

One Step Behind: The Government of India and Agricultural Policy During the Covid-19 Lockdown

Sudha Narayanan* and Shree Saha†

Abstract: This paper reviews the Indian state's response to the disruption in agri-food supply chains triggered by the lockdown as revealed in notifications pertaining to the agricultural sector. This paper contends that though many notifications and orders did not percolate to State and local-level administrative enforcement mechanisms, the greater problem was the absence of coordination between the Centre and States. Our analysis suggests that State Governments better managed the situation and in tackling many issues pertaining to agri-food supply chains, took action before the Centre did. The Centre's actions were not only a step behind but also largely uncoordinated with State initiatives. This disjunction was not addressed, and the ensuing chaos was therefore unsurprising. This experience highlights the importance of better Centre-State coordination and offers lessons for both future emergencies and structural reform in agriculture.

Keywords: Agri-food supply chains, Covid-19, federalism, Centre, State, India, lockdown.

INTRODUCTION

When the Government of India announced the lockdown on March 24, 2020, in an effort to contain the spread of Covid-19, agri-food supply chains began to unravel on a large scale.¹ Farmers who were about to harvest their winter crop faced labour shortages as the large migrant workforce on which they depend had departed for their native villages and towns. Many farmers had limited access to harvesters and shops that serviced equipment and machinery. Most faced serious difficulties in getting their produce to markets, both on account of transport restrictions and

* Associate Professor, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, sudha@igidr.ac.in

† Research Associate, Indira Gandhi Institute of Development Research, shree@igidr.ac.in

¹ The Indian lockdown in response to Covid-19 was ranked among the most stringent by Hale *et al.* (2020), based on a set of criteria capturing the scope of the lockdown.

intermittent closure of regulated markets or mandis (Rawal and Kumar 2020). Traders were reluctant to transport produce because of uncertainties in moving goods, and in the face of a collapse in demand, especially in large urban centers, prices crashed. The situation was particularly grim for those in animal rearing, i. e., producers of milk and meat. Many cooperative dairies slashed the prices they paid milk producers. Poultry farmers faced a substantial decline in demand, not only due to closure of eateries and income losses among consumers, but also because of initial rumours that Covid-19 is transmitted via birds. Many fisherfolk who were at sea when the lockdown was announced were left with unsellable catch. Evidence based on data, newspaper reports, and detailed narrative accounts from villages confirm large-scale disruptions in agri-food chains (Rawal and Kumar 2020; Narayanan and Saha 2020; Mahajan and Tomar 2020; Seth and Vishwanathan 2020; Hussain 2020; Ramakumar 2020; Singh 2020).

This paper contends that, during the national lockdown, the Central Government was often a step behind States on matters relating to agriculture, and several State governments appear to have had a better handle on the situation. Many States had announced lockdowns and restrictions even before the national lockdown and had already issued guidelines for agriculture in preparation for the lockdown. The Government of India's response therefore came when things had already been set in motion, varying by State, and was, unfortunately, largely independently of State initiatives. This paper argues that this disjunction was never addressed appropriately and, without prior Centre-State coordination, the ensuing chaos was unsurprising.

We examine the policy response to agriculture by the Government of India and the State governments during the lockdown.² We reconstruct the sequence of events based on notifications, guidelines, and press releases issued by the Government of India via its Ministries and contrast these with the notifications and responses of the States. We draw on a database of all notifications pertaining to agriculture, but focus on a few select themes to illustrate our point.

THE CENTRE, STATES, AND AGRICULTURAL MARKETS IN INDIA

The policy response by governments to challenges in the agri-food supply chain during the lockdown is best understood in the context of the shared role of the Centre and States in managing agricultural trade in India (GoI 2018).³ The federal structure laid down in the Constitution of India in 1950 divided the power to legislate on various subjects between the Centre and State under three lists: List I (Union List), List II (State List), and List III (Concurrent List).⁴ Since agriculture is in the State List, State

² Although we have compiled and documented notifications for most of the large agricultural States, we only draw on a subset of these for this paper.

³ This section draws heavily on Narayanan (2018).

