

# HUNGER WATCH

R E P O R T





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**Right to Food Campaign**  
and  
**Centre for Equity Studies**

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## PREFACE

# Lockdown and the hunger crisis in India

Harsh Mander

**T**he second wave of the pandemic is again holding the country hostage. It is threatening to shake the fluid platforms of existence of millions in the country. While the rate of infections continues unabated, the central government's studied silence on religious congregations and election rallies point to its complacency and irrationality. And all this, while the embers of the continued crisis of hunger, livelihoods and insecurity of millions of poor Indians are yet to be extinguished. The lives of millions are at stake owing to the callousness of a few in power.

With less than 4 hours' notice the Indian Prime Minister Modi on March 24, 2020 announced the complete and peremptory closure of the entire country. This was a public act without precedent in the history of India and indeed the planet. The intense humanitarian crisis that resulted from this almost immediately was a massive explosion of hunger countrywide, beginning with cities and towns. This eruption of mass hunger was an inevitable outcome of the harsh lockdown, because nine out of ten workers in India continue to be informal, millions amongst who eat what they earn each day. Most workers in India have little or no social protection or savings to guard against calamities.

What further aggravated the humanitarian crisis acutely was the resolve of the Government of India to offer actual additional cash and food transfers of less than 1% of GDP to people whose livelihoods were suspended or terminated by the lockdown, lower than most countries that resorted to lockdowns. The Indian working people continue until the time of writing to reel under the calamitous impact of the largest lockdown in the world with one of the smallest relief packages.

The first to be hit by hunger almost immediately were the labouring poor in cities and towns. Here the economy is substantially held aloft by the poorly paid labour of millions of workers with few labour rights and even less social protection. I have for the last two decades worked extensively with urban homeless people and street children; and have learned from them that although for the urban labouring poor, hunger is always just a heartbeat away, there is very rarely mass hunger in urban India. If you are willing to work without contracts, elementary rights and security in low-end exploitative work, you are likely to earn enough to feed your body. Even a street child newly arrived in the city after escaping an abusive family, learns in a week or two how to collect plastics and waste from trains and trash dumps and sell these for a couple of hundred rupees a day. Waste work has no entry barriers and many stigmatized people such as Rohingya refugees and the poorest Indian migrants turn to this to survive and bring food to their children each day. Millions of workers gather every morning at street-corners across the country to offer their labour to whoever bids for it and on whatever terms he offers. And on days when all of this fails, you always have gurudwaras, dargahs, temples and churches to fall back upon. It is this lifeline to some work and food – however exploitative and humiliating - that was snapped thoughtlessly, and I believe with spectacular cruelty, by the union government, that led to tens of thousands gathering in search of food charity at street-corners across the country.

In many parts of India, the countryside is not powered by farm incomes that are low and uncertain; these instead are largely remittance economies, dependent mainly for their food and other survival needs on the remittances from the young men, and sometimes young nuclear families, who migrate to the cities to lead hard and often lonely lives as the only way to ensure the survival of their families back in the village. But the lockdown suddenly snapped also this lifeline, and impoverished aged parents or wives - who were tending the house, children and sometimes land - had to become the providers. Millions of determined migrants left the cities, braving police batons, disinfectant sprays, incarceration, and arduous walks of several hundred kilometres to return to the place they called home.

Despite petitions in the Supreme Court and demands from the political opposition as well as social groups, the government refused the elementary demand that since formal sector workers were getting salaries during the lockdown, at the

very least informal sector workers should get at least minimum wages during the period of the lockdown (a transfer of 7000 rupees a month to every household) and free food transfers in a universal and expanded PDS. In newspaper columns with senior economists Prabhat Patnaik and Jayati Ghosh, we tried to make the case for this support in an economy which was abruptly completely shut down. We calculated that this would not cost more than 3% of GDP. Had the union government heeded this, the migrant exodus, the explosion of hunger, and the unprecedented contraction of the economy could all have been mitigated if not avoided. Even using a purely utilitarian paradigm, compassionate public policy would also have yielded returns for the health of the economy. But we believe that there is a deeper ethical question here, of the duty of the good state to protect millions of its people from sinking into an acute and then chronic hunger and livelihood crisis.

Instead the Prime Minister appealed to the charity of employers to pay wages to the workers during the lockdown. Only 15% informal workers have identifiable employers; even if many of these heeded the appeal of the Prime Minister, what would happen to the food needs of the remaining 85% of informal workers? And more fundamentally, social protection of workers is a matter of labour rights, even more so in a calamity created by state policy; and not rendering their survival to depend on the indignity of uncertain and reluctant charity. Likewise the Finance Ministry in October, 2020 spoke of a “new normal where self-protection is inseparable from economic activity.” This too implied a retreat from the government’s responsibility of ensuring social protection of all workers. The budget for 2021-22 did not contain any new packages for social protection, many states weakened legal rights of workers, and allocations for many social protection schemes including anganwadi services, social security pensions and so on have seen a reduction in real terms.

The tragic epic journeys of the migrant workers briefly caught national, and indeed international attention, forcing a reluctant union government to ultimately restart trains, although these often had no food and water, were hard to book seats in, and sometimes took many days to reach their destinations. But the public conscience of the rich and middle classes, and of governments, is notoriously fickle and shallow. Today as I write this a year later, if you rely on newspaper headlines and television discussions, you would imagine that hunger and joblessness unleashed by the lockdown are already a thing of the past.

Hunger Watch is a loose collection of social groups and movements that came together for periodic study of the actual status of hunger, food access and livelihood security among various disadvantaged populations in the wake of the nation-wide lockdown in late March, 2020. This is the first report of the collective, based on interviews with 3,994 households across 11 states. Dipa Sinha, who

teaches in Ambedkar University, Kavita Shrivastava, General Secretary of PUCL and Rajendran Narayanan who teaches in Azim Premji University, coordinated the survey, data analysis and report writing, with Naveen Gajjalagari, Nawasha Mishra and Aysha. It is a very rooted and engaged study, conducted less by formally trained researchers and more by people from and working closely with these dispossessed segments of people. There is a commitment to not just study and report, but to help organize the groups to access their rights.

I quote from the findings of the first Hunger Watch report: “(L)evels of hunger and food insecurity remained high with little hope of the situation improving without measures specifically aimed at providing employment opportunities as well as food support. Families are using different coping mechanisms – we have seen children being withdrawn from schools and sent to work, assets and jewellery being sold, money being borrowed to buy food, massive reductions in the quantity and quality of food consumed”. As a district officer, I have witnessed such food distress in rural and tribal India after repeated failures of the monsoon and chronic drought. But never in urban India.

Hunger Watch also notes that the recent NFHS-5 based on surveys before the lockdown, shows in most states either “a worsening or stagnation in malnutrition outcomes such as prevalence of stunting and wasting among children and high levels of anaemia amongst women and children”. This makes the consequences of the lockdown on the survival, nutrition, health and productivity of millions of the working poor even more disastrous and inter-generational, depriving another generation of Indian people the opportunities to survive with dignity, assured decent work, assured and sufficient food and nutrition and free health care.

Roughly two-thirds of nearly 4000 persons interviewed by Hunger Watch reported that the quantity of food that they consumed in October, 2020 had either “decreased somewhat” or “decreased a lot” compared to before lockdown. But even these alarming average figures should not mask the even more calamitous impact of the lockdown on socially vulnerable groups such as households headed by single women, households with people having disabilities, transgendered people and old persons without caregivers. 58% of the older people without caregivers, for instance, had to go sleep at night sometimes without a meal. This was the case with 56% of single-women headed households, and 44% of households with persons with disabilities.

Hunger Watch concludes that “the stringent national lockdown and the rising spread of the pandemic has resulted in deep economic distress resulting in a crisis of livelihoods, food and healthcare”. The economic crisis continues and deepens. “People who lost their jobs are yet to find replacements. Work, even where it is available, is even more irregular and for fewer days”.

It has been estimated that in just 2 months of lockdown, for the informal sector, workers have suffered a wage loss of nearly Rs 653.53 billion which is almost the annual budget for the MGNREGA for 2020-21 (Estupinan and Sharma, 2020). The data on economic contraction suggest that the impact on livelihoods has been severe and has affected women and Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and women more (Abraham and Basole, 2021). Hunger Watch finds evidence among the economically and socially vulnerable groups it surveyed a sharp fall compared to the pre-lockdown period in the consumption of foodgrains, pulses, vegetables, and eggs and meat. It observes that a direct rise in unemployment has led to a serious decline in incomes, and in consequence in food access and consumption.

Hunger Watch also finds worryingly that little has been accomplished after the lockdown for the revival of livelihoods in the informal sector. “For nearly a quarter of the respondents, the incomes had halved from pre-lockdown levels and for about one in five households, the incomes had reduced by a quarter. Since the majority of the respondents already had low incomes to begin with, a further reduction in household income is akin to taking a bullet train to hunger”. Though jobs are shrinking rapidly, the report notes that the crisis and food insecurity has prompted more people to enter the labour force. The Hunger Watch survey finds a staggering 55% increase in the labour force among the respondents. It notes perhaps a silent rise in child labour as well.

Hunger Watch also finds that overall more than half (and in urban areas nearly three-quarters) of those interviewed in the survey had no ration cards. This barred most from accessing the small benefits of food and ash transfers that governments made during and after the lockdown.

Hunger Watch ends with a number of recommendations, including a universal public distribution system that provides every individual with 10 kg grain, 1.5 kg pulses and 800 gm cooking oil for at least the next six months; nutritious hot cooked meals, including eggs, through anganwadi centres and school midday meals to be distributed while following all safety guidelines related to distancing and sanitisation; revival of all services of ICDS, including growth monitoring, additional supplementary nutrition for severely malnourished and nutrition counselling; ensuring 200 days of employment per rural household under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) with timely payment of statutory minimum wages; and since the survey finds that the urban poor were worse hit by the lockdown, the urgent need to create a National Urban Employment Guarantee Programme.

I have no idea if India’s policy-makers, law-makers, civil servants and senior journalists will make time to read the Hunger Watch Report, and heed the evidence of mass hunger and persisting livelihood losses that it gathers evidence about. If

they do not implement the measures thoughtfully listed at the end of the report to help millions of working poor people and their families to survive this calamity that has been thrust upon them, their distress, hunger, joblessness is likely to persist and fester in widespread hunger and malnourishment for many years; and a generation of children may have to drop out of education and lose all chances of escaping the dead-end poverty of their parents. If governments do not urgently undertake measures such as these to reach adequate food and cash transfers to the working poor through measures of the kind suggested by Hunger Watch, they will be culpable in the immense and substantially preventable suffering into which large swathes of millions of India's working poor have been thrust.

**Harsh Mander**

New Delhi, April 2021

# Introduction

Sarita Tribhuvan, a 40 year old Dalit woman, is a widow with six children. She works as a rag picker and lives with her 6 children in a 10 feet by 10 feet room in a slum in Dyaneshwar Nagar in Thane district, Maharashtra. She is originally from the drought-prone Marathwada region. Before the lockdown, she earned approximately Rs 7,000 per month by selling usable objects from the rags she picked. About 40% of her monthly earnings were spent in paying her room rent. She lost her only source of income when the lockdown was imposed. She does not have a ration card and none of her children go to school. During the lockdown, she received food and rations from a local NGO and a community member called Shobha. As of October, 2020, there were several nights that she and her children had to go to bed without a morsel of food. Due to non-availability of cooking gas, she burned left-over rags to cook.

These are some observations made by an interviewer as part of a continuous action research initiative called ‘Hunger Watch’ by the **Right to Food Campaign** and the **Centre for Equity Studies** along with a number of other networks. The project was initiated in September-October, 2020 to track the hunger situation amongst vulnerable and marginalised communities in different parts of the country induced by the lockdown. The Hunger Watch will conduct field surveys and then follow it up with local action towards demanding access to entitlements as well as drawing the attention of governments and media to the prevailing situation of hunger in the country. This report underscores that Sarita’s condition is not unique but has instead become the norm among those on the precipice of existence. It presents a limited view of food security among some vulnerable households after the strict lockdown had ended.

The monthly report from the Finance Ministry in October, 2020<sup>1</sup> observed that “From a trickle in not so distant past to now a sea of humanity coming out on the streets, the people of India have embraced the new normal where self-protection is inseparable from economic activity.” It attempts to poetically celebrate the spirit of resilience among the people by alluding to “self- protection” by shying away from the government’s responsibility of social protection. Indeed, it presents a

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1 <https://dea.gov.in/sites/default/files/October%202020.pdf>

misplaced notion that things were getting back to “normal”. In the subsequent report from November, 2020<sup>2</sup>, the Finance Ministry has expressed ebullience in the agriculture sector calling it “silver lining” during the COVID pandemic. It says: “India’s food grains production is estimated at a record 296.65 million tonnes in the 2019-20 crop year (July-June), beating the target of 291.1 million tonnes and 4.0 per cent higher than last year.” Despite such record foodgrain production, the additional support provided for the poor and informal sector workers, that were introduced as part of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) as well as the Atmanirbhar Bharat package, have all ended in October 2020. The budget for 2021-22 which was presented on 1st February 2021 has also not announced any new packages for additional support for poor and informal sector workers. Rather, the allocations for many social protection schemes including anganwadi services, social security pensions and so on have seen a reduction in real terms.<sup>3</sup>

As we found in the survey, the levels of hunger and food insecurity remained high with little hope of the situation improving without measures specifically aimed at providing employment opportunities as well as food support. Families are using different coping mechanisms – we have seen children being withdrawn from schools and sent to work, assets and jewellery being sold, money being borrowed to buy food, massive reductions in the quantity and quality of food consumed. These are some of the things that the ‘Hunger Watch’ documents in a systematic manner.

