

Assessment of the Situation in Rohna Village (Hoshangabad District, Madhya Pradesh)

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The two-hour drive from Bhopal to Hoshangabad along National Highway 46 is marked by wide, yet congested roads with several traffic bottlenecks till Obedullaganj. Past this town, narrow, bumpy roads lead to a bridge across the Narmada river. Across the bridge lies Hoshangabad, the largest-wheat producing district in Madhya Pradesh; village of Rohna lies ten km further down the state highway. With the construction of the Tawa Dam on the Narmada in 1974 and the advent of canal irrigation in the Narmada Valley region, the cropping pattern in this village and its surroundings has changed from a single annual crop to three crops per agricultural year.

About sixty-five per cent of the households in Rohna own some land, and income from cultivation forms a major share of their annual earnings. However, inequality in land ownership across farming classes is very high: about sixty per cent of farmers own less than five acres. Such households supplement their income either through casual agricultural labour or through daily wage labour in the construction sector. At the same time, the top twenty per cent of Rohna's farmers have made rapid economic progress over the last decade by expanding cultivation and diversifying into allied agricultural activities. Agricultural labour is the primary source of income for most landless households in the village.

Like the rest of the country, Hoshangabad too is under lockdown on account of the COVID -19 pandemic. Activity in the village has been limited since March 22 due to the presence of police. The village kotwar (the lowest-rung employee of the Revenue Department) has been put in charge of helping the police in enforcing the lockdown and prevent crowds at shops selling groceries, agricultural inputs and medicines.

Impact of the Lockdown on the Rabi Crop

Wheat is the main crop of the rabi season. The harvest had already been delayed by a week due to rainfall in mid-March and lockdown restrictions. It finally began in the village in the last week of March, after the state government issued orders allowing wheat harvesting to take place as scheduled, and is expected to be completed by April 15. Rohna is entirely dependent on combine-harvesters and even crops sown on small plots (less than five acres) are harvested using these machines. Like the rest of Central India, Rohna also sees an influx of large numbers of combine harvesters from Punjab during the harvesting period, but anxiety over COVID-19 and the current restrictions on movement mean that most parts of the state are anticipating a shortfall in the availability of machines for harvesting. This has already emerged as a major problem in other districts. Fortunately, Rohna has nine combine harvesters owned by a few farming families within the village, meaning harvesting here should not be delayed due to the unavailability/shortage of harvesters, although a shortage of drivers for these harvesters could still be a source of disruption. These drivers come from Punjab every year, and some of them left the village in the last fortnight due to the pandemic.

Almost all the farmers in Rohna sell a large portion of their wheat produce to the government through the Co-operative Society in Rohna. The villagers had some

information that the process of procurement would begin from March 25 but there was no official confirmation until after the nation-wide lockdown was announced. At that point, an official announcement that procurement would begin from April 1 was made. Some farmers in the village also received an SMS informing them of the date fixed for the purchase of their wheat. However, this order has been retracted, procurement has been postponed, and no new date has yet been announced. Additionally, certain important tasks associated with procurement—the storing of grains in sacks and the loading of these onto trolleys—are usually carried out by migrant labourers from Bihar who have not been able to travel to Rohna. Staff members of the Co-operative Society are anticipating a labour shortage as it appears migrant labourers may not be able to travel to the village at all this season.

Some of the small farmers in the village who had harvested wheat early, and needed to sell it to meet immediate requirements of cash, have had to sell their grain to traders in the village at the rate of Rs 1500 per quintal which is much lower than the Minimum Support Price (Rs 1925 per quintal) at which government procures the grain. An officer working in the Collectorate said that the mandi might not open till April 14. Unless the procurement operations start soon, many more farmers will be forced to sell their grain at low prices to local traders.

