

THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 AND ITS PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACT ON PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT STRATA IN INDIA



Sooner or later the COVID-19 pandemic will come to an end. But the big question that will come up then is: “Will our life continue to be the same as before?” In this blog, Neela Madhav Patnaik discusses the impact of COVID-19 on different sections of people and the repercussions that are bound to follow in the agriculture sector.

CONTEXT

Numerous studies have indicated that after a disaster – whether natural or manmade (viz. [Super cyclone](#), [9/11 attack](#), [Tsunami](#), [Bhopal Gas tragedy](#), etc.) – people find it very difficult to come to terms with their post-disaster life due to the haunting memories that are embedded in their psyches draining them emotionally. The COVID-19 pandemic is such a disaster that has breached the innermost boundaries of our minds taking a mental toll on us. Considering the magnitude of the situation, the Union Health Ministry has launched a toll-free helpline (08046110007) to address the mental health issues of people in the wake of the countrywide lockdown. People waited anxiously at 10 am on 14 April 2020, for the Prime Minister’s address to the nation.. This was an indication of the people’s anxiety, panic, restlessness, and their looming sense of uncertainty in these testing times. Given the internet and social media, [people are overloaded with news](#) and fake messages/rumours which act like a virus in the brain, thereby compounding their fear and worries.

Health concerns, home quarantine, financial implications, change in lifestyles have also sent a mental shock to many people. [Roy et al. \(2020\)](#) conducted an online survey of 662 respondents across India on their knowledge, attitude, anxiety and perceived mental healthcare need during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study revealed high levels of anxiety with more than 80% of the people preoccupied with thoughts of COVID-19. Sleep difficulties, distress-related social media, and paranoia about acquiring COVID-19 infection were reported in 12.5%, 36.4% and 37.8% of participants, respectively. Interestingly mental healthcare need was found in more than 80% of the participants. Folks from different walks of life – academicians, farmers, students, healthcare professionals, private job holders, labourers, homemakers, etc., – are under severe psychological stress regarding both the current situation and what the future could hold. Here, I will try to specifically address the issues of farmers, agricultural labourers and students with snippets from private sector employees and healthcare workers.



Plight of stressed-out farmers

IMPACT ON FARMERS

The impact of COVID-19 on farmers has been very well explained by Dr Mahesh Chander in [AESA Blog no. 107](#) and by [Maji et al. \(2020\)](#). In his [interview to News 18](#) published on April 12, eminent scientist Dr MS Swaminathan stated that the rural economy is not prepared for the pandemic, but he closed on a positive note by saying that the mobilization of institutional organizations such as Panchayats in partnership with technology and extension service providers like KVKs, NGOs, FPOs and line departments can bring relief. One remedial solution in the current situation comes from Kerala State where Panchayat-level interventions are feeding the poor – through community kitchens with help from volunteers (Kudumbashree members, Anganwadi members etc.) – along with provision of essential commodities like food grains, pulses and sugar. Readers can refer to [AESA Blog 109](#) for more details on how the State machinery of Kerala is working to solve the agrarian crisis. Farmers are left without adequate [labour to harvest](#) their standing rabi crops in many parts of the country and at the same time do not have enough financial resources for purchasing critical inputs like seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, feed and fodder, etc. With disruption in the supply chain and market linkages, farmers who are already burdened with debts are hit hard.

The rise in farmer suicides every year is further intensified by COVID-19 now. Farmers, already stressed by numerous factors have been facing an unprecedented crisis which may last for a long time. [Reports](#) have indicated that farmer suicides occur due to poverty, [alcoholism](#), depression and [family disputes](#), etc. Rather than simply blaming the victim, this requires understanding the root cause of the problem in the first place. Though social research has been carried out on this there is a [policy-practice gap](#). Punjab Agricultural University (PAU) has submitted a survey report to ICAR on ‘Addressing farmers’ distress through capacity building of farming families’, based on [findings](#) after interacting with farmers on their mental health. The report is based on findings from 16 of the worst farmer suicide affected districts of Punjab, Maharashtra and Telangana. “Only a vibrant farmer can do vibrant farming, which is the need of the hour,” says Dr Sarajbeet Singh, principal investigator of the project ([The Times of India, 25 Feb, 2020](#)). ICAR, with the help of SAUs, should plan and implement a technical and culturally sound suicide prevention programme, both at the national and the State level on a priority basis considering the repercussions this pandemic would have on the mental health of farmers.