⁴ Article 246, Constitution of India.

legislatures are empowered to legislate on matters in this regard, and agricultural spot markets like mandis (a regulated market yard) and auction platforms are governed by State agricultural produce marketing laws.

At the Centre or federal level of government, three key factors shape spot markets: the provisions of the Essential Commodities Act, 1955 (ECA), the operation of the procurement system wherein the government undertakes purchases at pre-established minimum support prices (MSPs), and trade policies that change periodically in response to market conditions and demands from interest groups. The ECA imposes restrictions, mainly to protect consumers, on storage and movement of certain essential commodities by private parties. Minimum support prices are set for 28 commodities; they are announced at the beginning of the season by the government, which in principle procure produce should market prices fall below the MSP value. Although the ECA and MSPs are driven by the Centre, States do have some role. In the case of ECA, States are free to set stocking limits based on the Centre's notification. In the case of MSP and procurement, States provided, until recently, bonuses that's over and above MSP for certain commodities. States can also undertake procurement operations under the Decentralised Procurement Scheme introduced in 1997. Thus, both the ECA and procurement operations, though driven largely by the Centre, also envisage a substantial role for States to devise policy. Trade policy, by contrast, is determined exclusively by the Central Government. The administrative architecture of the larger market ecosystem – including warehousing and storage, transport, assaying, and finance – also tends to be fragmented, with roles distributed across different national authorities and between the Centre and States. The warehousing market is regulated by various rules and guidelines imposed by the Central Warehousing Corporation, State Warehousing Corporations, and the Warehousing Development and Regulatory Authority. Transport controls derived from the ECA and taxes on cross-border trade until recently posed barriers for interstate movement of goods. Thus, despite the role of the Centre and States, both “agriculture” and “markets” remain State subjects and are overwhelmingly shaped by them. Therefore, in managing the lockdown, it is not surprising that the States play a crucial role in maintaining agri-food markets and supply chains.

THE CENTRAL GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE

Agriculture contributes 16.1 per cent to India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Despite this relatively small contribution to the GDP, the agriculture and allied sector is a source of livelihood for as much as 54.6 per cent of India's workforce.^{5, 6, 7} The

⁵ Officially, agriculture includes crops and livestock, and allied sectors include forestry and fisheries. The data presented here are for agriculture and allied activities, but for the purpose of this paper, we focus only on farming activities including crops, livestock, and fisheries.

⁶ The figures are for the share of the agriculture and allied sector in total employment as per the Census of India, 2011 (GoI 2016, p. 35). The National Sample Survey (NSS) estimates that in 2011–12, 48.9 per cent of the total workforce was employed in agriculture.

⁷ Data are for the year 2014–15 at 2011–12 constant prices (GoI 2016).

Situation Assessment of Agricultural Households of the National Sample Survey (2013) suggested that among farming households, agriculture accounted for approximately 60 per cent of household income, with 32 per cent of the income for these households coming from wage work. Within agriculture, 48 per cent of income was from cultivation and as much as 12 per cent from animal rearing. Given this context, the lockdown's impact on wage workers or any disruptions to the supply chain for crops and animal products would affect a large constituency of rural households in multiple ways.

In the guidelines announced along with the national lockdown on March 24, there was no mention of either farming or agriculture explicitly as permissible activities. Indeed, the words "farming," "farmer," or "agriculture" did not appear in the guidelines at all. On the contrary, the guidelines seemed to focus more on the consumer end of the agri-food supply chain, i.e., distribution, and indicated that transport and sale of essential items would be allowed. The notification stated that retail outlets selling food and grocery items, fruits and vegetables, dairy and milk products, meat and fish, and animal fodder were permitted and emphasised that the lockdown relates to movement of people and not goods. Manufacturing units, cold storage, and warehouses of food and essential items too were allowed to operate. The use of the words "essential" and "food" was somewhat confusing to start with, interpreted differently or not at all by local law enforcement (Narayanan and Saha 2020). This confusion would not be resolved until March 29, when the distinction between essential and non-essential commodities was removed to ease bottlenecks in the movement of commodities, thereby allowing free movement of all commodities.