Further, there is a cause for concern in the recent NFHS-5 results for 22 states, that show that in most states there has been either a worsening or stagnation in malnutrition outcomes such as prevalence of stunting and wasting among children and high levels of anaemia amongst women and children. The NFHS-5 survey in the states for which the factsheets have been released was conducted in 2019, before the onset of COVID-19 or the lockdown. Stunting is an indicator of chronic malnutrition and is also considered to be one of the most sensitive indices of overall well-being in society. What the NFHS-5 available so far suggests is that not all was well even before the lockdown began. Based on various field surveys, including the findings of the Hunger Watch, it is likely that the situation post lockdown will be worse.

Malnutrition levels in India have always been high, with some improvements being seen in the last 10-15 years following Supreme Court interventions that universalised school meals and supplementary nutrition through ICDS and expanded Public Distribution System (PDS) (through orders passed under the ‘Right to Food’ case, PUCL vs Union of India, 2001 to 2015). These interventions

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2 [https://dea.gov.in/sites/default/files/MER\\_03122020%28F%29.pdf](https://dea.gov.in/sites/default/files/MER_03122020%28F%29.pdf)

3 See Right to Food Campaign’s releases on Budget 2021: Annexure 1



were further strengthened through the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013 which among other things guarantees 5 kilos of cereals per person per month at highly subsidized prices to 67% of the population through the PDS. While these entitlements do contribute to the overall food security of households and play an important role in preventing starvation, ensuring nutritious diets for all and eradicating malnutrition requires much more.

Multiple factors influence malnutrition levels and access to employment and livelihoods which is a critical determinant of household food security is central. Other services such as health, sanitation and hygiene contribute to preventing and treating illnesses, which can then prevent malnutrition as well. An enabling environment for child care in the form of maternity entitlements and creches is also essential. Better status for women within the household and the community has also been seen to contribute to reducing child malnutrition. However, for the likes of Sarita who migrate from the arid countryside to urban centres seeking work or through marriage, malnutrition becomes an instant corollary to the multiple forms of precarity and hardships they are forced to endure. While their resilience is indeed remarkable, the real question is why should the State disproportionately subject them to a test of resilience every single day of their existence. It is such a celebration of spirit that emerges from coercive structural violence that hides and erases government accountability of upholding the fundamental rights to live with dignity and equality.

## **How many are there and how are they living**

The last few years have seen precarity rise with the country facing the highest levels of unemployment, stagnant rural wages and a slowdown in economic growth. Rural wages in real terms have been stagnant for the last 6-7 years (Srivastava and Padhi, 2020). The Right to Food campaign documented over 100 hunger-related deaths<sup>4</sup> from across the country based on media reports and fact-finding investigations between 2015 and 2019. In this background, the stringent national lockdown and the rising spread of the pandemic has resulted in deep economic distress resulting in a crisis of livelihoods, food and healthcare. Although the lockdown has ended, it has been observed that the economic crisis continues. People who lost their jobs are yet to find replacements. Work, even where it is available, is even more irregular and for fewer days. For just 2 months of lockdown, for the informal sector, workers have suffered a wage loss of nearly Rs 653.53 billion which is almost the annual budget for the MGNREGA for 2020-21 (Estupinan and Sharma, 2020). The data

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4 [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fKfm69Hd3su-w8kY\\_kCsohPuC63qAz1bIVr\\_1-LTEQ8/edit?ts=5fce5765](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1fKfm69Hd3su-w8kY_kCsohPuC63qAz1bIVr_1-LTEQ8/edit?ts=5fce5765)

on economic contraction suggest that the impact on livelihoods has been severe and has affected women and Dalits, Adivasis, Muslims and women more (Abraham and Basole, 2021). The real GDP in India is estimated to contract by 7.7% in 2020-21 as per the advanced estimates released by the National Statistical Office (NSO).

The Hunger Watch team spoke to nearly 4,000 respondents across various socio-economic categories of vulnerability. Most of the respondents belong to the informal workforce. While the survey results may not be representative of the entire informal workforce, it nevertheless, presents a credible view of the situation of 90% of the workforce in the country.

There is variation in estimation of the absolute numbers of workforce in the country. Consequently, there is variation in the absolute numbers of those constituting the informal workforce. Depending on the chosen definition of employment, the estimated workforce in India for 2017-18 is between 439.2 million and 452.4 million (Nath and Basole, 2020). Only 4.2% of this workforce gets social protection that can be called a 'good job' or 'decent work' (Kapoor, 2020). Moreover, as per the Periodic Labour Force (PLFS) data from 2018-19, nearly three-quarters of this workforce are either self employed or casual workers who are completely out of the ambit of any employment benefits. What this means is that even assuming a highly conservative estimate, nearly 330 million workers in the country are bereft of any basic social protection. As evidenced by the massive exodus of migrant workers during lockdown, migration is an important dimension to assess the hunger situation. The last available data on migration is from 2011. According to the 2011 census, there are about 454 million migrants in India and nearly 28.3% of the Indian workforce are migrants. The 2017 Economic Survey estimates that there are 139 million migrant workers in India (Sharma, 2017). As per the report of the Working Group on Migration of the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation 2017), there has been a steady increase in the share of migrants in the workforce in the intercensal period between 2001 and 2011. The aforementioned report also observes that even though the official reason for migration of women is noted as 'marriage', a majority (~57%) of them constitute the female workforce in India. Many of these numbers don't accurately capture short term circular migrants.

Migration is likely to have increased further in the last 10 years owing to an acute rural distress. As per leaked Consumption Expenditure Survey from 2017-18, rural India has been more adversely affected between 2011-12 and 2017-18. If we rank the rural population from the poorest to the richest, and divide them into 10 groups (or deciles), we find that the Monthly Per Capita Consumption Expenditure (MPCE) fell for every group (Subramanian, 2019). This means that

consumption — and so income — in the entire cross-section of the rural society decreased. For example, the average monthly consumption levels of the poorest 50% of the rural population was ₹1,138 in 2011-12. This came down to ₹1,082 in 2017-18. Overall, the average monthly household consumption reduced from ₹1,430 in 2011-12 to ₹1,304 in 2017-18, a sharp decline of around 9%. In other words, more people have become poorer and hence have less money to spend on food and so are forced to migrate to urban centres for better income opportunities.

Typically males from relatively more food secure households tend to migrate while entire households from poorer economic profiles migrate. This further exposes them to higher levels of exploitation by their contractors, their children's education gets disrupted and pushes women to additional layers of exploitation. There is also a strong correlation between poorer households and those from historically marginalised communities like Dalits and Adivasis. Moreover, such migration implies that they are out of the coverage of the NFSA. This, in turn, means that a significant share of their daily income is spent on basic foodgrains and so access to nutritious food becomes less likely. Their children's education gets disrupted and many are forced to child labour. In terms of numbers, the hunger unleashed just on the migrant workforce in the country is akin to plunging the entire combined population of Germany and the United Kingdom on the brink of starvation. And, accounting for the remaining informal workforce in India, it is like saying that the combined populations of Germany, France, United Kingdom, France, Italy and Spain (~325 million) have been pushed to hunger without adequate food or health security.

The conditions of the likes of Sarita Tribhuvan are hard to metrize. In this context, it might be useful to recall the opening lines of Leo Toystoy's novel *Anna Karenina* "Happy families are all alike; Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." The complexity of the ordeals of the likes of Sarita Tribhuvan get buried in the cloak of arid numbers. The numbers in this report smooth out the complexities and paint an aggregate picture of hardship. Such normalisation of hardship needs resistance and collective action to rectify. The harsh realities of the millions who contribute to the growth of the country deserve to be treated better.

## Methodology

As mentioned above, Hunger Watch has been conceptualised as a continuous process of documenting the status of food security and hunger, as well as catalysing local action for relief and support mechanisms. In this context, the survey was a voluntary exercise in which members of the **Right to Food** campaign, **Karwaan-e-Mohabbat** with a number of other organisations/networks were invited to join.

The questionnaire and sampling methodology that will be used for the study was decided collectively over a series of meetings.

It was felt that the survey must be conducted face-to-face with communities with whom the local researchers will be able to work in future or are already working with. In these areas, the focus was on vulnerable and marginalised communities. Accordingly, there is over representation of some communities in the sample in specific states. For example, in Delhi, most of the sample is of homeless populations as the groups involved in the survey were largely those who work with the homeless. On the other hand, in West Bengal the sample includes agricultural labourers, tea garden workers, sex workers along with some other informal sector workers, as these are the areas and communities with whom the local organisations involved Hunger Watch work. In some states, individual volunteers participated in the survey – data from only those states that had surveyed at least 50 households have been analysed and included in the report.

To identify the households that would be included in the survey, local activists/researchers first identified vulnerable communities in rural and urban areas where the survey would be conducted. In each of these locations, group discussions were held with the community to identify the vulnerable households to be included in the survey. It was also decided that they surveyors would try to speak to adult women members of the household, and in case they are not available then the conversation would be adult male members. So, we find that a little over half the respondents were women.

In this report, the data related to 3,994 households across 11 states is presented. Given the purposive nature of sampling, marginalised and excluded communities are over-represented. 79% of the respondents had income less than Rs 7,000 per month before the lockdown. The survey also focussed on getting a comparative picture of the food security situation based on the perceptions of the respondents. Therefore, the respondents were asked to talk to us about their food security situation in the month before the survey was conducted (September - October) in comparison to what it was before the lockdown was imposed (February-March). Some further questions were also asked in comparison to the national lockdown period (April-May).

A simple questionnaire was developed and administered using smart phones. This is one of the few in-person surveys that have been conducted since the pandemic began. Inter-state comparisons are not possible with this data set because of the different sample sizes and profiles of the respondents. While the data being presented may not be representative of the district, state or country, they tell a story of deprivation of thousands of households in similar situations.

**Figure 3.1 State wise number of respondents**

State	Number of Respondents
Chhattisgarh	187
Delhi	146
Gujarat	403
Jharkhand	179
Maharashtra	249
Madhya Pradesh	558
Rajasthan	374
Telangana	81
Tamil Nadu	66
Uttar Pradesh	967
West Bengal	784

## Findings

The sudden loss of livelihood and the consequent hunger faced by millions after the sudden announcement of the lockdown has been well documented (Adhikari et al. 2020), (ActionAid Association (India) 2020), (Dvara Research 2020), (Kesar et al. 2020), among others. Many relief efforts and surveys highlighted the plight of the weaker sections of society immediately following the lockdown (SWAN 2020a), (SWAN 2020b). The Hunger Watch survey sought to understand the situation in October, 2020 compared to how it was before the national lockdown was announced on March 24, 2020. The survey also sought to understand if the situation in October had improved compared to the situation in April and May when the adverse impact of the lockdown was perhaps the worst. What is important to note is that the findings of this survey are in consonance with other similar surveys highlighting the continued distress among vulnerable communities even six months after the lockdown. The respondents were asked the following broad questions: (a) demographic details, (b) socio-economic profile (c) income and food consumption patterns before the lockdown, during the 2 months of lockdown and in October, 2020, and (c) Access to government rations.

In Section 4.1, we outline the demographic and the socio-economic profile of the respondents. In Section 4.2 we present a comparative picture of the food consumption patterns before the national lockdown was announced in March and in October, 2020. In some cases we present an interim picture of consumption patterns in April and May 2020. We present some findings comparing rural and

urban respondents. It's evident from the responses that urban residents were hit harder while the rural residents were able to cushion the blow to some extent due to availability of rations at PDS outlets. In Section 4.3, we discuss access to government rations since the announcement of lockdown.

#### 4.1 Profile of the respondents

Out of 3,994 respondents, 2,189 were female respondents and 1,777 were male respondents. 27 of the respondents were transgender and one of them did not wish to state their gender. The respondents were roughly equally split between rural residents and urban dwellers. A detailed (but non-exhaustive) set of 22 occupational categories were listed in the questionnaire. The main occupational category of the household was recorded by the surveyor. For the ease of presentation, the detailed set of occupations have been clubbed under five main occupational categories. Table 4.1.1 presents the five broad categories roughly mimicking the occupational categories as per the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) work categories.

**Table 4.1.1 Broad occupational categories**

Agriculture	Self-Employed (non-agriculture)	Regular wage/salaried workers	Casual labour (non-agriculture)	Other informal
1. Farmer 2. Tenant/ Share cropper	1. Artisan/ Weaver 2. Street Vendor 3. Other small businesses 4. Sex worker	1. Home-based worker 2. Factory worker 3. Health worker/ ASHA/ICDS 4. Teacher	1. Casual daily wage worker 2. Employed in eateries 3. Head loader 4. Construction worker 5. Rickshaw puller 6. Autorickshaw driver 7. Sanitation worker 8. Rag picker	1. Homemaker 2. Dependent on alms 3. Any other 4. Not Applicable

The respondents were also categorised based on the specific social and residential vulnerable categories they belonged to. Out of all the respondents, about 30% were Adivasis, 29% were Dalits, nearly 23% identified themselves as OBC and about 11% belonged to the 'General' category. About 4% belonged to the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) which were mostly in Jharkhand. Among the main religion categories of the respondents, nearly 64% of them identified themselves as Hindus, 20% as Muslims, about 14% as having their own Adivasi religion. Less than 2% were Christians and only 2 respondents were

Sikhs. Table 4.1.2 gives the household income profile before the lockdown. As can be seen from Table 4.1.2, roughly 79% of the respondents had a monthly income of less than Rs 7,000.

**Table 4.1.2: Household income profile before lockdown**

Monthly Household Income (in Rs)	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Less than Rs 3,000	1,625	40.69
Between Rs 3,001 and 7,000	1,498	37.51
Between Rs 7,001 and 15,000	419	10.49
Can't Say	367	9.19
More than Rs 15,000	85	2.12
<b>Overall</b>	<b>3,994</b>	<b>100</b>

The respondents were asked their primary sources of foodgrains in October, 2020. There were multiple overlapping sources for accessing foodgrains. 57% of the respondents depended on ration shops for foodgrains highlighting the criticality of the Public Distribution System (PDS) during the period. Nearly 42% bought foodgrains from grocery shops and about one in five respondents continued to depend on civil society organisations for foodgrains.

