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POST EFFECT OF PANDEMIC COVID-19 (NOVEL CORONA VIRUS DISEASE) IN INDIA: AN AGRICULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

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Impact of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) on human health and the economy, globally has been substantial and is likely to intensify. The current ongoing health crisis in the world has affected all the way of life. According to WHO (World Health Organisation) report, COVID- 19 is a new disease, distinct from other diseases caused by coronaviruses, such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) and Middle East Respiratory Syndrome(MERS). The outbreak of the virus spreads rapidly through the exponential rate. International Monetary Fund (IMF) managing director Kristalina Georgieva started on 23 March, the outlook for global growth will decrease sharply “negative” in 2020. India had declared a nationwide lockdown for three weeks till mid-April in the initial phase. To combat this imminent spread of COVID-19, the nationwide lockdown has been subsequently extended up to third-May. During these situations, Indian agriculture is facing multifarious challenges. The government has more than sufficient food reserve, Food Corporation of India (FCI) is ensuring uninterrupted supply of rice and wheat throughout the country during the lockdown period. Under National Food Security Act (NFSA), FCI is prepared for meeting not only food requirement at 5 kg/month per beneficiary but also ready to meet any additional demand and supply of 5 kg per person for the upcoming 3 months to serve 81.35 crore population under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.

Through this article, we have tried to summarise the ongoing situation from the agricultural perspective through several governmental websites, scientific reports and news. The farming sector is facing several challenges, starting from rabi crops harvesting to the marketing of vegetables, the price crashed of several perishable commodities, from the

unavailability of labour to farm equipment etc. As the effect of the virus disseminates all around the world, the scope of agricultural export is also negligible. To tackle this situation, the government has taken several mitigation strategies starting from income support scheme Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi (PM-KISAN) to increase the wage rate under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) for the agriculture sector. Beside these strategies, the farm sector in India is facing several challenges. Keeping in mind the lockdown, we have tried to find and assembled the major problems faced by the farming sector in India.

Challenges Faced by the Farm Sector

On this pandemic, nationwide lockdown creates multifarious challenges in front of the farming sectors. We have assessed and able to find out the major factors and the consequences of this pandemic on agriculture.

Prices of Perishable Commodities Drop By 20 Per Cent

In West Bengal, most of the farmers are marginal and small farmers; they are in a distress sale. Due to lockdown, they are forcibly selling their farm produce at lower market price and facing economic challenges. As bulk demand from hotels and restaurants has nosedived and there is uncertainty over exports, the prices of agricultural commodities such as perishable vegetables, grapes and sugar have fallen 15-20 per cent. Farmgate price for export of grapes fallen from Rs. 100 per kg to Rs. 70-75 per kg (All India Grape Exporters' Association).

Labour Shortage Hits Harvest of Rabi Crops

Due to this lockdown reverse migration of labour took place. The nationwide lockdown has triggered the labour shortage. Harvesting of rabi crops, especially wheat, will face a severe labour scarcity phenomenon. The major source of labour in wheat-growing states of Haryana, Punjab and Uttar Pradesh is from eastern India. Most of the labour has returned to their home after lockdown before 24 March due to fear from COVID-19 and has to face wage disruptions. Lasalgaon is one of the biggest onion markets in Maharashtra. Marketing practices like loading, unloading grading of onions are mostly operating through the migrant workers. Lockdown results in the shortage of migrant labours, which creates challenging situations in front of the farmers and traders.

Demand for Dairy Products Drops Sharply

Hotels, cafes, restaurants are the bulk consumers of dairy products. Due to lockdown, these are shuttered down, and also there is a ban on inter-state trade. Therefore, demand, as well as sales of dairy products, drastically reduced. Amul, the largest player of the dairy industry, has witnessed 25 per cent dip in sales, while the second-largest milk co-operative, the Karnataka Milk Federation (KMF) faced 30 per cent fall in sales. There is a demand for dairy products in metros and other regions, but manufacturers are not able to transport due to restrictions.