On March 26, the government issued a detailed note specifying standard operating procedures for different activities. Among other stipulations, it emphasised that people engaged in maintaining supply chains would be allowed to commute with an e-pass or any other certification issued by the concerned local authorities and a valid photo identity card. In the case of the unorganised sector, persons engaged in the supply of essential goods would be allowed to commute with the approval of local authorities. Here again, the focus was overwhelmingly on distribution.

In the immediate aftermath of the lockdown, a few farmers' organisations and industry associations petitioned the Government of India, seeking relief and clarity with respect to farming operations and support services related to the agricultural sector.⁸ It was on the third day of the lockdown that a swiftly crafted addendum attempted to remedy the silence on agriculture. On March 27, the Centre published a detailed notification on

⁸ For example, Kisan Swaraj, the National Seed Association of India, and the Federation of Seed Industry in India made separate appeals to the Government of India. See <http://www.kisanswaraj.in/2020/03/26/urgent-suggestions-to-goi-with-regard-to-support-to-farmers-their-livelihoods-as-well-as-to-ensure-uninterrupted-food-supply-chains/> and <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/agriculture/seed-industry-bodies-demand-uninterrupted-movement-of-agri-inputs-ahead-of-kharif-season/articleshow/74774663.cms>, viewed on May 11, 2020.

agriculture. It noted that agencies engaged in the procurement of agriculture products, mandis operated by the Agriculture Produce Market Committee (APMC) or as notified by the State government, and input retail and manufacturing units, including units dealing with fertilizers, chemicals, and seeds would be allowed to operate. Until then, it was unclear whether States, which oversaw the functioning of mandis, were allowed to operate them. The notification also confirmed that farming operations by farmers and farmworkers in the field would be allowed. Custom Hiring Centres (CHCs) and intra- and interstate movement of harvesting and sowing machines like combine harvesters and other agricultural and horticultural implements would also be permitted. This was aimed to provide relief not just to farmers who were currently harvesting produce but also to those preparing for sowing the monsoon crop (kharif).

On April 2, the ninth day of the lockdown, the government was pushed to clarify that the term mandi “includes direct marketing, facilitated by the State Government/Union Territory Administration, directly from the farmers/group of farmers, Farmer Producer Organisations (FPOs), Cooperatives, etc.” (DO No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A)). This was a crucial step because much trade occurs outside the mandis, and it seemed that the government had not accounted for the range of agricultural transactions that were undertaken routinely. On April 3, the government permitted the operation of truck repair shops on highways, agricultural machinery shops, and those selling spare parts to ease highway movement of produce. It was also on this day that the government turned its attention to the plantation sector, announcing that the tea industry and plantations could continue to operate with 50 per cent of their workers.

By the time the Central Government recognised the marine and aquaculture fisheries sector, it was already April 10, 16 days into the lockdown. As indicated earlier, this group was hard hit by the sudden lockdown. Customarily, April 15 is the start of the annual two-month ban on marine fishing (in States such as Maharashtra, West Bengal, and Odisha) that allows fish to breed and stock to be maintained.⁹ The delay in permitting these activities had already hurt the fishing community in some States, for whom the weeks before April 15 typically accounted for a disproportionate share of their annual earnings. An April 12 notification makes explicit mention of flour mills, and use of transport for ferrying workers as permissible activity, allowing workers to engage in these activities (the first explicit statement that workers could commute to work).

On April 15, the government issued a consolidated set of guidelines of all preceding addenda and notifications into a single document. Yet, the guidelines did not seem to be comprehensive. The next day, it clarified that collection and sale of

⁹ The period of trawling ban varies by State, for example, Kerala has a trawling ban for 56 days starting in June. See <https://www.mpeda.gov.in/MPEDA/cms.php?id=YmFuLXBldmlvZA==#>, viewed on May 11, 2020.

“Minor Forest Produce (MFP)/Non-Timber Forest Produce (NTFP) by Scheduled Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers in forest areas” would be permitted (DO No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A)).