Table 4.1.3 summarises the differences between urban and rural respondents on some key parameters. In each of these, it compares the situation in October, 2020 with what it was before lockdown and all the responses are meant for the entire household.

**Table 4.1.3: Difference in rural and urban respondents on some key parameters**

Questions	Rural (in %)	Urban (in %)	Overall (in %)
No Income in October, 2020	26%	30%	27%
Income reduced by half or quarter	35%	52%	44%
Consumption of rice/wheat “decreased a lot” in October, 2020	17%	31%	24%
Consumption of dal “decreased a lot”	23%	35%	29%
Went to bed without a meal at night at least once	43%	55%	48%
Went to bed “sometimes” without a meal	22%	34%	27%
Had to skip a meal at least once	41%	58%	46%
Had to skip meals “sometimes” or “often”	23%	39%	30%

Nutritional quality of food had become “much worse”	36%	45%	40%
Nutritional quality of food is “more or less the same”	19%	9%	14%
Nutritional quantity of food has “decreased a lot”	21%	37%	28%
Need to borrow money for food has “increased”	38%	54%	45%
Any member of the household who didn’t work before is “seeking work” or “started working”	53%	57%	55%

As is evident from Table 4.1.3, across all the important parameters, on average, urban respondents reported at least 15 percentage point worse condition than the rural counterparts. Incomes reduced by half/quarter for more than half the urban respondents while it was a little over one-third for rural respondents. Consumption of grains and pulses were at least 12 percentage points worse for urban respondents. The rural-urban difference holds true even for nutritional quality and quantity of food intake. While 54% of the urban respondents had to borrow money for food, it was 16% lower for rural respondents and while 45% of the rural respondents had to skip a meal in October, 2020, in comparison, nearly two-thirds of the urban respondents had to skip a meal in October, 2020.

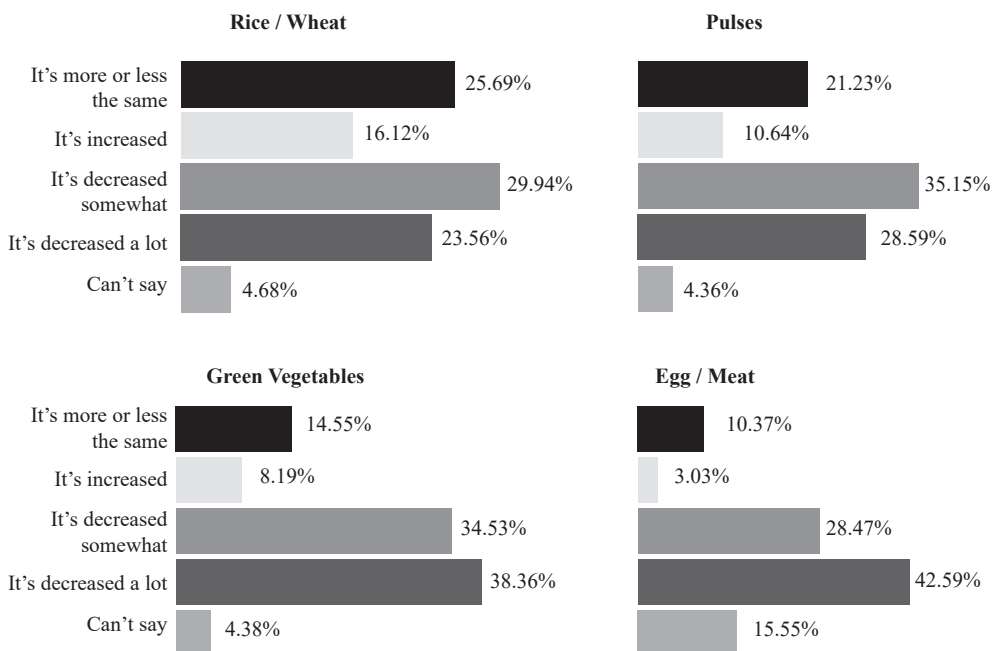
## ***4.2 Change in food consumption patterns and income***

We first look at the overall change in the consumption pattern of rice/wheat, pulses (dal), green vegetables, and eggs/meat. The baseline reference period for all the data in this section is before the lockdown was announced in March, 2020. As such, unless stated otherwise, all comparative statements are with respect to the baseline reference period. Figure 4.2.1 shows the change in consumption pattern in October, 2020 compared to the baseline reference period. The upper left panel of Figure 4.2.1 shows the change in the household consumption of rice/wheat. The upper right panel of Figure 4.2.1 shows the change in the consumption of pulses (dal/sambhar/dalma). The lower left panel of Figure 4.2.1 shows the consumption change for green vegetables and the bottom right panel shows the same for eggs/meat.

As can be seen from Figure 4.2.1, 53% of the respondents said that their rice/wheat consumption had decreased in October, 2020, of which about one in four respondents said that it “decreased a lot.” We also observed that the consumption either “decreased somewhat” or “a lot” for every income category for more than half the respondents. Nearly 64% reported that their dal consumption decreased in October 2020 compared to the reference period, out of which about 28% reported



**Figure 4.2.1: Change in Household Consumption of Rice/Wheat, Pulses, Green Vegetables, and Eggs/Meat in October 2020 Compared to March 2020**



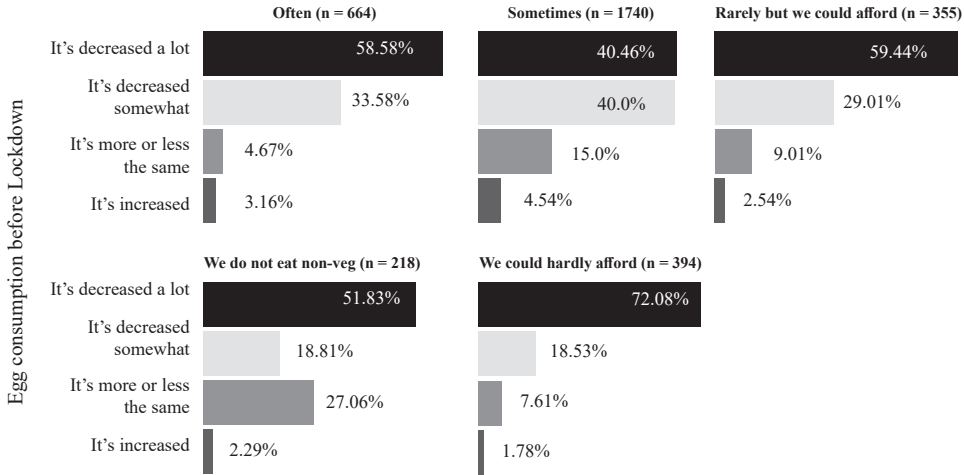
that dal consumption has “decreased a lot.” The decrease in consumption of green vegetables was starker than grains or pulses. 73% reported that their consumption of green vegetables had decreased and for about 38%, it “decreased a lot.” This was also visibly similar in the decreased consumption of eggs/meat. About 71% reported that their eggs/meat consumption had decreased of which about 43% reported that it “decreased a lot.” Indeed, the relatively less decrease in rice/wheat consumption compared to green vegetables, for example, could perhaps be attributed to the availability of the same through the PDS.

In fact, about one in seven respondents did not eat eggs even once in the month preceding the survey period and about 44% of all the respondents “rarely” ate eggs at this time. Similarly, about 11% did not eat fish/meat even once in the month preceding lockdown, about 45% “rarely” ate meat.

Since the focus was on marginalised communities, most people may not have been able to afford eggs/meat consumption even before the lockdown. The respondents were asked the frequency of eggs/meat consumption before the lockdown and they were also asked if the consumption has increased, remained the same, or decreased in October, 2020. In Figure 4.2.2, we show the change in

eggs/meat consumption in October, 2020 for each sub-group of respondents who during the baseline period used to eat eggs/meat often, sometimes, rarely but could afford, could hardly afford or if they didn't eat non-vegetarian food.

**Figure 4.2.2 Eggs/meat consumption in October, 2020 in comparison to frequency of eggs consumption before lockdown**



About 17% of our respondents said that they consumed eggs/nonveg “often” before the lockdown. Among them, 91% said that their eggs consumption has either “decreased somewhat” or “decreased a lot” and a staggering 58% said that it has decreased a lot. About 46% of the respondents said that they consumed eggs/meat “sometimes” before the lockdown and among them, roughly 76% reported that their eggs consumption has either “decreased somewhat” or “decreased a lot.” About 9.4% of the respondents said that they consumed eggs/meat “rarely but could afford” before lockdown and among them 84% said that their eggs consumption has either “decreased somewhat” or “decreased a lot.” Roughly 12% of the respondents could “hardly afford” to eat eggs/meat before the lockdown and among them 76% said their eggs consumption further decreased. Out of these people, only 6.3% said that their consumption of eggs in October, 2020 was the same as before lockdown and just 1.5% (7 respondents) said that it had increased.

We looked at the fish/meat consumption separately for each subgroup of people depending on their frequency of fish/meat consumption before the lockdown. For instance, those who rarely ate fish/meat before the lockdown, are unlikely to have increased their consumption in October, 2020. However, from a nutritional perspective, it would be useful to know the change among those who regularly or even occasionally consumed fish/meat before the lockdown. Among those who

ate meat “often” before the lockdown, nearly two-thirds of them “rarely” ate meat in October, 2020. Among those who ate meat “sometimes” before the lockdown, about 56% of them ate meat “rarely” or “never” in October, 2020 of which nearly 5.5% (103) people said that it was because “Corona spreads through meat.” About 40% in this category continued to eat meat “sometimes.” Among those who could afford eating meat but did so rarely before lockdown, about 74% have either eaten meat “rarely” or “never” in October, 2020 and of which 9% did not eat because of rumours of Corona being spread through meat.

**Figure 4.2.3. Sleeping at night without eating and skipping meals in October, 2020**

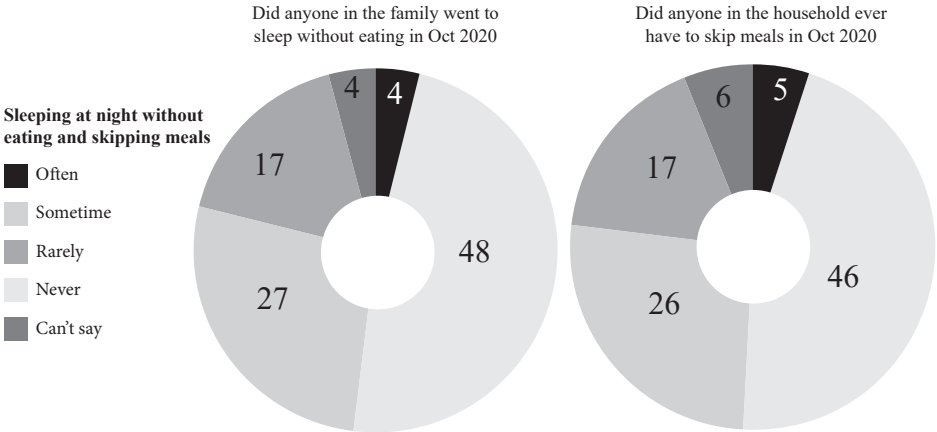


Figure 4.2.3 depicts if the respondents had to go to bed without eating or if they had to skip any meal in the month preceding the survey. 27% of the respondents had to go to bed without eating “sometimes” and about one in twenty had to go to bed without eating “often” in October, 2020. The numbers are similar for those who had to skip meals in the same month. Moreover, 56% of the respondents “never” had to skip meals before and there is a 10 percentage point increase in the number of people who had to skip some meal in the month preceding the survey period. In other words, the net of hunger has become more widespread as more people have had to start skipping some meal in a day. And, even among those who never had to skip meals before the lockdown, about one in seven had to skip meals “often” or “sometimes.” These are alarming. Seen in conjunction with the recent rounds of NFHS data, these are danger signals for unacceptable levels of hunger and malnutrition.

The respondents were asked if they were unable to cook a meal owing to shortage of cooking gas/coal/oil/wood. The respondents were asked also if they

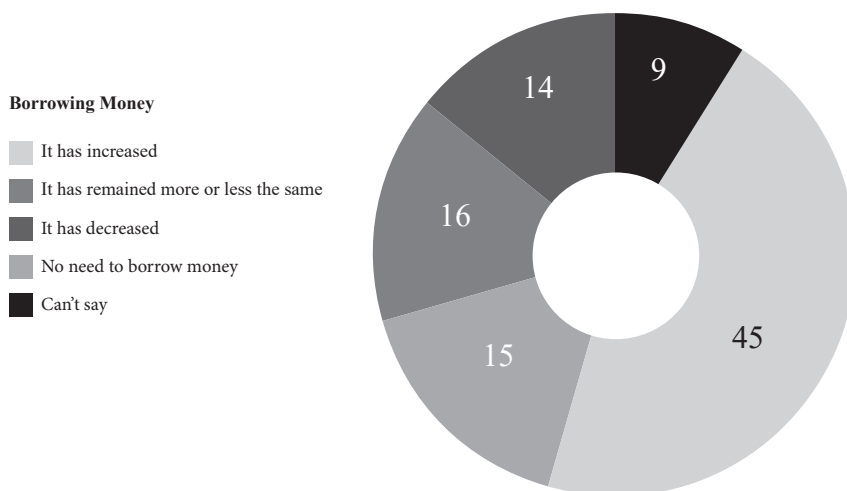
had to do this in the baseline reference period. The responses are presented in Table 4.2.1.

**Table 4.2.1: Unable to Cook Because of Shortage of Cooking Gas/Oil/Coal/Wood**

	Before Lockdown (in Feb, 2020) (% Respondents)	In October 2020 (% Respondents)
Never	57.13	47.57
Sometimes	19.81	27.66
Rarely	14.38	14.17
Often	4.14	5.76
Can't Say	4.54	4.84

While 57% of the respondents “never” had to forego cooking a meal because of shortage of cooking essentials before lockdown, it changed to 47% in September-October, 2020. What this means is that there is a 10 percentage point increase in the number of households that could not cook a meal because they did not have the money to buy cooking essentials. This is closely related to the household’s need to borrow money for food in October, 2020 as illustrated in Figure 4.2.4.

