

# **Fallout of COVID-19 Pandemic on Agriculture and Food Security in Lasara Kalan village, Uttar Pradesh**

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Lasara Kalan is a village of 293 households located in Azamgarh district of Uttar Pradesh. According to the 2011 census of India, twenty-seven per cent of the population of the village are Scheduled Castes (SC). The majority of households in the village depend on agriculture as the main source of their income. A small number of households in the village own grocery shops, and the rest of the workers in the village are either long-term salaried employees or daily wage workers. The rabi crops grown by farmers in the village include wheat, potato, rapeseed/mustard, gram and green peas, while the kharif crops are paddy, maize, arhar (tur) and bajra (pearl millet). Non-agricultural occupations in which workers are engaged include construction, driving, and casual multi-purpose labour.

This essay is based on information provided by eighteen individuals through telephonic conversations conducted between March 29 and 31, 2020. The essay attempts to summarize the present situation in Lasara Kalan and assesses the impact of lockdown announced by the government of India. The informants include nine farmers, five shopkeepers, three government employees and one driver. All respondents own some agricultural land; three of them have also leased in land for cultivation. Two of the three sharecroppers are from Other Backward Classes (OBC), and one is SC.

By the first of week of February 2020, the farmers of Lasara Kalan village had harvested their crops of potato, rapeseed/mustard, gram and peas. Some of the farmers had put surplus potatoes into cold storage before the lockdown began. Most of the farmers said that they have surplus rapeseed and have been unable to sell it because the prices are low. Although the Minimum Support Price declared by the government for rapeseed/mustard is Rs 4425 per quintal, none of the traders who buy it is willing to pay more than Rs 3300 per quintal.

The standing wheat crop has already suffered some damage owing to the recent, unseasonal rains. The harvesting of wheat has to begin by the second week of April. Large farmers in the village use combine harvesters—which are available for hire—for harvesting wheat. Although a few combine harvesters are owned by people from nearby areas, most of them come from Punjab. Drivers, mechanics and helpers usually bring these combine harvesters from Punjab in the last week of March. However, due to the spread of COVID-19 and the country-wide lockdown, there has been no opportunity to bring them to the village yet. Given the current situation, farmers anticipate that the wheat harvest will be delayed and that the agrarian crisis will worsen. A few farmers who have contacted the operators of combine harvesters have been told that the combine harvester owners are to get passes for inter-state transport amid lockdown. Farmers who use agricultural wage workers to gather their wheat harvests fear that, if the lockdown continues, they might not be able to hire labourers. However, one of the respondents said that the local labourers, who have no non-agricultural employment because of the lockdown, might be willing to do agricultural labour since they would need money.

Construction is the most important non-agricultural activity within and in neighbouring villages. Because of the lockdown, construction material is not available and only a few households that had already procured construction material are able to engage in any construction work. Most of the construction work in the village has stopped since the beginning of the lockdown and most construction workers of Lasara Kalan are without work.

Some households in the village supply milk to the local market. These households have been unable to sell milk because of the closure of the market and have consequently suffered a loss of income. Respondents said that dry straw, green fodder (clover) and other types of animal feed are locally produced in the village and that, as of now, there was no problem in access to animal feed.

As per the informants, there was a rise in the prices of food grains and vegetables in the first week of lockdown in comparison with the week before the lockdown. The prices of essentials like tur dal, potato, onion, tomato, and garlic, whole gram, sugar and wheat flour as well as vegetables like bhindi, parwal and cauliflower were seen to increase in the first week of lockdown (see Table 1). The change in prices of some of these essential items is listed below.

**Table 1. Prices of essential items in Lasara Kalan, before and during the lockdown**

Commodities	Pre-lockdown prices Rs./kg	Prices in the first week of lockdown Rs./kg	% change	Commodities	Pre-lockdown prices Rs./kg	Prices in the first week of lockdown Rs./kg	% change
Wheat flour	28	30	7.1	Potato	16	25	56.3
Rice*	NA	NA	NA	Onion	30	36	20.0
Tur dal	75	98	30.7	Mustard oil	115	115	0.0
Dry peas dal	60	62	3.3	Tomato	30	75	150.0
Gram dal	75	75	0	Ginger	100	100	0.0
Masoor dal	140	140	0	Garlic	80	90	12.5
Moong dal	80	80	0	Bhindi	80	90	12.5
Besan	90	90	0	Parwal	90	100	11.1
Nutrila	180	180	0	Cauliflower	30	35	16.7
Whole gram	60	65	8.3	Cabbage	30	30	0.0
Sugar	38	40	5.3	Milk	40/litre	40/litre	0.0
Tea	PR	PR	NA	Bread	PR	PR	0.0
Eggs	150/tray	120/tray	-20.0	Suji	34	34	0.0
Chicken	180	30	-83.3	Fish	240	NA	NA
Mutton	450	400	-11.1	Ghee	450	450	0.0

Source: As reported by the informants

Shopkeepers in the village complained that local shops have been closed since March 21. One of the respondents, who owns a shop selling sewing machines, said that he had borrowed two lakh rupees to procure new machines in anticipation of increased demand during the marriage season. His business has been severely hit by the lockdown. He also mentioned that several of his customers had bought machines on credit, and were unable to repay their debt. A respondent who has a furniture shop in the local market said that the supply of timber had stopped due to the lockdown. He had to complete a few orders before the upcoming marriage season, but meeting the deadline seems impossible now. He said that unless work began again soon, he would be unable even to pay the salaries of his two workers.

About five km from the village is the local branch of the Union Bank of India, which is the bank nearest to Lasara Kalan. The ATM is located inside the building and can only be accessed during office hours. The residents of the village use the Fino Payments System in the local market when they need cash. The Fino Payments Bank has authorised a person in the local market where residents of the village get money using their ATM cards or through their Aadhar Cards, which are linked to their bank accounts. The agent charges one per cent for the withdrawal of money. The respondents said that amid the lockdown, the payments service is also curtailed, resulting in a cash crunch. However, the local administration has allowed the agent to open his office for a few hours every day.

In conclusion, the spread of COVID-19 and the government's announcement of a countrywide lockdown has brought the rural economy to a grinding halt. Whether and how farmers will manage to harvest wheat in the next two weeks are critical questions. Combine harvesters from Punjab have not yet arrived and farmers are waiting for the operators of mechanics to arrive in the village. Non-agricultural activities such as construction and wood working have halted due to lack of access to raw materials. Shops in the local market are closed. The prices of many essential food items have increased in the local shops. There was no MGNREGA work in the village during the lockdown. The distribution of wheat and rice from the PDS to both the Patra-grihashthi and Antyodaya ration card holders would take place in the first week of April.

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