Lockdown Results In Wilting of Flower Trade in the Country

Flowers like jasmine, marigold, rose, lily possesses high demand during this time. But as there is no wedding and also ban on prayers in temples, flower demand has drastically reduced in this lockdown. Farmers are simply destroying the flower, which brings negative impact in the flower industry. In this peak season of harvesting of marigold in Jammu & Kashmir farmers are simply throwing the flowers in canals instead of selling it into Jammu markets.

Lockdown Disrupts Supply Chain

The main aim of nationwide lockdown in India is to stop the spread of coronavirus, which is preventing the movement of perishables to reach from production to consumption sites. This results in pushing up the prices, and farmers are forced to feed their produce to the animals. Many wholesale markets are empty of produce. Unavailability of drivers and transport facilitates the blockage in the supply chain. Millions of urban and rural poor are especially affected after the breakdown of the supply chain in India. APMC_s(Agricultural Produce Market Committees) are the bulk suppliers of fruits, vegetables, flowers and grains in each district. To prevent the overcrowding and facilitate the implementation of lockdown, most of the APMC_s are closed.

Lockdown Hits Poultry Farmers Hard

Lockdown hits the poultry industry tremendously. First, the spread of rumours about linking chicken consumption with coronavirus pandemic in social media. After those misconceptions allayed due to awareness campaign and circular from the Department of Animal Husbandry & Dairying, the poultry farmers are facing the lockdown situation.

Therefore, the poultry industry has faced a double whammy problem. The result of this rumour and lockdown is decreasing in chicken demand and eggs by 30-40 per cent.

Agricultural Equipment Market in Slow Lane

The primary aim of this lockdown is to stop the spread of the coronavirus. But lockdown has a negative effect on the demand for agricultural equipment and tractors. Labour scarcity has prompted the mechanisation activity. In India, around 95 per cent tractors are purchased on credit basis. Though agricultural machinery and spare parts are exempted from the effect of lockdown, tractor selling remains locked out.

Government Initiatives to Mitigate the Pandemic Situation

Immediately after the nationwide lockdown, Indian Finance Minister has announced Rs 1.7 lakh crore as a relief package for the vulnerable sections including farmers of the society. Apart from direct cash transfers for the next three months, 800 million population will get free cooking gas and cereals. Through PM-KISAN scheme Rs. 2000 will be transferred to each beneficiary accounts as income support scheme. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana has been announced as a welfare scheme for the vulnerable population of the nation.

For ensuring that the farmers do not suffer from any adverse fall out during lockdown, Department of Agriculture Cooperation and Farmers Welfare is taking all possible measures to accelerate the harvesting of rabi crop and also sowing of the summer crop. The video conference was conducted with all states and insurance companies to review the payment of claims, understanding the status of Crop Cutting Experiments (CCEs), implementation of smart sampling technique and crop loss survey. For facilitating farm insurance, the letter has already issued to all the states to issue passes to a representative of respective insurance companies for co-witnessing CCEs. Necessary coordination established with cultivators, aggregators, mandi associations, wholesalers for smoothening the transport and to sort out all challenges. In the lockdown period, Kisan Call Centres (KCCs) are being operated at all 21 locations. All the KCC (454) seats are continuously operated on a daily basis from 6 AM to 10 PM.

Conclusion

The lockdown is driving some long-awaited positive changes in agriculture. Lockdown brings direct contact between farmers and big buyers in metro cities and forcing a change in cropping practices that will help rejuvenate the soil and conserve water. Direct selling has been strengthening due to uncertainty in mandis. Farmers are able to bring their produce in different cities by the help of central and state interference, which drastically reduce the middlemen and their profit share in the entire supply chain. Lastly, the impact of COVID-19 would have a long term effect, which can be known after precise assessments. For a better healthy environment, in this pandemic situation, policymakers have the opportunity to repurpose the existing agricultural policies.

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