**Figure 4.2.4: Change in the household’s need to borrow money**

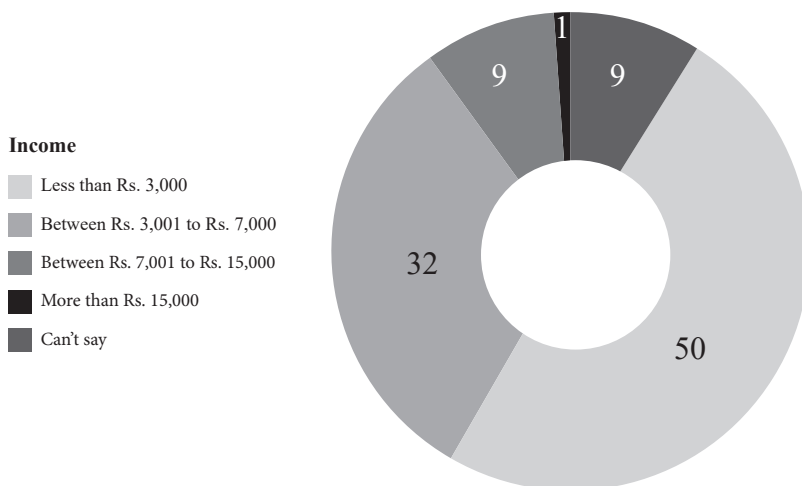


As Figure 4.2.4 indicates, a significant proportion (~45%) of the households said that their need to borrow money for food had increased in October, 2020 compared to the baseline reference period. Surprisingly, the need to borrow money was highest (~54%) among those whose income was between Rs 7,000 per month

and Rs 15,000 per month. Additionally, about one in six households had to sell their jewellery or other household items so that they could eat. As anticipated, the poorest had to face the maximum brunt and had to forego their belongings. This is depicted in Figure 4.2.5. **When spliced by the social category, the need to borrow money among Dalits was nearly 14 percentage points more than the overall and it was about 9 percentage points more among Muslims.**

Pushpa is a 40 year old women who lives in Kota and is a construction worker. She has three children. Her daughter has physically disability but has not received any pension since the lockdown. One of her sons got ill during the lockdown. The family had to borrow a lot of money since they were unable to afford the treatment and are now reeling in huge debt with no certainty on how to repay.

**Figure 4.2.5: Income category of households who sold their jewellery/belongings to eat**



As Figure 4.2.5 shows, nearly 82% of all those households that had to sell their jewellery or other household items so that they could eat, earned less than Rs 7,000 per month. Out of which, nearly 50% of the households earned less than Rs 3,000 per month.

Consider the case of Sumitra Haldar, a resident of Murshidabad district in West Bengal. Her husband used to work as a hawker in trains but he lost his livelihood since lockdown. Sumitra is now forced to work as a domestic worker from August, 2020. She had to sell her gold to repay an outstanding loan from a money lender. This cuts into their monthly income whereby they have to compromise on food consumption.

As has been well documented in numerous papers, reports and surveys the lockdown had a disproportionately debilitating impact on the livelihoods

and hence the earnings of the poor. Using the Consumer Pyramids Household Surveys of 174,405 respondents conducted by the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE), (Abraham and Basole 2021) show that informality increased significantly. An estimated 11 million jobs were fewer in December, 2020 compared to December, 2019 and the impact on women has been worse. 56% of the women experienced no recovery at all being unemployed in August, 2020 and in December, 2020. In conjunction with numerous civil society organisations, Azim Premji University carried out a survey of 4,942 workers in February, 2020, April-May, 2020 and in September-November, 2020. This survey also focussed on marginalised communities and the findings of this survey are similar to the Hunger Watch survey. Around one out of five workers did not find a single day of work in the month preceding the survey and nearly 70% reported to have reduced their food consumption (Nath, Mandela, and Gawali 2021).

Despite numerous appeals from academics and civil society organisations, and despite the horrific scenes of hunger and deprivation that the lockdown created, the Government of India (GoI) did not offer any income support for the poor. The sudden shock of the loss of employment coupled with lack of adequate social protection measures pushed the already marginalised into further precarity. This is further demonstrated in Table 4.2.2.

**Table 4.2.2: Change in household monthly income in October, 2020 compared to before lockdown**

Change in Income	Percentage of Respondents
No Income	27.33
Reduced by Half	23.97
Reduced by Quarter	19.74
Reduced Slightly	18.66
Income is Unchanged	6.18
Can't Say	4.11

From Table 4.2.2, we can see that a little over 27% of the households we spoke with had no source of income even six months after the lockdown was imposed. This is a marginal improvement from the fact that about 43% of the respondents had no income in April-May as per our survey. Out of those who had no income in April-May, only about 3% have gone back to income levels of what it was before lockdown while 56% of them continued to have no income in October, 2020. This indicates a persistence of unemployment for six months. For nearly a quarter of the respondents, the incomes had halved from pre-lockdown levels and for about

one in five households, the incomes had reduced by a quarter. Since the majority of the respondents already had low incomes to begin with, a further reduction in household income is akin to taking a bullet train to hunger.

The crisis and food insecurity has prompted more people to enter the labour force. The Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) measures the percentage of people in the working age who are either employed or seeking employment. According to the Hunger Watch survey, there is a staggering 55% increase in the labour force among the respondents. This includes about 15% of respondents who have had to enter the labour market and about 40% who are seeking work but have not got employment yet. In particular, given that December was the harvesting season, most farm labourers would have lost work and with no alternatives, the unemployment among our respondents would have increased in the post survey period. Indeed, as per the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy<sup>5</sup>, the unemployment rate increased to 9.1% in December, 2020; the sharpest rise since June, 2020. As per the report “The influx of people looking for work swelled. The labour force increased from an estimated 421 million in November to 427 million in December. But, labour markets were not ready for this six-million surge in labour. It thus left them largely unemployed.” The report further called it a “secular decline” in the sense that the fall in employment was not confined to one sector or one region. Moreover, there is perhaps a silent rise in child labour as well. For instance, consider this case. The Hunger Watch surveyors report the condition of Kakuli Debnath, a 35 year old single woman from Gajadharpara in West Bengal. She used to work as a domestic worker in a town but since lockdown she has had to move back to live with her parents. Her employers are unwilling to give her back her employment. With no income from March, 2020 and no school, she is forced to send her 7 year old son to work in a local grocery shop.

The data so far indicate a significant fall in consumption of foodgrains, pulses, vegetables, and eggs/meat. Further, we observe a steep rise in unemployment, and, as a corollary, a sharp fall in incomes. The respondents were also asked about the change in the overall nutritional quality and the overall quantity of food consumption in October, 2020 compared to the baseline reference period. Figure 4.2.6 shows the change in the nutritional quality of food by the income category of the respondents.

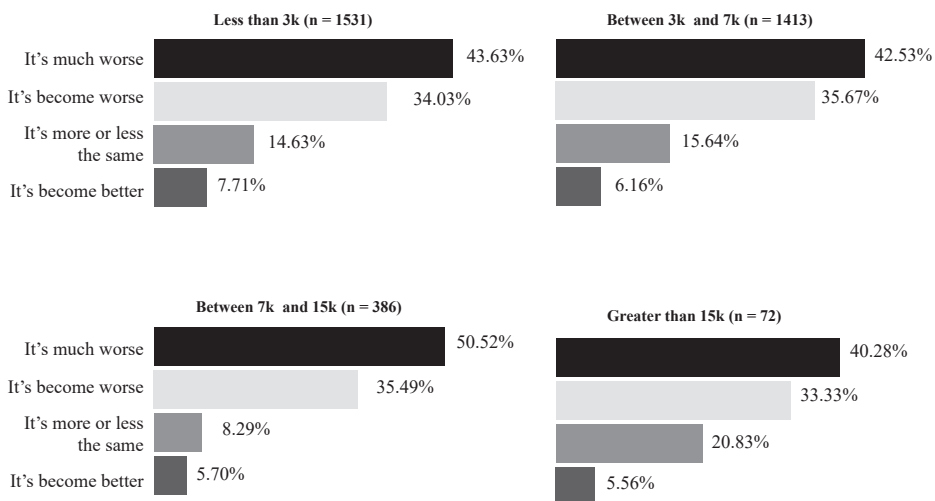
Overall the nutritional quality has worsened across income groups. All the incomes are per month figures. While nearly 78% (in income group < 3,000) and an equal number (in income group between Rs 3,000 and Rs 7,000) reported that their nutritional quality either “became worse” or “much worse” in October, 2020,

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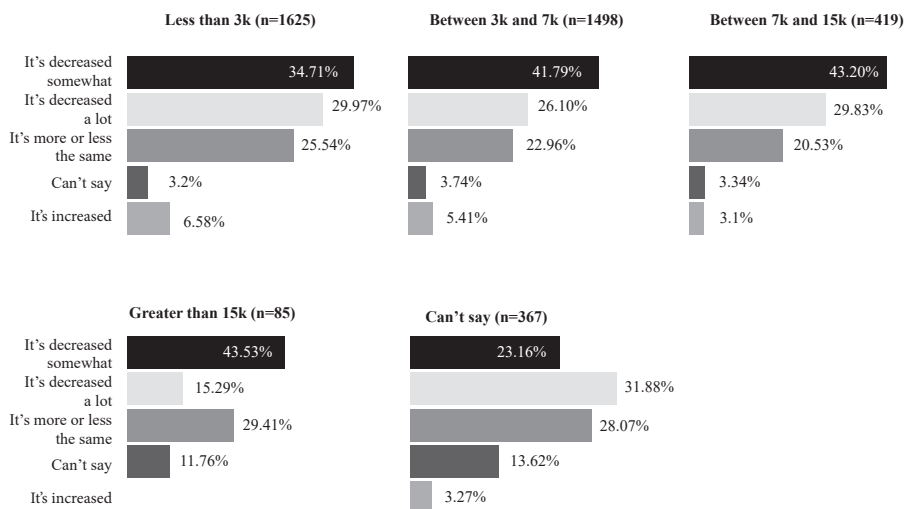
<sup>5</sup> <https://www.businesstoday.in/sectors/jobs/unemployment-rate-rises-to-6-month-high-of-91-in-dec-cmie/story/426893.html>

nearly 85% respondents in the income category between Rs 7,000 and Rs 15,000 reported that it “became worse” or “much worse.” And, of which, nearly half in this income category reported that it became “much worse.” In comparison, 63% in the highest income category (> Rs 15,000) reported that their nutritional quality had become worse or much worse. Figure 4.2.7 shows the change in the quantity of food consumption across income groups.

**Figure 4.2.6: Change in nutritional quality of food by income categories**



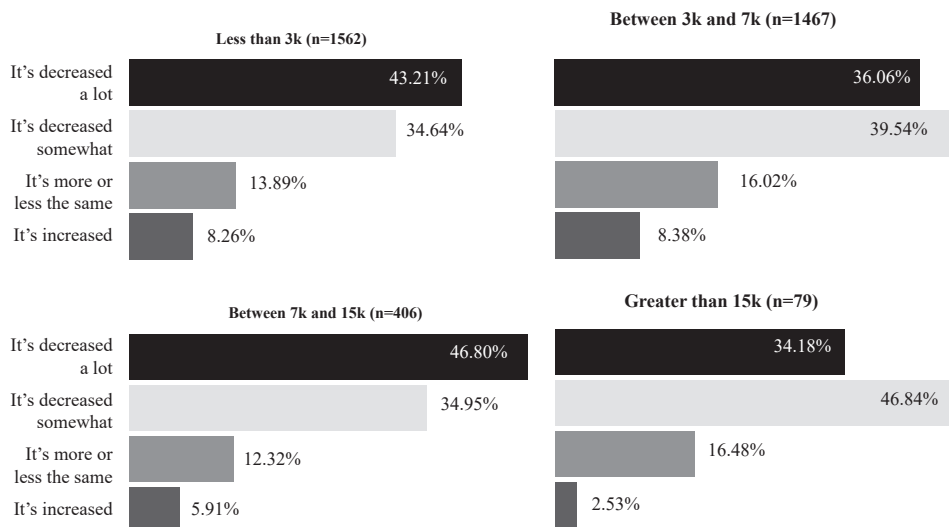
**Figure 4.2.7: Change in the quantity of food consumption by income category**





Roughly two-thirds reported that the quantity of food has either “decreased somewhat” or “decreased a lot” in October, 2020 compared to before lockdown. Once again, as can be seen, the decline in the quantum of food consumption is irrespective of the income category. Figure 4.2.8 shows the change in consumption of green vegetables by the income categories of the respondents. Once again, it is clear that there is a secular decline in consumption of green vegetables regardless of the income category. More than 3 out of 4 respondents across all income categories reported a reduction in consumption of green vegetables.

**Figure 4.2.8: Change in the consumption of green vegetables by income category**



### 4.3 Impact on specific social groups

In Section 4.2, we observed a broad pattern of change in food consumption and the impact of the lockdown on incomes and livelihoods. In this section, we present the findings spliced by income and other social categories such as caste and religion of the respondents.

We also looked at the impact of the lockdown on some vulnerable groups such as households headed by single women, households with people having disabilities, transgenders etc. Overall, about 71% reported that the intake of nutritious food became worse or much worse. But when disaggregated by socially vulnerable groups, we find that some were more drastically affected. This is illustrated in Table 4.3.1. It is evident from Table 4.3.1 that the impact on these communities is worse compared to the rest of the respondents. For nearly 79% transgenders

and other sexual minorities, income reduced by half or quarter. This was around 62% for survivors of domestic violence and about 50% for Muslims. Nearly 58% of the older people without caregivers had to go to bed without a meal. This was uniformly more than half of respondents in that category aside from Adivasis and transgenders. The other numbers are equally unflattering and a major cause for concern.