It is evident from the description above that the lockdown period was punctuated by announcements that incrementally aimed to clarify that agri-food supply chains would operate smoothly (Table 1). The flurry of clarificatory orders over the period suggests that the Government of India was responding to whatever emerged as an urgent issue. It also appears that issues faced by several sub-sectors, ironically including those that are identified as crucial for doubling farmers’ incomes, were addressed only during the tail-end of the first phase of the lockdown.

On the one hand, the Government of India’s actions have been responsive to the situation at hand by issuing guidelines focused on relieving hardships faced by different groups in the larger agri-food system. On the other hand, it is bewildering that these issues, all of which could have been anticipated, were not addressed as part of a comprehensive lockdown plan. Only when the lockdown was extended to May 3 did the guidelines for agriculture begin to appear coherent and comprehensive, as they ought to have from the beginning.

While the Ministry of Home Affairs was addressing the gaps in the guidelines, the Ministry of Agriculture had begun exploring options to streamline the transport of agri-food commodities. The Indian Council of Agricultural Research compiled the advisory notifications for farmers coupled with State-specific lockdown orders.

There were also active efforts to restore agri-food supply chains by means of what appears to be a largely uncoordinated exercise. Over the lockdown period, smartphone apps were released in quick succession by different agencies. The National Informatics Centre’s Kisan Rath (“Farmers’ Chariot”), having an elegant interface, purported to offer a platform for farmers to connect to transporters.¹⁰ At the same time, Kisan Sabha (“Farmers’ Forum”), operationalised by the Central Road Research Institute of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research with Sarvodaya Infotech Pvt. Ltd. in May 2020, offered a more ambitious platform for supply chain logistics, ranging from inputs to marketing and including a range of stakeholders. The app has been designed on the basis of a study of more than 500 farmers and a six-day long survey of dealers, transporters, and farmers in Azadpur Mandi in Delhi, Asia’s largest wholesale market. Indian Railway Traffic Service also began an initiative called SETU (“Bridge”) to arrange for the transport of perishables by train, as did the National Agricultural Cooperative Marketing Federation of India, to overcome the bottlenecks in road transport.

¹⁰ The app will facilitate transportation of farm produce from farms to mandis and from one to another mandi. It will ensure seamless supply linkages between farmers, FPOs, APMC mandis, and intra- and interstate buyers.

Table 1 *Timeline of select notifications of the Government of India, March 24–April 24, 2020*

Date	Ministry/Department	Details
24-03	Ministry of Home Affairs	*Guidelines to keep essential shops open and promote delivery of essentials via e-commerce, manufacturing units of essentials, and their transportation to remain open
25-03	Ministry of Home Affairs	*Shops for seeds and pesticides to remain open
26-03	Ministry of Home Affairs	Clarification: Exceptions cover the transportation/interstate movement of animal feed and fodder as essential items
27-03	Ministry of Home Affairs	<p>*Agencies engaged in procurement of agriculture products, including operations, are allowed</p> <p>*“Mandis” operated by the APMC or as notified by the State Government are allowed</p> <p>*Shops of fertilizers can remain open</p> <p>*Farming operations by farmers and farmworkers in the field are allowed</p> <p>*CHC-related to farm machinery may remain open.</p> <p>*Manufacturing units of fertilizers, pesticides and seeds can remain open</p> <p>* Intra- and interstate movement of harvesting- and sowing-related machines like combined harvesters and other agriculture/horticulture implements are allowed</p>
29-03	Ministry of Home Affairs	*Entire supply chain of milk collection and distribution, including its packaging material, is allowed
02-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	Clarification: “Mandi” includes direct marketing facilitated by the State government/UT administration directly from the farmers/group of farmers, FPOs, cooperatives, etc.
03-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	<p>*Though exceptions have been allowed for farming operations by farmers and farmworkers, exceptions for procurement of agricultural productions, operation of mandis, movement of harvesting- and sowing-related machinery, etc., as per information received, have not percolated down to the field level</p> <p>*With a view to ensure smooth harvesting and sowing operations while maintaining social distancing, it is requested that the exceptions allowed for agriculture sector must be communicated to all field agencies</p>

