

Situation Assessment Report during the COVID-19 Lockdown: A Report from Hakamwala and Tehang Villages in Punjab

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This report is based on interviews with selected informants in two villages: Tehang in Jalandhar district and Hakamwala in Mansa district of Punjab.

The Economies of the Two Villages

Hakamwala village is located in the Budhlada tehsil of Mansa district in Punjab. The village shares boundaries with Boha and Gamiwala villages in Mansa district in Punjab, and Nangal and Sardarewala in Fatehabad district in Haryana. The two nearest towns are Budhlada in Punjab and Ratia in Haryana. These two towns provide non-agricultural work to manual workers during the agricultural lean season. Agriculture is the primary source of income and livelihood for cultivators and wage workers in the village. The landed cultivators belong to Jat Sikh and Kumhar (Other Backward Classes) households. Dalit households from the Majhabi Sikh, Ramdasia and Ravidasia Sikh castes are landless, and rely on wage labour.

Tehang village is in Jalandhar district in Punjab. It is just four km away from the tehsil headquarters, Phillaur and twenty-two km from Ludhiana city. It lies in the Doaba region of Punjab. Tehang is a fully irrigated village and has a fairly advanced capitalist agrarian economy. The village has a high concentration of landholdings, with the dominant Jat Sikh caste owning a disproportionately large share of the land. Merely twenty per cent of the households in the village are engaged in cultivation and most of them are Jat Sikhs. Demographically, more than half of the households in the village belong to the Scheduled Castes; they are mostly landless and predominantly dependent on non-agricultural wage labour (primarily in the construction sector and nearby industrial enterprises) for their sustenance. Non-agricultural wage employment is the primary source of income for more than seventy per cent of the households in Tehang. In most cases, these workers commute to nearby towns like Phillaur and Ludhiana for their work.

We spoke to eight informants in Tehang. Seven were Jat Sikh farmers with different sizes of landholdings; the eighth informant works as a mason. Two cultivator households and a manual worker household were interviewed in Hakamwala.

A large number of people from the Doaba region, especially from among the landed Jat Sikh caste, have emigrated to Europe and North America. Many families in Tehang also have members settled or working in countries such as Italy, Spain, France, the United Kingdom and the USA that have been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The general trend in the village suggests that many of these emigrants visit the village in December and January and leave by February. This travel pattern makes the Doaba region potentially vulnerable to a large-scale outbreak of the virus. In fact, the first three positive cases of COVID-19 (which further led to an increase in the number of positive cases) in Punjab were detected among people who had travelled to Punjab from Italy and Germany.

Agriculture

Rice (kharif) and wheat (rabi) are the main crops grown in Tehang. In Hakamwala, rice and cotton are cultivated in the kharif season while wheat is the main crop in the rabi season. While Tehang has better access to irrigation than Hakamwala, where salinity in groundwater is a problem, both villages are connected to canals and have a large number of tube wells.

In both villages, wheat harvesting was beginning when we spoke to our informants. Since wheat harvesting is largely mechanised, the demand for hired agricultural labour is low during this period. Although farmers were initially concerned about availability of combine harvesters because of the lockdown, these fears were allayed by the Punjab government's assurance that the movement of combine harvesters would be permitted in the state. However, relatively smaller farmers in Hakamwala expressed an apprehension that the rental charges for combine harvesters would increase because of a shortage of these machines caused by the lockdown. Wheat straw, an important by-product of wheat used as livestock fodder, is prepared by mechanical straw reapers. In Hakamwala, based on the advisory issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), the local administration has allocated two-time slots in a day—6.00 a.m. to 9.00 a.m., and 3.00 p.m. to 6.00 p.m.—for agricultural operations. In Tehang, it is mainly post-harvesting operations like loading/unloading of wheat and wheat straw that require the use of labour, usually migrants from Bihar. In Hakamwala, large farmers also sell surplus wheat straw in the market. The bundling and loading of wheat straw are done by wage workers from neighbouring villages on piece-rated contracts. With the curfew announcement, labour gangs from villages in Haryana could not enter Hakamwala, which disrupted this particular activity.

Farmers do not need any agricultural inputs for the rabi crop but they were finding it difficult to get their tools and implements repaired, a task that is usually done at this time of the year. Since movement to the nearby towns and cities has been affected due to the curfew, cultivators are also finding it difficult to procure animal feed. However, most of the respondents in Tehang, who are medium-scale and rich peasants, reported that they had substantial inventories of animal feed.