**Table 4.3.1: Impact on vulnerable groups on some key parameters**

Questions	Single Headed women households (n=627)	Disabled Persons in the household (n=262)	Older Persons without caregivers (n=176)	Survivors of domestic violence (n=52)	Transgender and sexual minorities (n=27)	SCs (n=1148)	STs (n=1200)	PVTG (n=159)	Muslims (n=800)
No Income in October, 2020	32%	36%	40%	17%	4%	29%	27%	29%	32%
Income reduced by half or quarter	45%	37%	37%	62%	79%	48%	34%	46%	50%
Consumption of rice/wheat “decreased a lot” in October, 2020	28%	21%	32%	46%	7%	30%	13%	22%	31%
Consumption of dal “decreased a lot”	35%	24%	39%	44%	7%	35%	18%	37%	34%
Went to bed without a meal at night at least once	56%	44%	58%	60%	22%	51%	37%	54%	60%
Went to bed “sometimes” without a meal	31%	24%	36%	35%	11%	36%	17%	13%	33%

Had to skip a meal at least once	52%	57%	35%	60%	22%	54%	39%	49%	59%
Had to skip meals “sometimes” or “often”	33%	22%	42%	42%	15%	40%	20%	34%	37%
Nutritional quality of food had become “much worse”	42%	37%	44%	50%	37%	52%	27%	34%	52%
Nutritional quality of food is “more or less the same”	11%	13%	13%	12%	4%	9%	20%	9%	6%
Nutritional quantity of food has “decreased a lot”	36%	28%	36%	42%	11%	39%	14%	35%	40%
Need to borrow money for food has “increased”	48%	41%	43%	50%	27%	59%	34%	45%	54%
Any member of the household who didn’t work before is “seeking work” or “started working”	53%	60%	54%	44%	18%	57%	49%	64%	67%

While overall, about 71% respondents said that consumption of nutritious food has either “become worse” or “much worse”, we observed that its impact on the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG) and Dalits were higher than rest of the social categories. Nearly 85% of the PVTG respondents said that it has either “become worse” or “much worse”, while this was about 77.5% among the Dalits. This pattern was visible even for change in the quantity of food being

consumed. While overall, nearly two-thirds reported a decline in the quantity of food consumption, it was higher for PVTG and Dalits. Nearly 3 out of 4 respondents among Dalits and PVTGs said that there has been a decline in the quantity of food consumption.

There were news reports during the peak lockdown in April-May that some people faced discrimination in accessing food because of their caste or profession. We sought to understand if that situation prevailed in October, 2020 as well. Table 4.3.2 presents the responses of the main categories we have in our sample.

**Table 4.3.2: Percentage of people reported to have faced discrimination to access food based on category/religion**

	SC (n=1148)	ST (n=1200)	PVTG (n=159)	OBC (n=930)	General (n=425)	Muslims (n=800)
<b>Often</b>	13.2	3.3	5.0	6.6	2.8	7.4
<b>Sometimes</b>	12.9	8.7	14.5	12.6	7.5	16.4
<b>Rarely</b>	11.4	7.4	8.9	12.7	10.9	17.4
<b>Never</b>	56.1	77.7	68.6	61.3	74.6	54.1
<b>Can't Say</b>	6.3	3	3.1	6.9	4.2	4.8

From Table 4.3.2, we can see that roughly one in four Dalits and one in four Muslims either faced discrimination “often” or “sometimes” when trying to access food in the month of the survey. This was roughly one in six among OBCs. This was less prevalent among Adivasis and those identifying themselves as belonging to the “General” category. It’s likely that discrimination reported by Adivasis was lower because of the community structures of living.

In addition to discrimination, there were other instances of threat and eviction. For instance, there were several informal settlers, migrant workers, along a road called Satya Marg at Ahmedabad in Gujarat. Each year, they would return to their native villages after Holi but last year the lockdown prevented that. They lacked any government identification card, their children were not enrolled in any Anganwadi Centre and did not receive any support from the government either. They were forced to borrow money from local moneylenders at high interest rates even to buy basic groceries. Their precarity is further amplified as they are constantly under threat of being evicted.

#### **4.4 Access to food schemes**

In the context of lack of employment opportunities and resulting loss in income as seen above, the food distribution programmes of the Government could play an

important role in mitigating some of the negative impact on food security. Under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 75% of the rural population and 50% of the urban population are entitled to five kilograms of foodgrains each month at highly subsidised prices. The households that have been identified as being eligible under the NFSA are given priority ration cards. Further, under the Antyodaya Anna Yojana (AAY), extremely poor households are given AAY cards through which they are entitled to 35kgs of foodgrains at subsidised prices irrespective of the number of members in the household. Each state has its own criteria for identifying the eligible households under priority and AAY categories, and there are a number of issues in identification resulting in exclusion of poor households from the NFSA benefits. Further, the population figures that are the basis for determining the number of priority and AAY cards are based on the 2011 Census and do not take into account the increase in population since. As pointed out by Khera, Dreze and Mungikar (2020)<sup>6</sup>, 100 million persons would additionally have to be included if the population estimates for 2020 are taken into account, in order to meet the mandate of the NFSA.

Despite these well-known exclusions from NFSA due to identification errors as well as using old population estimates, the additional PDS measures announced by the central government in the context of the national lockdown and COVID-19 were restricted to only those who are already covered by the NFSA. Therefore, under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana (PMGAY), an additional entitlement of 5 kgs of foodgrains per individual and 1kg of pulses per household for free was given for those who hold priority or AAY cards under the NFSA. This covered for 800 million persons across the country. While the PMGKAY, was first announced for three months (up to June 2020), it was later extended for another four months, up to November 2020. Further, in a number of states there are also other categories of beneficiaries who get subsidised grains, who are covered under various state schemes. These were however not included in the free grain provision under the PMGKAY.

In the Hunger Watch survey, we asked the respondents a few simple questions on whether they had ration cards, received their regular entitlements and for those who had NFSA rations on whether they received the additional entitlements of free grains. A number of other surveys, such as (Kesar et al. 2020), showed that although there were some gaps compared to the other relief measures such as cash transfers in various schemes, the PDS free rations had reached a larger number of people in the initial phase of the lockdown.

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6 <https://scroll.in/article/959235/100-million-indians-fall-through-gaps-in-food-safety-net-economists-urge-rethink-on-covid-19-relief>

**Table 4.4.1: Possession of ration cards among respondents**

Number of Respondents who had:	Total		Rural		Urban	
	Number	Percent	Number	Percent	Number	Percent
NFSA (Priority or AAY Cards)	1715	42.9	1227	56.1	488	27.0
Cards under State and other schemes	89	2.2	70	3.2	20	1.1
Yes, APL/General but don't get any grains on it	244	6.1	84	3.8	160	8.9
Yes, APL/BPL card with NFSA stamp card	981	24.6	518	23.7	463	25.6
No ration cards	931	23.3	275	12.6	655	36.2
Can't Say	34	0.9	12	0.6	22	1.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>3994</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>2186</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>1808</b>	<b>100</b>

From Table 4.4.1 we can see that about 43% of the respondents had NFSA ration cards and were therefore eligible for the additional free grains under the PMGKAY as well. Higher proportion of respondents in rural areas (56%) had NFSA ration cards compared to urban areas (27%). Additionally, 27% of the respondents had ration cards that gave them subsidised grains under various state schemes. 23% of our respondents had no ration cards - in urban areas this was 36% compared to 13% in rural areas. Further, 9% in urban areas and 4% in rural areas had APL or General cards. Under the NFSA, this category of beneficiaries do not receive any subsidised food grains. Therefore, based on the distribution of ration cards we can see that these social security schemes have a relatively better coverage among the rural poor when compared to the urban poor. While in normal times, the urban poor are slightly better off in comparison with higher wages and access to various facilities, the lockdown imposed highlighted the vulnerability of their lives with thousands of migrant workers having to immediately leave their place of residence and look for ways of going back to their villages. Many cities had arranged for public feeding centres, but these were in place for a very short period and were not adequate to cover all the urban poor who were in need. Having access to rations during this period would have been very useful for the migrants and other informal sector workers in urban areas.

As far as the distribution of ration cards among socially vulnerable categories is concerned, as can be seen in Table 4.4.2, in our sample the SC respondents (36%) had fewer NFSA cards compared to the overall sample (43%). The other categories had a higher proportion of the respondents with NFSA cards, as it should

be, as these groups are supposed to be prioritised for AAY and priority ration cards. Although the sample size is very small, it is seen that among transgender and sexual minorities and survivors of domestic violence there were very few who had NFSA ration cards.

**Table 4.4.2: Percentage of respondents belonging to socially vulnerable categories who have NFSA cards (Priority or AAY)**

Single women headed households (n=627)	48.7	Schedule Castes (SCs) (n=977)	36.4
Persons with disability houses (n=262)	45.8	Scheduled Tribes (STs) (n=1077)	47.5
Older persons without caregivers (n=176)	50.6	Muslims (n=659)	44.2
PVTGs (n=211)	65.4		
Transgender and sexual minorities (n=27)	7.4		
Survivors of domestic violence (n=52)	19.2	<b>Total</b>	<b>42.9</b>

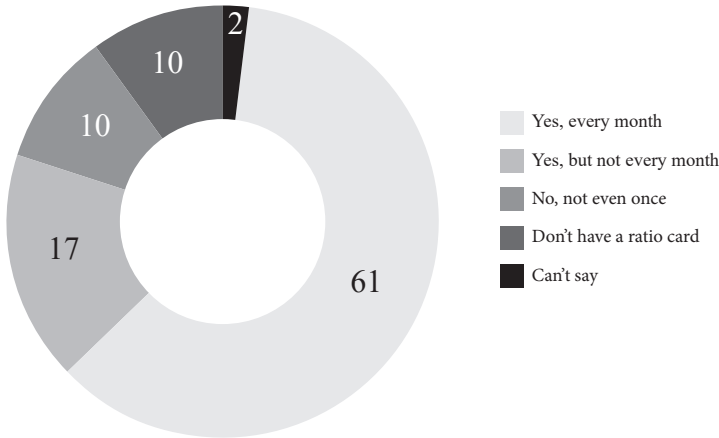
The entitlements under different kinds of ration cards were not uniform across all states. Given the nature of this survey which involved a short questionnaire - two simple follow up questions were asked regarding whether the respondents received any ration support or not. All the respondents were asked whether they received their usual ration entitlements during the period April to September, 2020 and those respondents who said that they had priority or AAY ration cards were additionally asked if they had received the free rice and dal under the PMGKAY during these months. Therefore, the former question was addressed to all the 3,994 respondents while the latter to the 1,715 respondents who were in the NFSA category.

Of all the respondents, 70% received their regular PDS entitlements between April to August 2020. 60% received these entitlements every month while a further 9.5% got their entitlements but not every month. The remaining 30% did not receive anything as seen in Figure 4.4.2. Further, as mentioned above, the 1,715 respondents who had NFSA cards were also asked about whether they received the additional free foodgrains and dal that was distributed under the PMGKAY. 69% of those with NFSA ration cards said that they did receive free foodgrains (rice and/or wheat) every month and an additional 19% said that they got it but not every month (Figure 4.4.2). Therefore, 88% of those who had NFSA ration cards benefitted to some extent from the free rations under PNGKAY.

In the case of dal, 64% of the respondents received dal/chana every month and an additional 28% said that they received it but not every month (Table 4.4.3).

Therefore about 90% of the NFSA cardholders among the respondents received the benefits of the PMGKAY. The problem however was of those who did not have NFSA cards (57%) and therefore were not entitled for the free grains under NFSA. Further, those who did not have any ration cards at all (23%) were not entitled for any benefits from the PDS.

**Figure 4.4.2: Percent of respondents receiving PDS foodgrains (usual entitlement)**



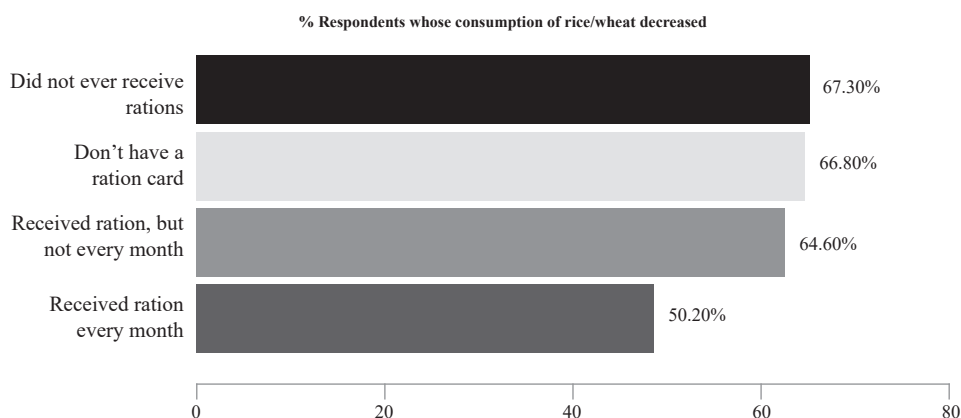
**Table 4.4.3: Distribution of free foodgrains under PMGKAY to NFSA cardholders**

Among NFSA card holders (N=1715)	Percentage of eligible respondents who		
	received free foodgrains - every month	received free foodgrains - but not every month	received any free foodgrains
Rice/Wheat	69	19	88
Dal/Chana	64	28	92

As seen in Figure 4.4.2, a large majority of the respondents had some kind of ration cards and received some PDS entitlements in the form of subsidised grain. Additionally, some also received free grains under the PMGKAY. Despite this, as reported in sections above many reported a decline in food consumption in terms of both quantity and quality. It can only be imagined how much worse the situation would have been in the absence of the PDS. In Figure 4.4.3 we look at those who said that their consumption of cereals in September/October had decreased in comparison to pre-lockdown months. There is a clear pattern where a smaller percentage of respondents who received regular PDS rations saying that their consumption of rice/wheat had reduced compared to those who didn't.