[AESA Blog 111](#) highlights the importance of convergence of extension service providers (Maharashtra State Agriculture Department, ATMA-Pune, Maharashtra State Agricultural Marketing Board and Maharashtra Cooperative Development Corporation) as seen in Maharashtra State, to collectively fight the pandemic situation. Dr Wadkar also points out that maintaining the psychological balance of poor people, especially landless and migrant workers, has been a challenging task. The present situation is a litmus test for Extension and Advisory Services (EAS) providers in the area of e-Extension and at the same time provides an excellent opportunity to harness ICT technologies for farmers’ benefit by providing timely information, supply chain linkages, and for creating awareness on various schemes at both State and Central level etc.

IMPACT ON FARM LABOURERS

It pains our hearts when we hear many labourers saying “[Hunger may kill us before corona](#)”. Daily wage labourers are mostly engaged in diverse activities in the organized and unorganized sector. But with the shutdown of industries and manufacturing sectors along with shops, their services get terminated by default leaving them without any financial support for shelter and food. Many Samaritans have come forward to help with food and shelter along with many initiatives by State and Central Governments and NGOs to address the plight of labourers.

Let’s pause a minute and think of the landless labourers in rural areas.

With strict lockdown enforced and lack of movement, landless labourers are left in the lurch without any work for their livelihood. Without COVID-19 the present season would have been an ideal situation for landless labourers, especially those actively engaged in harvesting, grading and packaging operations of wheat, rice, pulses, onion, along with sowing of summer rice, pulses and cotton. This also happens to be peak season for many fruits such as mango, watermelon, muskmelon, apricots, plums, etc.

But in the present scenario, landless labourers are solely dependent on State and Central assistance to battle the crisis. Though the Central Government and governments of different States have initiated various schemes for the welfare of rural poor including cash transfer, PDS, food supply, etc., pinpointing and gauging their effectiveness so early would be naive. The government under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) has [decided to deposit Rs 500/-](#) into women's Jandhan accounts which is a welcome move. But this cash transfer promised to certain section of the poor is both small and narrowly targeted. Under PM-KISAN scheme, every farmer is entitled to Rs 6,000 annually in three installments, but landless agricultural workers, who are among the poorest of the poor, are not covered under this scheme. On one side we have witnessed farmers facing difficulty in harvesting their standing crop and on the other there are agricultural labourers unable to provide this service – and both sides suffering. This conundrum has left the agricultural sector reeling under severe problems which needs to be addressed at the earliest so that people do not fall into the debt traps of moneylenders to meet their basic needs.

Box 1. Is excess grain a liability or an asset?

In the current situation, many people have lost their livelihoods and are pushed into hunger and poverty. [Disturbing news](#) of people committing suicide due to starvation – in a food surplus nation – has surfaced. In [one unfortunate case](#) where a labour committed suicide, the district administration chose the easier path of blaming the victim for being 'mentally disturbed'. On the contrary, [FCI has](#) 3.09 million tonnes of wheat, 2.75 million tonnes of rice and 2.87 million tonnes of paddy as of March, which is three times more than the amount of buffer stock India needs. With harvest of rabi crops and procurement round the corner the FCI may face serious [storage issues](#). Though the [central government](#) has decided on free distribution of 5 kg food grains per person and one kg of pulses per household under PM Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana for the next three months in addition to the usual allowance of ration under PDS scheme, there seems to be something missing. Substantial numbers of the poor are excluded from the PDS due to various reasons such as pending applications and identification barriers for verification to get ration card. Eminent economists Amartya Sen, Raghuram Rajan, and Abhijit Banerjee have [suggested](#) issuing temporary ration cards to the poor for the next six months. This suggestion assumes importance since the lockdown may be lifted sooner or later but revival of economy will take some time (months). The [initiative by Kerala govt.](#) of providing 15 kg of free rice over and above their regular ration for one month, starting from April 1, to both [BPL and APL](#) holders is worth mentioning. Targeted initiatives ought to be formulated for utilizing the available surplus stocks which are bound to reduce the stress and tension of poor people, at least partially, and the resulting psychological problems.

IMPACT ON STUDENTS

The COVID-19 crisis brought a unique dilemma to the student fraternity. With the colleges and universities closed, the students were left with no option but to move to their homes hastily. In most cases it was mandatory to leave the hostel while in some other cases the students were allowed to stay with requisite permissions. These sudden changes have brought immense agony to the students who are already burdened with their semester and competitive exams, research and academic activities. With the ever [increasing unemployment rates](#) every year, this pandemic brings a double whammy to the students. Moreover the economy being at the lowest point the IMF is echoing concerns of a [global recession](#) in the making. India is no different in the current scenario with constantly decreasing [growth rates](#) – presently projected at 1.9% by the IMF. Thus it is a no brainer to

assume that the [future regarding job prospects](#) is uncertain and bleak, shattering the dreams and aspirations of young people all over the country. This is pushing them towards more stress.

