

COVID-19 in Rural India: Isar Village (Surat, Gujarat)

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Isar village is in Mandavi block of Surat district. Isar is also a gram panchayat and has a total area of 445 hectares, of which sixty-five per cent is the net cultivated area. Eighty-two per cent of the net cultivated area is irrigated due to the presence of an earthen dam. The availability of water has encouraged farmers, a majority of whom are small and marginal (0.64-hectare average landholding), to cultivate vegetables during the rabi season, which runs all the way to the end of April. The nearest block town, Mandavi, is fifteen km away. The major crops cultivated in the village are rice, sometimes mung bean, and vegetables such as okra, guar, chauli, palak. Of the total population of 1891 individuals, twenty-five per cent are cultivators, while sixty-five per cent are agricultural labourers (2011 Census).

Lack of access and availability of factors of production

Interviews with three farmers—Satishbhai, Vijaybhai, and Bhaljibhai—show that COVID-19 has resulted in several disruptions in the village. All three are marginal farmers who own 2.5, 1.5 and two acres respectively. Bhaljibhai has been the head of the participatory irrigation committee of Isar Dam for fifteen years. Isar and other nearby villages are a cluster for vegetable cultivation, especially okra and guar (*Cyamopsis tetragonoloba*, also known as gavar). The farmers are facing problems in purchasing inputs such as seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers. Satishbhai reported, “the farmers have seen best yield this year as the rain was good. But we did not expect such a shock. This year most of the farmers have cultivated vegetables.” We also interviewed Mr Vinit Kumar, representative of the Forest Department.

The interviews shed light on the challenges faced by the farmers due to the lockdown. First, the availability of urea has been disrupted. There is a limited stock of urea and other fertilizers. Satishbhai reported that a vehicle had come early in the morning in the previous week to supply urea to the co-operative. The price some of the farmers paid was Rs 280 per bag, but the fertilizer stock was very soon exhausted. Satishbhai also said that urea is available in a nearby town called Jankhwa, seven kilometres from Isar. A private shop here was selling the fertilizer for Rs 380 per bag. Vijaybhai reported that some of the agro shop owners are selling loose urea at the price of almost Rs 400 per bag of urea. When we asked about the situation for other inputs, he seemed to suggest that there has not been much disruption to the supply of other inputs as the agro-shops remain open until noon. Vijaybhai had anticipated some of the problems a lockdown would bring and so had bought seeds already. He is replanting okra in his field in a hope of getting a better price later. He said that the okra seeds cost him Rs 4500 per acre; the price of the seeds is higher than last year. However, Bhaljibhai reports that the supply of inputs like pesticides has not been regular, and that farmers are buying whatever stock is there in the input agro centres even though what is necessary is often unavailable. Moreover, police constables are not allowing easy access to the market. One of the Forest Department clusters in a village called Visdaliya is also supplying inputs such as pesticides, seeds, and fertilisers to some farmers nearby, but it is not enough.

The price of labour has not changed much, but there has been a drop in availability, Bhaljibhai reported that most farmers are harvesting vegetables using family labour, as it is not profitable to engage labour given the market price. Fear of infection is also a deterrent. Only a few farmers had been engaging labour to harvest vegetables, and even they have stopped now. The current prevailing farm labour rate is Rs 130 for harvesting guar from 8.00 a.m. to 1.00 p.m. The mobility of labour is at a standstill due to the lockdown; labourers are facing a loss of wages as farmers are reluctant to hire both outsiders as well as locals. Moreover, surplus labour cannot seek work outside the village due to the lockdown. The demand for labour has also reduced due to the farmers' inability to take their produce to market. Farmers are also facing a cash crunch due to banks being apprehensive about disbursing money—according to Bhaljibhai, bank officials are not giving cash to the farmers even if they have it in their accounts.

Bottlenecks in marketing

Bhaljibhai and Vijaybhai reported that a few large farmers have ploughed their lands after feeding surplus vegetables to their cattle. Bhaljibhai told us that milk procurement has been consistent and smooth. The farmers from the village are supplying close to 1000 litres of milk everyday to the co-operative, Sumul. Farmers maintain physical distance while collecting milk at the cooperative.” However, the marketing of vegetables has been an issue. The two respondents mentioned earlier used to sell their produce to a trader from their village. The trader used to sell the produce in the cities like Surat and Ahmedabad. Isar village also has a crucial collection point for vegetables from tribal villages nearby. But the lockdown has restricted the movements of the village's farmers. The trader referred to earlier used to employ a driver from the village to transport vegetables to Kalupur mandi, Ahmedabad. After the driver caught a cold, there was panic among the farmers, and the driver was quarantined by the panchayat for fourteen days. He tested negative for COVID-19, but the panchayat decided to ban people from travelling outside the village and people from entering the village anyway. This restriction has disrupted the collection, weighing and sale of vegetables.

According to Bhaljibhai, the farmers brought up the issue with the panchayat, and have now been allowed to take their vegetables to a new collection centre that has been set up outside the village in the nearby forest, where they must maintain social distancing. However, the trader is offering poor prices: ten rupees per kg for okra and ten to twelve per kg for guar— before the lockdown the prices for the two vegetables were twenty-five and forty-five rupees per kg, according to Satishbhai. Some of the traders are also exploiting situation. Satishbhai reported that some of the traders are still able to sell okra for thirty rupees per kg (Rs 600 per twenty kg) and guar at forty-five rupees per kg (Rs. 900 per twenty kg) in Vyara, a town twenty-eight km away from Isar.

While the farmers can sell okra at the new price because it can be harvested with less labour, they are facing a loss if they sell guar at the new price. Some farmers have either fed their guar crop to their cattle or have ploughed it into the soil to make it manure. According to Vijaybhai: “The labour cost to harvest guar is Rs 260 to 300 per twenty kg, while the prevailing market price is Rs. 260 per twenty kg— we cannot even bear the cost of labour, forget about the other costs. Last year we got a price of Rs 1100 per 20 kg for guar. I have given the crop away to my cattle, and have

ploughed my land for the next crop of okra.” Vijaybhai is cultivating costly okra in the expectation that the price will improve in future. Those who have family labour are still harvesting and selling the guar crop, but those who cannot harvest are ploughing the land for the next crop. Vijaybhai added that many farmers have switched to growing fodder to feed their livestock, but they do not have enough urea for the fodder crop; at present, some farmers are using on-farm manure. One narrative was common among the farmers: every year farmers in the village earned a profit on cultivating vegetables; this profit was then used to buy inputs and rent machinery for the kharif season. This year, farmers anticipate facing problems in financing their agricultural activities during the upcoming kharif season.

The town of Zankhva is seven km from the village and is another option for farmers looking to sell their produce. Slightly better prices are available here, with one kilo of okra going for fifteen to twenty rupees. But the farmers have no way to transport their produce to the town, and risk social stigma and fear when they do leave the village, as they would be seen as potential carriers of COVID-19.

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