**Figure 4.4.3 Receiving PDS entitlements and change in consumption of rice/wheat**



With regard to other schemes specifically targeting women and children, the coverage was lower. 57% households with school going children (2,531 households) said their children received mid-day meals or alternative (dry rations/cash) in September-October. 48% households with young children/pregnant lactating women (2,125 households) said they received supplementary or alternative (dry rations/cash) from anganwadis during September-October 2020. Supplementary nutrition and mid-day meals are an important source of nutrition for children. They also help slightly reduce the burden of care work on the women in the household. With schools and anganwadi centres being closed these services were disrupted too. However, in March even before the national lockdown was announced (but schools/anganwadis were already closed), the Supreme Court had issued orders that children should continue to get food either in the form of take home rations or by receiving cash compensation for the meals they missed. The NFSA also has a provision for a food security allowance in case of any unavoidable circumstances, the meals are not being provided. Even six months after the lockdown however, it was found that the implementation of this aspect was very tardy with many children (and pregnant and lactating women) still not receiving the nutritional support. This along with disruption in other nutrition and health services, and the overall economic distress faced by the families, could have very serious implications on nutrition outcomes for children and women.

#### **4.5 Other forms of challenges/vulnerability**

There were other cases that the surveyors noted. In many places, during the lockdown and in its aftermath, several households suffered either some form of

health crisis or accidents or even deaths. Many of these are hard to capture and, in particular, reducing them to numbers would admittedly dilute the gravity of the issues the families have had to face. Take for instance, the case of Anita (name changed on request) from Darjeeling, West Bengal who is around 60 years old. Her pregnant daughter in law could not reach any hospital on time for delivery as they could not arrange transportation. The baby was still born and Anita's daughter died soon after. The trauma took the life of Anita's son-in-law as well who committed suicide. Anita is now left with three grandchildren to take care of two of whom are less than 5 years old. Given the dire state of affairs, the older grandson, who is barely 15 years old, has had to start working. They are unable to take their entitled rations from the shop as the shop is far from their home.

There are similar hard hitting narratives from elsewhere too. Prakash Bendkoli is a 26-year-old Adivasi man and is a resident of Nasik district in Maharashtra. He worked at a factory. Lack of regular health support during the lockdown meant that his wife had severe complications during her pregnancy. The child died within two days of birth.

Pinki is a 28 year old Dalit woman from Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh. Her husband met with an accident during the lockdown after which their financial condition worsened drastically. They had to sell all their belongings for his treatment and with no money left, they are now completely dependent on her parents.

In another instance, one of our surveyors noted the condition of Javed, a 34 year old resident of Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh. While riding his bicycle, he had met with an accident during the lockdown but was unable to find any treatment since the clinics and public health centres were not accepting non COVID patients. As such, even 4 months after the accident, his hand injury continues to be severe.

Haleem Begum is a 60-years-old woman who lives in Delhi. She sold clothes on the streets of Delhi for a living. During the lockdown, her son got severely sick. He was unable to breathe and also had severe gastric problems. These compounded and he also supposedly started bleeding during defecations. When he was taken to a hospital, the authorities denied admission which resulted in her son's death.

According to her Aadhaar card, Rani is 65 years old but looks over 70. She belongs to the Valmiki community and lives at Jagdamba Camp near Sheikh Sarai, South Delhi. She used to work as a domestic help before lockdown and she does not have any ration card. Her husband's relatives have snatched everything from her but allowing her to live in that house. Her son is no more and she is left to take care of her grandchildren. Their situation was bad even before lockdown and the lockdown worsened it further. Her 14 year old grandson had been pushed to be a rickshaw puller before lockdown and they had no income during the lockdown. Post lockdown, he gets infrequent work as a housekeeper. During lockdown the

family received hot cooked meals provided by the Delhi government and ration kits from some civil society organisations.

There was at least some positive news from Jharkhand. A few people reported that the Didi Kitchen run by the Chief Minister of Jharkhand was very helpful for the people. However, that too got reduced to just one meal a day after a few months after lockdown.

## **Discussion**

There is no doubt that the COVID 19 pandemic and the national lockdown has been an unprecedented crisis, the impact of which is still unfolding. While there is a lot of discussion, including in the Economic Survey, of a ‘V-shaped’ recovery in the economy as far as employment opportunities for those in the informal sector goes it is clear that things are not ‘back to normal’. The Hunger Watch results as presented in this report show that even six months after the lockdown ended incomes had not recovered to pre-lockdown levels for most people. The impact of this fall in incomes has been severe. Given the fact that the respondents already belonged to very low income households, a decline in incomes has meant increased food insecurity and hunger. In our survey, about one in ten households reported that there was some accident/death in their household that exacerbated their vulnerabilities.

Over two thirds of the respondents reported that in October 2020, the quantity of food they were able to consume was less than what it was before the lockdown, in February 2020. Seven out of ten respondents reported a worsening nutritional quality of diets. It was found that not only did people forgo more expensive foods such as eggs and meat, but also that there was a reduction in the quantity of staples consumed. Perishable items such as fruits and vegetables were difficult to access both due to availability and unaffordable prices. Multiple coping mechanisms were reported such as skipping some meals, going to bed hungry and buying food on credit. There were a number of instances where members of the household who were previously not active in the labour market, including children, have been forced to look for work.

When asked if they felt that the food security would improve in the next few months, there was scant expectation or optimism. Nearly one out of four households (925 hh) felt that the hunger situation would be the same while 31% reported (1256 hh) felt it would get worse. A significant number 36% were unsure how the hunger situation would change in the next few months while a mere 9% (364 hh) reported any semblance of optimism indicating that things would be better.

The survey found that even among this group of households that all belonged to the informal sector and from lower income categories, those belonging to socially vulnerable groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, PVTGs, Muslims as well as households with single women, aged, disabled were worse off. These households reported higher decline in consumption of food

One of the findings of the Hunger Watch, that is in line with various other reports, is that the pandemic affected the urban poor even more. A larger proportion of the urban respondents compared to rural respondents reported having no income or continuing to face a loss in come. Similarly, decline in nutritional quality and quantity was more among the urban respondents as was the need to borrow money for buying food. On the other hand, the data on the access to state support in the form of the PDS rations reached those in rural areas better, with a larger proportion of households in urban areas not having access to ration cards. This calls for special attention on social protection measures including schemes for provision of subsidised food and employment guarantee in urban areas.

On the whole, the survey found that three-fourths of the respondents had some kind of ration card (almost 90% in rural areas and about 65% in urban areas). Given that the survey targeted poor and vulnerable households, ideally all of them should have had a ration card. Almost 70 percent of the respondents also reported getting some subsidised rations from the PDS. However, only 57% of the respondents had NFSA cards which gave them additional free grains as part of the covid relief measures of the government and most of them reported receiving these additional benefits. Therefore, we find firstly that the PDS did reach people who were eligible and included in the system and secondly, that those who were not already part of the system remained excluded. Further, it was also quite clear that the PDS was a lifeline for those who got it - without it the situation of food insecurity would have been worse. At the same time, it is also the case that the PDS support was really minimal and despite getting it such high levels of hunger have been reported. The coverage of the other schemes such as mid-day meals and ICDS were not as encouraging with only about half the respondents getting these. With the government allowing the opening of anganwadi centres in November, hopefully this has improved.

While this is the situation on the ground, some of the policy and legislative developments in the last few months are such that they could make the situation much worse. The four labour codes that have been brought in, it is feared will disempower the informal sector workers and make their access to wage employment even more precarious thereby affecting their ability to buy food (EPW Editorial, 2020), (Shyamsundar, 2020a), and (Shyamsundar, 2020b)<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, the three

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<sup>7</sup> Read here, here, and here for a critique of these codes.

farm Acts, as is being argued by the farmers' movements, endanger the entire procurement mechanism and hence the PDS itself.

In the present situation of hunger and malnutrition, it was expected that there would be some special announcements in the Union Budget 2021 to address this issue. Unfortunately, the budget has actually reduced the allocations for crucial food and nutrition schemes such as the ICDS, mid-day meals and maternity entitlements. The revised estimates for 2020-21 show that anganwadi services and PMMVY suffered greatly because of the lockdown and closing of anganwadi centres. The revised estimates for PMMVY is only around half of what was allocated. This itself was low as the scheme covers only the first child and gives an entitlement of ₹5000 while the National Food Security Act entitles all pregnant women to a maternity benefit of at least ₹6000. Studies based on nationally representative data from the CMIE also show large livelihood losses and a dramatic increase in inequality. During the first six months of the pandemic (March to August 2020), the average household had 17% lower income relative to what they earned in the corresponding six months in the previous year. This is equivalent to losing 36 days of income. Even worse, the bottom 10 percent of the households lost three months of income in this period. In this context, one hoped that the budgets for NREGA would be increased from the revised estimates of FY 2019-20. However, the current allocations are 34.5% lower than the revised allocation of the pandemic year. Moreover, given the massive shock experienced by the urban poor, it was hoped that there would be an announced of an urban employment programme. That also did not happen.

Different schemes have been clubbed making comparisons difficult, but it is clear that overall these programmes have been undermined. The budget for SAKSHAM anganwadi services which includes anganwadi scheme along with POSHAN abhiyaan and some other schemes has a smaller allocation for 2021-22 than what was allocated for the anganwadi scheme alone in 2020-21. The mid-day meals scheme also sees a reduction in allocation this year compared to the revised estimates of last year. The same is the case for the social security pensions which saw a slight increase in the revised estimates, probably because of the one-time payment of ₹1000 that was made as a part of covid relief.

There is also no announcement in the budget to expand the PDS to include those who are excluded from the NFSA, to update the population estimates used for the NFSA to current figures or to include items such as dal and pulses. While it seems like the food subsidy has increased, this is only a reflection of the central government finally paying the FCI for the grains distributed over the last few years.

As seen in Hunger Watch, even after the lockdown the distress among marginalized communities continues with people having lower incomes and

reduced food consumption. On the other hand, the results of the NFHS-5 point to the worrying situation of poor improvements in malnutrition levels in the country after 2016. In this context, what was required was much greater allocations for all these schemes. The need therefore is to ensure universal access as well as expanded entitlements during this period of crisis.

## **Recommendations for state response:**

In the background of the findings of the Hunger Watch and declining budgetary support, we make the following recommendations:

1. A universal public distribution system that provides every individual with 10 kg grain, 1.5 kg pulses and 800 gm cooking oil for at least the next six months.
2. Nutritious hot cooked meals, including eggs, through anganwadi centres and school midday meals to be distributed while following all safety guidelines related to distancing, sanitisation etc.
3. No mandatory fortification of any food product
4. Universal child care services with a priority to those who are most affected by the COVID pandemic.
5. Revival of all services of ICDS, including growth monitoring, additional supplementary nutrition for severely malnourished and nutrition counselling.
6. Maternity entitlements under the Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojana without any restrictions on number of births or conditionalities to be met.
7. Enhanced social security pensions of at least ₹2000 per month for old people, single women and disabled persons.
8. Repeal of the Farm Acts and steps to guarantee MSPs not just for rice and wheat but also pulses, oilseeds and millets.
9. Strengthening of the FCI and setting up systems for decentralised procurement of a wide variety of food crops while linking these to food distribution schemes such as PDS, mid-day meals and ICDS.
10. The Food Corporation of India (FCI) was created to save Indians from hunger. It also ensures farmers get Minimum Support Price (MSP). Despite the additional grains being provided as part of COVID relief, the additional budgetary provision for FCI in the supplementary budget is only Rs 10,000 crores. This continuous underfunding of the FCI means weakening of price support to farmers and pushing them also into further debt. Government of India should provide adequate budget to strengthen the system of FCI.

11. Ensure 200 days of employment per household under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) under the statutory minimum wages. Ensure timely payment of wages.
12. Even in urban India, wages for casual work remain abysmally low. Given the lack of social protection and the increasingly private provision of public goods like healthcare and education, a rise in the wage rate from very low levels is not only desirable but urgently needed. As such, there is an urgent need to create a National Urban Employment Guarantee Programme. Variations of this have already been operational in a few states such as Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, and Jharkhand.

### **Further action points for campaigns and organisations:**

Constituents of the Right to Food campaign have been planning a number of follow-up activities based on the Hunger Watch study and report. The following is a list of such actions that can be undertaken by any organisation/group that would like to take up the issue of hunger. Conduct periodic studies based on this baseline report.

1. Send letters to different commissions such as the SC/ST Commission, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), the National Commission for Women (NCW), the corresponding state commissions, the Chief Justices of respective High Courts and the Supreme Court seeking intervention along with this report.
2. Send formal letters with the report to state food commissions.
3. Ensure that all those households that participated in the survey but did not have entitlements are brought under the entitlement cover.
4. Urgently seek suggestions and ensure that specific vulnerable communities such as the homeless, the Denotified Tribes, sex workers etc are enrolled into food schemes. Ensure state-wise actions around these.
5. Conduct workshops to understand the implementation of schemes for children by campaign groups with the Anganwadi Workers and Sathins, Sahyoginis and MDMS workers who have lost their jobs in COVID despite some of them being frontline workers.
6. Ensure the setting up of statewise units to ensure food security for migrant workers and their families.
7. Ensure mandatory conduct of social audits on a periodic basis.

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Excerpts from the book, *Locking Down The Poor: The Pandemic and India's Moral Centre* by Harsh Mander, published by Speaking Tiger.

*'I won't die of corona. Before that I will die of hunger.'*

I am in Old Delhi with a group of young friends, volunteers of Aman Biradari's Karwan-e-Mohabbat campaign, trying to feed homeless people in a small, almost helpless gesture of solidarity. It is only the third day after the prime minister announced a countrywide lockdown in a bid to contain the COVID-19 pandemic, and I have already heard these words spoken more than a dozen times. Through the dire weeks and months that are to follow, I will hear them repeated hundreds of times.