The Punjab government has ensured that mandis will be operational for the procurement of food grains. However, since the commission agents' shops are shut during the lockdown, small cultivators who usually sell their vegetables through commission agents have been unable to travel to the nearby town to sell them. Although, farmers in Hakamwala were confident that they would be able to sell their wheat produce in the mandi since the government had announced that the mandi would remain functional.

Status of Migrant Labourers

Villages in the Doaba region like Tehang receive an influx of migrant labourers (primarily from Bihar and Eastern UP) during the period of peak labour demand in agriculture, some of who work as long-term workers for big capitalist farmers, while a vast majority are part of labour groups working on piece-rates. The long-term workers have continued to stay in the village since they have contracts for a specified time period. They are also provided food and shelter by their employers. While a large

number of seasonal migrant workers come to this region in June for paddy transplanting, some workers also come around the time of rabi harvest to work in post-harvest operations. These groups of migrant workers and the migrant labourers employed in non-agricultural tasks in nearby towns and cities are reported to have left on foot and bicycles for their homes as soon as the lockdown was announced.

Since capitalist farmers largely depend on migrant workers for post-harvesting operations (primarily loading/unloading of wheat and wheat straw), there is growing concern among them about a shortage of labour in the coming weeks. One capitalist farmer also expressed concern that local labourers will demand higher wages, which could raise the farmers' cost of cultivation and eat into their expected profits. In addition, commission agents are concerned about the availability of labour since they too are dependent on the migrant workforce for cleaning and filling the gunny bags for sale in the mandi.

Landless Households in the Villages

In addition to the nationwide lockdown, the government of Punjab has enforced a state-wide curfew to deal with the spread of COVID-19. Since the announcement of the curfew, the state's borders with Haryana have been completely sealed until April 14, 2020. Therefore, travelling to nearby towns like Ratia in Haryana without government-issued travel passes (available only for those engaged in essential services) is now prohibited. Since the announcement, the police have been patrolling the village at least two or three times a day.

In Hakamwala, some wheat harvesting was being done manually. However, given the limited time slots in which such work was allowed to be done, the extent of employment availability was very limited. In Tehang, wheat harvesting is almost entirely mechanised and very little employment was available in agriculture.

A number of workers from landless households in Hakamwala work as long-term farm servants (called 'siri') on annual contracts. These workers are paid about Rs 80,000 per annum and some amount of grains. These workers received a part of their annual payment after harvesting the kharif crops around November 2019. Since most of that money has been utilized for their sustenance over the last five months, they are badly in need of the next installment of their payment, which is likely to be delayed because of delays in the harvesting and sale of wheat.

In Tehang, workers from landless households are mainly employed in construction or on piece-rate arrangements in nearby industries (there is a biscuit factory near Tehang). Since the lockdown, both construction activities and work in factories have stopped. For workers in Hakamwala, opportunities for non-farm work in nearby towns were not available owing to the lockdown. Since the border with Haryana was sealed, there was also no option of going to the town of Ratia, to which many workers commuted for work.

There is no MGNREGS (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme) work being undertaken in any of the villages at the moment. In general, very little work is made available under MGNREGS in these two villages. For example, last year, only about forty days of work were provided under the scheme and workers who managed to get work under the scheme have not been paid until now.

Given the cash crunch, manual worker households primarily relied on their limited stock of cereals. Some reported purchasing food materials on credit from the local shop. Grains distributed through the “Atta-Daal” scheme of the state government were supposed to reach poor households by the end of March but they had not arrived at time of our interviews.

Access to Banking Facilities

Tehang has branches of Punjab National Bank and a state co-operative bank. Banks were shut till March 29, 2020 but have been opened for two days a week since then and my respondents had been able to access banking facilities since.

In Hakamwala, where we managed to interview some landless workers, we found that accessing cash was an issue for almost all the manual worker households. The households had money in a savings bank or with private Micro-Finance Banks like RBL and EQUITAS but the nearby banks were operational only for two hours in a day. Cultivators accessed ATMs during the allocated time slot and did not allow workers to use them during those hours. This made it difficult for landless households to access money from formal sources even if they had some money in their accounts. For emergency purposes, a few workers were pushed to take credit from the local shop-owners or the cultivators.

To conclude, the lockdown has severely affected the employment of landless households in the two villages. While landless households in Hakamwala are primarily dependent on agricultural labour (though some workers also went to neighbouring towns for non-agricultural work) those in Tehang are primarily dependent on non-agricultural employment outside the village. The curfew imposed by the Punjab government, a much harsher measure than the lockdown imposed in rest of the country, means that no non-agricultural employment has been available and agricultural labour has only been allowed in specified slots. This has resulted in huge distress among the landless manual worker households in the two villages.

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