With regard to the students of agriculture and allied subjects, different SAUs and ICAR institutes have devised different rules for their students following the guidelines provided by the respective State and Central governments. The change in JRF/SRF syllabus, along with a single exam to be conducted by NTSE, has been both boon and bane for the students. But in the present scenario the final year UG/PG students are worried whether they will be provided a degree in time and how the whole process will be carried out; so there is a tense air of uncertainty surrounding them. Many [studies](#) have been carried out to understand the stress and mental illness found in PhD students and those in agriculture and allied streams are no different. This pandemic situation has thrown the research schedule and plans into deep water. Laboratory facilities closed, animal trials halted, plant treatments with no one to monitor, data collection schedules gone awry – these are some of the problems worth mentioning here from a larger pool of issues. Since PhD is not a time bound degree, many students fear that their term of study may get prolonged with no jobs in sight.



This gloomy picture of a student is symbolic of much more than what can be seen here

Box 2. Health Care Workers

They are the frontline soldiers who are fighting this contagious disease without proper ammunition, i.e., personal protective equipment (PPE) which is in [short of supply](#). Numerous reports have surfaced where the health workers have been subjected to [assaults and harassed](#) while on duty. A [study](#) that surveyed 1,250 health care workers in China reported that the respondents have developed symptoms of depression (50.4%), anxiety (44.6%), insomnia (34.0%) and distress (71.5%). [Guidelines and free online resources](#) are made available for supporting healthcare workers to deal with their stress.

IT Professionals and Private Sector Employees

'Work from home' surely has more challenges as opposed to working from offices as there is no fixed working hours, regular conference calls (audio and video), indefinite virtual meetings, poor internet connectivity due to huge loads, etc. The [work pressure and stiff deadlines](#) in this scenario has pushed them towards depression. [Several companies](#) have roped in counsellors and psychiatrists through [outsourcing](#) for the emotional wellbeing of their stressed employees.

Unlike those working in the private sector or health care workers who have some stress related support, does the farming community have this sort of mechanism? Sorry to say "NO". Compared to other strata of people who have better education and awareness and can afford counselling services, farmers and agricultural labourers neither have the platform or necessary know-how to discuss their problems, forget about counselling services.

All the universities and colleges under the University Grants Commission (UGC) have been directed to set up mental health helplines for addressing the psycho-social concerns of student community during and after COVID-19 ([The Economic Times, 6 April 2020](#)). All universities should conduct motivational sessions for students when the pandemic gets over. Professors and student advisors should have regular communication with the students to know their progress and well-being which is much needed at this point, especially for devising a future course of action and also to keep the students calm. However, the silver lining has been the use of e-learning resources, online classes by professors, free data analytic courses, AGMOOCs and regular assignments utilizing the power of the internet to keep the students occupied.

CONCLUSION

The last two decades have witnessed five pandemics viz., SARS (2002), Swine flu (2009), MERS (2012), Ebola (2014), and COVID-19 (2019) which have had long lasting effects on the various strata of people in society. God forbid but technically speaking, a pandemic like situation in the near future cannot be rejected outright. In such scenarios of healthcare emergencies affecting entire countries, much of the attention is focused on scientific research with little or no concern towards addressing mental illness. Evidently the COVID-19 pandemic too has opened a number of research avenues in the scientific sector but social science research too can play a very crucial role. There has been a dearth of research on psychological stress and mental illness especially in situations like this. Priority for extension research in understanding the mental illness of farmers is also quite low which needs attention. A number of models in vogue in social-psychology, such as health belief model, theory of reasoned action, theory of planned behaviour, social cognitive theory, self determination theory etc., can be utilized by extension researchers to good effect so as to identify and understand the factors influencing behaviour and behavioural change. This sort of research can help policy makers to perceive the importance of mental illness in the farming community in the first instance itself.

Extension service providers, though overburdened, may consider providing the farmers with trainings/discussions on the importance of life and how to tackle unforeseen situations. Peer support through the *krushak saathi/kisan mitras* found in every village, needs to be encouraged in order to identify the farmers at risk so that necessary action can be taken by the district administration/line departments. Feedback loop on constant monitoring and communication among farmers and stakeholders can go a long way in addressing the plight of farmers. Awareness ought to be created on the taboos associated with mental illness. Individuals should be encouraged and motivated to come forward in sharing their problems without any fear as the saying goes “Sharing is caring”. Before the next pandemic-like situation arises in the country, let’s be prepared to at least deal with the psychological problems of the common people.

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