On a hot summer afternoon in early April, two weeks after the lockdown was imposed by the Indian government, our food van is in Kashmere Gate, parked near the now-deserted interstate bus terminal. A young man with his face wrapped in a white hanky is awaiting his turn to receive the cooked meal we are serving. He erupts in rage, 'The government is asking us to stay inside our homes. Does it expect us to break the walls and eat the pieces?' When he reaches the head of the queue, he is shaking, and he breaks down as he accepts the khichdi and pickle.

It is evident by now that India has plunged deep into what will probably be the greatest humanitarian crisis that most of us, barring those who lived through Partition and the Great Bengal Famine of 1943, have seen in our lifetimes. But it is not always as clear that the devastating crisis was spurred but not created by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is the direct consequence of public policy choices that the union government has made, particularly of imposing the most massive, most stringent lockdown on the planet and in human history without notice on the entire country—a country the size of a continent, which is home to the largest number of people immersed in poverty; which ranks 102 out of 117 countries in the Global Hunger index; a country with an unemployment rate of over 24%, with 92% of its

total labour-force comprising informal workers; and a country with some of the lowest spending in the world on public health and social security.

Literally within days of the overnight closure of the country's economy, we have begun to see the rapid, burgeoning of signs of mass hunger, visible first in the cities: People spending long, humiliating hours in lines, sometimes stretching over two kilometres, for a ladle of basic, often watery, hastily cooked and cold food.<sup>1</sup> Dazed and desperate women and men, even children, rushing down empty roads unmindful of the 'curfew', enduring police lathis, scrambling over each other when there was news or rumour of food being distributed.<sup>2</sup> These are scenes I saw rarely decades back during famine-like droughts in the countryside as a district officer. Never before in a city.

During the many days through the lockdown that my colleagues and I walk the streets of Delhi to offer cooked food and dry ration packs to as many people as we can, it is apparent that hunger has deluged the Indian capital. Hundreds of thousands are diminished and depleted by a gnawing, constant longing for a full stomach, and the shame of not being able to feed those they love. This is a torment and humiliation that people who have not experienced involuntary hunger can never know.

The first to be swept away by this entirely human-made flood of hunger are the city's homeless. It is almost immediate, because most among them have no savings or stores of food to tide them over a single day. The Karwan-e-Mohabbat van drives with cooked food to a street corner in the Walled City of Delhi, called Company Bagh. Situated between the Old Delhi Railway Station and the Chandni Chowk Town Hall, this is a 'labour adda'. Here, on any ordinary morning, you will find gathered maybe a thousand homeless men and some women, offering their services for casual work to anyone, practically on any terms—they are desperate for work and powerless to bargain for a decent daily wage. Within days of the lockdown their numbers have swelled many times. People squat on the pavement and the edge of the road as far as the eye can go. A young man from Nepal says to us, 'I haven't seen a roti for four days. And to think that I earned my living making rotis in a tandoor. Most days I would earn five or six hundred rupees. Today I'm waiting for hours for your khichdi.'

There are many skilled workmen like him in the food queue, he tells us. The word he uses is 'karigar', artisan. Several other voices join his, speaking of their

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1 Lalwani, V. & Sharma, S. (2020) 'Watch: In Delhi, hungry people join a 2-km-long food queue in peak afternoon sun.' Scroll, 18 April. Available at: <https://scroll.in/article/959565/watch-in-delhi-hungry-people-join-a-2-km-long-food-queue-in-peak-afternoon-sun>

2 Mander, H. (2020) 'State's measures to fight coronavirus are stripping the poor of dignity and hope.' *Indian Express*, 27 March 2020. Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown-poor-6333452/>

work in dhabas, small restaurants and roadside eateries, and now the irony and agony of their hunger. ‘We have no family, no Aadhar card, just our hands to work with. We would work hard all day and collect four-five hundred rupees, we would sleep on the streets. But we didn’t starve and we managed to send money home. What can we do now, when all our work is snatched away from us?’

They often name the prime minister in their bewilderment and wrath. ‘Why has Modi ji done this to us? If we are hungry, will we not be more at risk of catching the disease?’ I wish Modi ji would give them an answer.

As the men rush to steady an elderly blind man, who even in normal times survives on alms. A woman approaches us, holding her small baby. She was returning to her village in Bihar, she tells us, when trains were suddenly cancelled the night the lockdown was announced. Strangers - a family in a hut near the railway station - took pity on her and gave her food. ‘But how long can I depend on them?’ she says. ‘They are also without work and food now.’

Yamuna Pushta is a stretch of land on the banks of the river, just adjacent to the Nigambodh cremation ground. Normally there are about 4000 near-destitute homeless men who live there. In the early days of the lockdown, their numbers have gone up to well over 10,000, as the homeless from other locations have converged there, as have stranded migrants, in the hope that food charities will reach them because of the large numbers there. A legendary Sardar ji (who insists on remaining anonymous) has fed a few thousand homeless people in the area every single day for the last 15 years. Even he is shocked, and submerged, by the levels of hunger and destitution he suddenly encounters now.

The lines are far longer at the Pushta than even at Company Bagh. The men squat in a line, bodies pressed against each other, their manifest desperation making a mockery of the mindless official platitude of ‘social distancing’. The rumour of food being supplied somewhere is enough to spark a near-stampede as men fall over each other to reach the spot. Wone, the old and the disabled among them are left far behind, empty-handed, empty-bellied.

Another morning, in Nizamuddin Basti, home to thousands of destitute families living on the streets, people tell us that their food stores and money are exhausted. Children crying for milk are given tepid black tea. A woman tells us, ‘If we eat the little that we have at night, there is no food in the morning. If there is food in the morning, there is none at night. We try to kill our hunger with tea. But a glass of tea costs ten rupees, four of us share this between ourselves.’

And here again we encounter helpless, powerless rage. ‘How can we survive without work, you tell me? They are killing the poor like dogs,’ a man cries. An old man joins us. ‘I was begging at a traffic light,’ he says, ‘I was hungry, and also

longing for a cup of tea. But the police beat me with their lathis. Do you see the blood on my pyjamas? This is what they are doing to us.'

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Soon after, hunger has reached the “unauthorised” slums that are crunched up between middle-class enclaves across the metropolis, outside the leafy central zone with sprawling colonial bungalows and large, airy flats reserved for government ministers, members of Parliament and top bureaucrats. Among the many perks of these men and women of power is a view of wide avenues and hushed lawns that separates them from the world that the vast majority of their fellow Indians inhabit. It is sobering to think that in the heart of this island of extreme privilege live the men who imposed the lockdown.

One hot day in the middle of April, as I walk past a shanty of bamboo and plastic sheets during our food distribution in Majnu ka Tila, a woman cooking outside over a fire of twigs in a brick chullah hurriedly covers the vessel with the edge of her sari. 'I'm ashamed,' she explains simply to me. She feels disgraced that she's cooking the feet of chickens, which are usually thrown away as waste. 'What can we do when there is no money?' I squat on the ground beside her, and try to tell her that it is not she who should be ashamed, but the government which has driven her to this. She's doing all she can to feed her family, she should hold her head high. But even as I say these words I wonder what they can mean to her at a time of such trial.

Another woman suddenly breaks down as she speaks with us. 'We heard someone was distributing food at the school. We ran there, but by the time our turn came there was no food. They only gave us two bananas.' She turns her face away from us to hide her tears, wiping them away with the edge of her frayed sari. 'Come into my home and see for yourself. The stove is cold, it hasn't been used for many days. How can I light it when there's nothing to cook?'

In this crowded slum littered with broken and rotting waste, most people survive in normal times by carving stone silvattas for grinding chutney, and others by pulling cycle rickshaws, rag-picking or domestic help. All of this is halted overnight. Some of the children, desperate and hungry, gather at the traffic lights to beg but they are driven away by the police; in any case, when the whole city is locked down, who is there to beg from?

The situation is no different in the low thatch and plastic-roofed shanties in the shadow of Tughlaqabad fort. Here, families go from house to house bartering vessels in exchange for old clothes. Some of them supplement the meagre family

income by ragpicking, and a few of the older people by begging. A young woman with a listless baby at her hip speaks into the camera held by one of my young colleagues who is interviewing people affected by the lockdown. The woman addresses Prime Minister Modi and Chief Minister Kejriwal. ‘Is this the state you want to reduce us to?’ she asks them piercingly. Another says, ‘We fear that we are fated to die. They say this corona will go on for a year. They will later say we died of corona. But actually we would have died of hunger.’

Everywhere we travel around Delhi for our food distribution, we are engulfed by complaints of poorly cooked food—undercooked rice and watery dal, almost always cold. And rice in any case is not the staple of many people in North India. Food often runs out as lines stretch sometimes for kilometres, leading to despair and frustration, frayed tempers, and sometimes small stampedes. Many food relief groups like the Karwan team quickly learn that what is most useful and least undignified is to assemble dry packets of rice, flour, dal, oil, masala and soap to last a family of five for ten days each, and this is what we are able to reach them with. Many other groups do the same. We learn, but the governments don’t.

Our volunteers also get calls from collectives of sex workers about how work has completely dried up. Many home-based sex workers are migrants from Hindi-speaking states, and do not have ration cards or Aadhar cards with a Delhi address, therefore are excluded from state assistance. They speak to us of begging shopkeepers for rations on credit and the men expecting sexual favours in return. Several survive only with the ration kits we are able to supply every ten days.

Belatedly, the Delhi government announces that e-coupons would be issued to those without ration cards. But, as we will see in the later pages of this book, this requires both a smartphone and proof of a Delhi address, thus excluding both the vulnerable people and migrants whom the scheme was meant to include.

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With the economy shattered, it does not take long for hunger to eventually overwhelm the already chronically indigent countryside. But in urban India it has already engulfed large populations who either had not known hunger or who had escaped it with their passage to the city. It is true that even before the lockdown hunger was not unknown in cities. For destitute homeless people, as for old people without care-givers and disabled people without personal support systems, there is never a time when hunger is not just a heartbeat away. But most times it is kept at bay. If you are willing to do even the most humiliating, unprotected, exploitative work—manually cleaning or sorting waste, pulling rickshaws, doing daily-wage

or casual sex work—at least subsistence-level employment is mostly at hand. And when even that fails, there are gurudwaras, dargahs and temples where you can get some food to stay alive.

It is this everyday reality of urban India which the lockdown altered calamitously.

While India has not been releasing health and nutrition figures since 2014, data from 2011-12 confirm that the lowest ends of the city populations just hang in even in normal times barely a step away from the steep cliff of hunger.<sup>3</sup> 2160 kilocalories per day is widely accepted as the lower threshold of the average daily consumption of energy necessary for a healthy individual. Official studies showed that 59% of the bottom 5% and 47% for the next 5% of urban households were unable to consume even this minimum calorie intake. The result is widespread malnutrition: almost a million children in Delhi have undergone stunted growth from malnutrition.<sup>4</sup> The only official report on nutrition released by the government recently, the National Health and Family Survey 2015-16, shows that 31% of urban children under five years of age are malnourished and 29% are underweight. An analysis of the National Family Health Surveys conducted between 2006-2016 revealed 1.5 to 1.8 times higher prevalence of thinness, short stature, and moderate to severe anaemia among urban poor women compared with urban averages for women. The data demonstrated that ‘among urban poor mothers, 12.8% were short, 20.6% were thin (3.5% being severely thin), 13.7% were overweight, 21.1% were obese, 57.4% had any anaemia, and 32.4% had moderate to severe anaemia.’<sup>5</sup>

This means that a huge chunk of urban poor - casual workers, homeless people, and residents of shanties - were already living at the edge of the precipice of hunger when the lockdown-induced hunger crisis was thrust upon them. The government can hardly claim it was ignorant of the reality of these dispossessed people, who without food and work would inexorably plunge into starvation.

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3 National Statistical Organisation. (2014) ‘Nutritional Intake in India, 2011-12 NSS 68th Round (JULY 2011 – JUNE 2012)’ Government of India, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation. October. Available at: [http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/nss\\_report\\_560\\_19dec14.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/nss_report_560_19dec14.pdf) (Accessed 20 August 2020)

4 Boga, D. (2015) ‘Why malnutrition is growing in rising, urban India’, *Business Standard India*, 3 June.

5 Sethi, V., Wagt, A. de, Bhanot, A., Singh, K.D., Agarwal, P., Murira, Z., Bhatia, S., Baswal, D., Unisa, S. & Subramanian, S.V. (2020) ‘Levels and determinants of malnutrition among India’s urban poor women: An analysis of Demographic Health Surveys 2006 and 2016’, *Maternal & Child Nutrition*, 16, e12978.

The indignity and torment of hunger, even in a pandemic, even during a lockdown, is entirely preventable. To save its people from this preventable suffering is the most elementary duty of the state.

But the Indian state today is adrift, bereft of vision, administrative capacity, a sense of urgency and public compassion.

The privileged Indian for too long has been comfortable with some of the most unconscionable inequalities on the planet. In its response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Indian government aligned itself entirely with this India of privilege. The lockdown exacerbated the already deep fractures in Indian society, as it destroyed the fragile livelihoods of those at the lowest depths of this teeming country, leaving them exposed and vulnerable to disease and further destitution not only for the present but for years to come.



## Hunger Watch Questionnaire

### *Note for surveyors*

Please explain the purposes of the Hunger Watch survey clearly to all the respondents in advance. Say that we are aware that people are suffering a lot after the lockdown led to job loss and other difficulties. This survey is to speak to a few people across the country, in cities and villages, and to ask them how their life is unfolding, particularly in relation to their access to food and possible experience of hunger. This is to inform governments about the situation, to pressurise them to do more to help people in this difficult time. But the purpose is not to extend assistance specifically to those we are interviewing.