Impact on the Moong Crop

Almost half the farmers of Rohna, many of whom have their own sources of irrigation like tubewells, grow a short duration (about sixty days) moong crop. Although the costs per acre for moong are high, it is remunerative short-duration bridge crop between rabi and kharif seasons because of high prices of moong. This year, there were reports that water would be released around from the Tawa dam on April 10 and almost all the farmers in Rohna whose lands are irrigated by the canal had planned to grow moong in the summer months. However, due to the lockdown, farmers are not sure whether water will be released into the canal in April. Therefore, farmers who had planned to grow moong for the first time and are solely dependent on canal water for irrigation are unsure whether they will be able to sow the crop in time to harvest before the kharif crop. Another problem with sowing of moong crop is the uncertainty over availability of rotavators and other machines that are required to quickly prepare the soil for sowing of the moong crop. Farmers are also concerned about shortage of fertiliser and pesticide for this crop. Even though the input shops have permission to remain open, input dealers in the village had not started opening their shops. Some farmers have managed to procure what they need by contacting the shop owners on the phone and then arranging to collect the stock from them.

Impact on Manual Workers/Labourers

The majority of the manual workers in Rohna travel to Hoshangabad city, which also serves as the headquarters of the district, to work in the construction business or in the city's supermarkets (locally known as 'malls') for around Rs 300 per day. Because of the lockdown, they are unable to commute to the city and are forced to remain at home. They are willing to perform agricultural work in the village for now, which pays a lower daily wage of Rs 200 per day, but there has not been much of a demand for this either in the last fortnight. This might change with the onset of harvesting, but, even so, these workers are facing a definite loss in wages.

There are 108 active workers on the list for the MGNREGA scheme and 575 total workers. Information on these active labourers is already in the government's database, but they have not received any money since the lockdown was declared. In Rohna, the Co-operative Society functions both as the local procurement centre and the ration shop. Every year, to reduce the burden of work, the Cooperative Society provides the ration to beneficiaries for three months in advance, before the procurement season starts. This year also, ration card holders were given rations for three months in advance in mid-March. This has proved to be extremely helpful for daily wage labourers of the village who have not been able to earn anything in the last fortnight. Some landless households also managed to collect wheat through gleaning the fields which will now prove to be important for their food security.

Many landless families engage in gleaning the fields after harvesting. Although the amount of grain that can be collected through gleaning has fallen with mechanisation of harvesting, gleaning remains extremely important for food security of poor households in the village. Women from landless households in the village are concerned that they may not be allowed to collect grain from the fields because of the lockdown.

Workers from landless households also work in two nearby spinning mills as machine operators. These factories have been shut over the last fortnight but the workers have been paid their full salaries for the month of March. Uncertainty looms over their jobs and income for the next month as they have not received any information from the factory owners yet.

Impact on the Dairy Business

Hoshangabad has traditionally been known for milk production and Rohna has a few households that run independent dairies. They also collect milk on a daily basis from other farming households in the village that keep livestock. These dairies sell the milk in the city. Due to the exemption of milk distribution under the lockdown, this activity continues to take place.

Straw is a valuable by-product of the wheat crop. After a combine harvester has harvested the grain, the straw-reaper machine is used to harvest and shred the dry straw. Dry straw harvested in this season is stocked for using as fodder for rest of the year. Rohna does not have enough of straw reaper machines and farmers are dependent on machines that come from nearby districts. Inability to get the straw harvested in this season would increase the cost of maintaining livestock as fodder prices in the market are very high. Harvesting and shredding of straw costs about Rs 1200 per trolley during the harvesting season. In comparison, the straw prices went up to Rs. 3000 per trolley in the local market last year.

Availability and Retail Prices of Food Commodities

Hoshangabad lies on the banks of the Narmada and a lot of vegetable cultivation happens on the river banks. Although not many farmers in Rohna grow vegetables, there has been no shortage, as daily vendors have been coming from nearby villages and prices have been stable. However, prices of other essential items like sugar, vegetable oil and pulses have seen a rise in the last fortnight. Shop owners cite limited supply and difficulty in procuring these items as reasons for the increase.

April is the season of weddings for families in Rohna. All wedding ceremonies this year have been postponed and many families are worried about losing money they have already invested in preparation for the wedding ceremonies. This would add to the problems that farmers in Rohna are facing because of closure of mandis, the postponement of wheat procurement, delays in release of canal water, shortage in availability of agricultural inputs and machinery and the reluctance of the shopkeepers to open shops due to the fear of Coronavirus infection.

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