakh and Jammu & Kashmir) put together have recorded only 4197 COVID positives vis-à-vis 251 deaths (GOI, May, 17, 2020 and The Hindu, May, 17, 2020). Although, the number of cases of Corona are not significant in any of the Indian Himalayan states (4.6% of total country cases and 8.7% of total mortality) as far as health situation is concerned. As we are aware, hill agriculture is not dependent exclusively on cropland/cultivated land; it is, however, a kind of inclusive farming system that is resilient. So, the impact of the current pandemic times on hill agriculture has not been much serious as far as production is concerned. Moreover, the hill farmers do not depend only on the produce to come from cultivated lands, but also on the withdrawals from the forests, rangelands, pastures, and livestock. Such a multi-enterprise approach in the hills makes the food sector to be relatively resilient. Nonetheless, the farmers of the IHR have been affected by the pandemic, as most of the hill farmers produce the agri-based raw materials (fruits, medicinal plants, etc.) for the commercial industries; most of them have the cold chain facilities and industries in the plains and/or in the neighbouring states. The nation-wide lockdown, however, has resulted in complete shutdown of transportation and industrial production. As a result, many farmers have to see their crop not harvested for marketing.

Many of the farmers practicing commercial floriculture in a few states of the IHR Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, etc. are facing a drastic economic crisis in the state due to COVID-19 situation. For instance, the Bilaspur district of Himachal Pradesh having ~40 ha of floriculture land has succumbed to a total economic loss of 3.29 Crore till mid of the April, 2020 (Amar Ujala, April 19, 2020). The situation is same in other major flower growing districts of the state like Solan, Shimla, and Hamirpur as well (The Hindu, 23 April, 2020). In another report of News18 (April 15, 2020) many marigold growing farmers of R. S. Pura, Indopak Border of Jammu & Kashmir were seen throwing their harvest in the canal. These kind of situations are a great cause of worry as where these small farmers used to earn a good amount of money (2-3 lakh rupees annually) earlier, have to now bear 100% loss. Further, those labourers who work in the farms face economic crisis as they could not paid wages, pending the sale of the produce (ANI, 2020). There were situations, like in the state of Assam, where many farmers

threw away their vegetables due to the lockdown imposed lack of transport for market (Insidene, April, 17, 2020). The situation is quite similar in the state of Jammu & Kashmir, where also many farmers had to dump their standing crops by cutting due to lockdown. Unequivocally, the lockdown majorly resulted in shortfall of labourers, because of which the farmers of the Jammu region were unable to reap the wheat crop (ABP News, April, 22, 2020). In this kind of emergency situations, relief packages are the last hope to tide over the crisis. Along with this, the weather fluctuations and prevailing low temperature conditions (delay in the transition from winter season to summers) is affecting the flowering and pollination which can further affect the apple production in Himachal Pradesh (Sharma, 2020). Further, the lockdown has closed inter-state boundaries, checking the supply of insecticides, fertilizers and other inputs like anti-hail nets and honey bees for inducing pollination process. Along with this, in the lockdown, going to orchard is also prohibited. A recent report have assessed that the outbreak of COVID-19, coupled with freeze in the freight and logistics industry may lead to a cumulative loss of around \$1 billion or around Rs 7,000 crore for the fruit growing farmers across the nation (Money control, April 4, 2020). Likewise, in Uttarakhand, the rabi crop of the Tarai region was damaged due to unseasonal rainfall and hailstorm (The Times of India, April 9, 2019). In another report of Amar Ujala (April 27, 2020), the weather fluctuation causing heavy rainfall and hailstorms in the month of February and March have affected around 10 lakhs farmers in the state leading to a loss of 6 crores or even more.

Apart from farming, tourism is also a major occupation for the people of the Indian Himalayan region and this epidemic has cost a lot to the tourism industry in the Himalayas. For example, the artisans and weavers are jobless in Jammu & Kashmir, where art & craft and horticulture are the major contributor to the export oriented economy of the state. In this way, the state is facing a loss of Rs. 270 Crore per day due to COVID-19. (Deccan Herald, April, 21, 2020).

Similarly, in the Sailulak village of Mizoram in the north-east India, where 'mithun' farming is quite common, a different situation arose. Because of nation-wide lockdown, around 200 mithun cattle were left unattended by the farms, because of which a pack of wolves attacked and killed 10 mithuns of the village (Northeast Now, April 5, 2020).

Yet another interesting and different scenario is being observed in Uttarakhand during the current pandemic. The national lockdown has resulted in a trend of reverse migration in the hills, where people who work in unorganized/informal/private sectors of urban land are

returning back to the ghost/empty villages as they may suffer a long-term unemployment in the near future. For instance, a total 6,897 migrants have returned to their villages in Pauri Garhwal district. The scenario is similar in many villages of Tehri Garhwal, Rudraprayag and other districts of Uttarakhand (Prakash, 2020). This situation also imposes an opportunity to the state government of Uttarakhand for healing the wounds of out-migration by planning and offering some kind of suitable job opportunities to these people which may hold back the out-migration during post-lockdown situation.

Notwithstanding, some relaxations in agriculture sector have been given by the Government to enable certain agricultural activities such as allowing harvesting of crops and other farming operations, manufacturing and packaging of seeds, fertilizers and pesticides, Inter and Intra-state movement of sowing and harvest related machineries, working of agricultural products procurement agencies and 'Custom Hiring Centres (CHC)' related to farm machinery, etc (Press Information Bureau, Government of India, March, 28, 2020).

One of the great initiatives of the Government of India was the launch of Aarogya Setu app, which is helping the government to monitor and achieve contact tracing, which is also becoming popular in the Indian Himalayan States. Along with this, the Prime Minister of India has recently announced a mega economic relief package worth Rs 20 lakh crores in order to make the country a self-reliant nation due to COVID crisis, the benefit of which will also be received by the Indian Himalayan States.

Despite all these pandemic caused scenarios, the citizens of the country could be fed through various mechanisms of food availability and food access. Thanks to the farmers and public and civil society organizations that enabled food security in this country, that we are able to meet the food requirements even during this pandemic, while also ensuring public healthcare during the pandemic.

1. Acknowledgements

The authors thank the DST, New Delhi for the support in the form of the NMSHE-Task Force on Himalayan Agriculture.

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