Please make no assurance to the respondents that you will try to help them, because we should not raise false hopes, and also because their answers may be different if they feel this will influence the support they will receive from you. But although you will give no assurance before the survey, it is our duty to try to assist them as much as we can after the survey is over.

Also, you may have many observations about their conditions. At the end of each interview, please verbally record your observations about the situation of the respondent on your phone.

For all questions with options (a) Often (b) Sometimes (c) Rarely (d) Never, please use your own judgement based on the monthly consumption of the household. For all questions where respondents are asked their consumption before lockdown, you could use festival markers such as ‘before Holi’ to indicate the time period or ask how it was in the month of February 2020.

### *Method for choosing the households:*

#### **(a) Rural/Urban Areas**

Select neighbourhoods/hamlets: In doing so, give priority to Dalit, Adivasi, Denotified Tribes (DNT), Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) and Muslim neighbourhoods.

In a neighbourhood/hamlet, conduct a meeting where the following question is asked:

*“Which are the households in this neighbourhood that have not been getting regular rations?”*

Make a list of at least 20 such households and survey those households. Unless not possible for some reasons, interview the female member of the household.

### **(b) Membership based collectives**

Choose a neighbourhood/cluster where there is membership.

From this, follow the same process as above for rural/urban areas (step 2 and 3) and interview at least 20 members

Examples of occupationally vulnerable groups are – landless farm workers, tenants, marginal and small farmers, forest gatherers, weavers, casual daily wage workers, home-based workers, street vendors, ragpickers, sex workers, rickshaw pullers, employees of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), sanitation workers, frontline health workers etc.

Examples of socially vulnerable groups are - single women headed households, households with persons with disability, households of older persons without caregivers, PVTGs, trans people and other sexual minorities, SCs, STs, Muslims, survivors of domestic violence etc.

Examples of residentially vulnerable groups are - homeless people, slum dwellers, rural residents who don't own their house sites, etc.

We split the demography section into 2 parts. First part will warm up and the last part if people are willing to respond.

Have a separate track of 2 to 3 questions right at the beginning to check if there are people with disability in the household.

## **Section A: Location details of the survey, occupational category & vulnerable category**

### **A1. Enter the location details**

Enter the date of the survey:
Enter the name of the state (dropdown):
Enter the name of the district:

Enter the name of the block/town/city:
Enter the name of the gram panchayat (if rural) or name of the locality if urban:
Enter the names of the surveyors (upto 3 names):
Enter the phone number of the surveyors (upto 3 numbers):
Enter the email address of the surveyors (upto 3 email ids);

**A2. Enter the Main Occupational Category of the Respondent (Multiple Options Allowed)**

Casual daily wage worker	Construction worker
Tenant/ sharecropper	Rickshaw puller
Farmer	Auto rickshaw driver
Artisan/weaver	Sanitation worker
Street vendor	Health worker/ASHA/ICDS worker
Other small business	Teacher
Homemaker	Rag-picker
Home-based worker	Sex worker
Factory worker	Depends on alms
Employed in eateries	Any other
Head-loader	Not Applicable

**A3. Enter the specific vulnerable category of the respondent, if any (multiple options allowed)**

Single women headed households
Households with persons with disability (Note: If there is a person with disability in the household, then remember to ask the additional questions at the end of the questionnaire)
Households of older persons without caregivers
Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTGs)
Transgender people and other sexual minorities
Schedule Castes (SCs)
Scheduled Tribes (STs)
Muslims
Survivors of domestic violence
Any other

#### A4. Enter the residential vulnerability (if any)

Homeless	Slum dwellers
Rural residents who don't own their house sites	Lives in institutions
Any other	

#### A5. Any Further Details: Please note here (A text box in the App for the surveyor to enter further observational details)

### B. Basic Demographic Details

1. What is your gender?

Female	Male
Transgender	Don't wish to state

2. What is your age?

<Enter a numeric value>
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3. What was the main source of income for your household before the national lockdown was announced at the end of March [If there are multiple sources of household income, select one which is more] ? IF THE RESPONDENT SAYS OTHERS THEN A BOX SHOULD OPEN WHERE THE SURVEYOR CAN ENTER DETAILS

Agriculture	Non-Agriculture
Regular wage/salary earning	Casual labour in agriculture
Casual labour in non-agriculture	Others

4. What was the approximate monthly income of your household before the national lockdown was announced at the end of March? (from all sources, please discuss and arrive at an **approximate** estimate of income)

Less than Rs 3,000	Between Rs 3,001 to Rs 7,000
Between Rs 7,001- to 15,000	More than 15,000
Can't Say	

5. How did your household's monthly income change during the lockdown in April and May?

Income has not changed	Reduced slightly
Reduced by half	Reduced by quarter
There is no income	Can't say

6. Compared to the monthly income before the lockdown, how has it been in the last 30 days?

Income has not changed	Reduced slightly
Reduced by half	Reduced by quarter
There is no income	Can't say

7. If there are any other details please note here (TEXT BOX)

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### C. Food consumption patterns before and after lockdown

8. What has been the main source of getting food/grains for your household in the last 30 days? IF THE RESPONDENT SAYS OTHER THEN A BOX SHOULD OPEN WHERE THE SURVEYOR CAN ENTER DETAILS.

#### **MULTIPLE OPTIONS ALLOWED**

Ration shop/PDS	Buy from kirana shops
Own produce	Temple/Gurudwara/mosque/church
Government food centres	Civil Society Organisations
Support from relatives, friends, neighbours	Other

9. Is your household consumption of rice/wheat in the last 30 days any different from your household consumption of rice/wheat before the national lockdown was announced at the end of March?

It's increased	It's more or less the same
It's decreased somewhat	It's decreased a lot
Can't say	

10. Is your household consumption of dal/sambar/dalma in the last 30 days any different from your household consumption of dal before the national lockdown began at the end of March (this question relates to all food items that use pulses as a main ingredient)?

It's increased	It's more or less the same
It's decreased somewhat	It's decreased a lot
Can't say	

11. Apart from potatoes, is your household consumption of green vegetables in the last 30 days any different from your household consumption of vegetables before the national lockdown began at the end of March?

It's increased	It's more or less the same
It's decreased somewhat	It's decreased a lot
Can't say	

12. Before the national lockdown began in March, how frequently in a month did your household consume eggs/non-veg?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely but we could afford	We don't eat non-veg
We could hardly afford	Can't say

13. Is your household consumption of eggs/or non-veg items in the last 30 days any different from your household consumption of eggs/non-veg items before national lockdown began at the end of March?

It's increased	It's more or less the same
It's decreased somewhat	It's decreased a lot
Can't say	

14. In the last 30 days, did you ever get to eat eggs?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

15. In the last 30 days, did you ever get to eat fish/chicken/mutton/beef?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	We did not eat because we were told that Corona spreads by eating meat
No. But not because of fear that Corona will spread through meat eating	We don't eat non-veg food
Can't say	

16. In the last 30 days, did any member of your household ever go to sleep at night without eating?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

17. In the last 30 days, did any member of your household ever have to skip meals?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

18. Before the lockdown, in say February, did any member of your household ever have to skip meals?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

19. In the last 30 days, did it ever happen that you were not able to cook a meal because you didn't have cooking gas/oil/coal/wood?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

20. Before the lockdown, in say February, did it ever happen that you were not able to cook a meal because you didn't have cooking gas/oil/coal/wood?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

21. If you procure any foods (roots, tubers, meat by hunting) by collecting from the forests, did this get affected in any way since the lockdown?

Not relevant, as we do not collect any food from forests	We used to procure food from forests and continued to do so, no change
We used to procure food from the forests, this was not possible during the lockdown, but it is back to normal now	We used to procure food from the forests but have not been able to since the time the lockdown was imposed (end March) and still are not able to
Gathering of food has increased after the lockdown since we do not have money to buy it.	Can't say

22. Do you feel that the nutritional quality of food that your household consumes now has changed from what it was before the national lockdown began in March (pulses, vegetables, eggs, fish, meat...)?

It's become better	It's more or less the same
It's become worse	It's much worse
Can't say	

23. Do you feel that the quantity of food your household consumes now has changed from what it was before the national lockdown began in March (number of meals, number of rotis, amount of rice...)?

It's increased	It's more or less the same
It's decreased somewhat	It's decreased a lot
Can't say	



24. Has your household's need to borrow money for food changed compared to how it was before the national lockdown was announced in March?

It has increased	It has remained more or less the same
It has decreased	The household does not have to borrow money for food or ask others for food
Can't say	

25. Since the lockdown announced in March, do you feel compelled to sell your land?

Yes	No
Not Applicable (I don't own any land)	

26. Since the lockdown was announced in March, did you have to sell jewellery or other items so that you can eat?

Yes	No
There was no need to sell	

27. Has any member of your household who didn't work before the national lockdown started working in the last 30 days?

Yes	No. But seeking work
No. Not seeking work	Can't Say

28. Do you feel that, compared to now, the food situation of your household will change in the next 3 months?

It will be better	It will be the same
It will get worse	Can't say

29. Since April, has your family faced any other severe accident or crisis aside from the hunger situation?

Yes	No	Can't say
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30. If response is "Yes" in Q 29, and further details are given, please enter here:

31. Please enter any specific comments that the surveyor may have in this box.

## D. Access to Government Rations

32. Do you have a ration card?

Yes. Priority Card	Yes. AAY Card
Yes, APL/BPL card with NFSA stamp	Yes, APL/General but don't get any grains on it
Yes, other card (e.g. state-specific card, temporary card)	No
Can't say	

33. From April to August, have you received your usual entitlement of foodgrains (rice/wheat) from the ration shop/PDS?

Yes. Every month	Yes. But not for every month
No. Not even once	Can't say
Don't have a ration card through which we can get foodgrain entitlements	

34. [Conditional Question. ONLY IF 32 == a OR 32 == b]

If you are an NFSA beneficiary (i.e. if you have a Priority or AAY Card), did you receive free additional food grains under PDS from April to August?

Yes. Every month	Yes. But not for every month
No. Not even once	Can't say

35. [Conditional Question. ONLY IF 32 == a OR 32 == b]

Have you received free dal/chana from the ration shop/PDS from April to August?

Yes. Every month	Yes. But not for every month
No. Not even once	Can't say

**36. [Conditional Question. ONLY IF 32 == c, d, e or f]**

If you/your family don't have a ration card that makes you eligible for the subsidised or free grains, then did you apply for it since the lockdown?

Yes, got a temporary ration card or e-coupon	Yes, got a new ration card or got name added to the family's existing ration card
Yes applied, but could not get a new card or name added to the family's existing ration card	Wanted to apply but could not apply due to lack of Aadhaar or other such important document
Would like to apply, but we are not eligible for ration card	I didn't know that I/my family could apply for a ration card
No, we don't need a ration card	Other
Don't know	

37. If there is a school going child in the household, did he or she get mid day meals or alternative during the last 30 days?

Yes, cooked meals	Yes, money in account
Yes, dry rations	Yes, dry rations and money in account
No, did not receive anything	Other
Don't know	No school going child in the household

38. If there is a child under six years of age in the household, or a pregnant or lactating mother, did he or she get supplementary nutrition or alternative from anganwadi/ICDS during the last 30 days?

Yes, cooked meals	Yes, money in account
Yes, dry rations	Yes, dry rations and money in account
No, did not receive anything	Other
Don't know	No child under six, pregnant or lactating mother in the household

39. Please enter any specific comments that the surveyor may have in this box.

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## E. More Demographic Details

40. Name of the respondent:

41. What is your category ?

PVTG	SC
ST	OBC
General	Don't know
Will not disclose	Others

42. What is your religion ?

Hindu	Muslim
Christian	Sikh
We have our own Adivasi religion	Others
Atheist	Will not disclose

43. How many members were there in your household before the national lockdown was announced in March?

44. How many members were there in your household now?

45. Have you faced discrimination in getting food or for selling food items since lockdown because of your caste/religion?

Often	Sometimes
Rarely	Never
Can't say	

46. Any other specific comments. Please input here. Also input your own observations of the family/community, if any in the following box.

**F. Additional questions: In case there is a person with disability in the household**

47. Is there any person (adult or child) with disability (physical or mental) in this household?

Yes	No
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IF [47==b] THEN THE FORM CAN BE SAVED/SUBMITTED OTHERWISE CAN BE SUBMITTED AFTER THIS SECTION IS COMPLETED

48. How many persons with disability are there in the household?

One	Two
More than two	

49. What is the age of the person with disability? (Person 1): \_\_\_\_\_ years ,<enter a numerical value>

50. What is the gender of the person with disability? (Person 1)

Female	Male
Transgender	Don't wish to state

51. Does this child/person have any difficulty in eating?

Yes, needs support of another person to eat	Yes, has difficulty in accessing (getting to) his or her food
Yes, needs to eat food that is different from what the family eats	No, no problems

52. What is the age of the person with disability? (Person 2): \_\_\_\_\_ years ,<enter a numerical value>

53. What is the gender of the person with disability? (Person 2)

Female	Male
Transgender	Don't wish to state

54. Does this child/person have any difficulty in eating?

Yes, needs support of another person to eat	Yes, has difficulty in accessing (getting to) his or her food
---------------------------------------------	---------------------------------------------------------------

Yes, needs to eat food that is different from what the family eats	No, no problems
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Note: If there are more than two disabled persons, enter the details above for the two persons with the most severe form of disability and give details of the others in the blank space provided below.

55. If the persons with disability have any difficulty in eating, please have a discussion on the difficulties faced, any special provisions received from state or NGOs etc. and make a note of the main points below:

56. If there are more than two persons with disability in the households, please give details below:

57. Please record your audio and save in the app for any other observations you may have.



**Right to Food Campaign**

Website: [www.righttofoodcampaign.in](http://www.righttofoodcampaign.in)

Twitter: @rozi\_roti

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/righttofood/>

email: [righttofoodindia@gmail.com](mailto:righttofoodindia@gmail.com)

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