(continued on next page)

Table 1 (continued) *Timeline of select notifications of the Government of India, March 24–April 24, 2020*

Date	Ministry/Department	Details
03-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	<p>Addition of sub-clauses:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Shops related to agricultural machinery, spare parts (including its supply chain), and repairs to remain open *Shops for truck repairs on highways, preferably at fuel pumps, to remain open *Tea industry, including plantations, operating with maximum of 50 per cent workers, to remain open
03-04	Letter from Home Secretary	<p>Letter from Home Secretary to Chief Secretaries of States:</p> <p>Mentions that ground-level interpretations/difficulty in getting passes hinder the smooth flow of supply chain of essential items and advises the facilitation of both intra- and interstate truck movement</p>
10-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	<p>Operations of the fishing (marine)/aquaculture industry, including feeding and maintenance, harvesting, processing, packaging, cold chain, and sale and marketing; hatcheries; feed plants; commercial aquaria; and movement of fish/shrimp and fish products, fish seed/feed, and workers for all these activities are allowed</p>
12-04	Letter from Home Secretary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> *Mentions problems of pass availability for labourers and truck movements and requests quick resolutions *Requests allowing micro, small, and medium enterprises engaged in the manufacture of essential items like wheat flour (<i>atta</i>), pulses (dal), and edible oils to operate and allows warehouses/cold storage to freely function irrespective of the nature of goods stored
15-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	<p>Consolidated guidelines issued and contains separate sections for each of the following topics: agricultural and related activities, fisheries, plantations, and animal husbandry</p>

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Table 1 (continued) *Timeline of select notifications of the Government of India, March 24–April 24, 2020*

Date	Ministry/Department	Details
16-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	Included the following in the list of exceptions during lockdown: *Collection, harvesting, and processing of MFP/NTFP by Scheduled Tribes and other forest dwellers in forest areas *Bamboo, coconut, areca nut, cocoa, and spices plantation and their harvesting, processing, packaging, sale, and marketing
21-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	Clarification: *Supply of essential goods include food processing units such as bread factories, milk processing plants, flour mills, dal mills, etc. located in urban areas
21-04	Ministry of Home Affairs	Included the following in the list of essentials: *Facilities for export/import such as pack houses, inspection, and treatment facilities for seeds and horticulture produce *Research establishments dealing with agricultural and horticulture activities *Intra- and interstate movement of planting materials, honey bee colonies, and honey and other beehive products *Forest offices include forestry plantation and related activities, including silviculture operations
Not dated	Department of Agriculture, Cooperation and Farmers Welfare	Guidelines for prevention of Covid-19 (Corona) spread during crop harvesting and threshing (kharif 2020): *Several precautionary measures related to the prevention of Covid-19 *Harvesting of crops should be done through mechanised harvesters as far as possible and involve less farm workers in the field. If harvesting is done with manually operated equipment like sickles, they should be sanitised with soap and water at least three times a day.

Note: * All of the above notifications from the Ministry of Home Affairs are given at an all-India level (Order No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A)).

The Ministry of Agriculture also introduced a special module on April 2 for FPOs trading via the electronic National Agriculture Market (e-NAM) and urged States Governments to declare registered warehouses as market yards. The module had three parts, the first being intended for FPOs, a second allowing for warehouse-based trading, and the third for logistics. The e-NAM was designed to move all trade in regulated mandis online so that traders, irrespective of their location, could place bids in any mandi of their choice, subject to their possessing a license. Whereas traditionally this was done only by people on site, the ability to bid electronically and anonymously for large quantities of graded or assayed produce expands the pool of buyers, enables farmers to get a better price for their produce, and prevents collusion among traders. Given that physical access to mandis and transport was now a constraint, the assumption was that FPOs would take advantage and sell farm produce using e-NAM and warehouses. These modules were thus intended to support alternate modes by which farmers could sell produce and predicated on State governments having appropriate State-level laws permitting such transactions. It is unclear whether these efforts have had the desired effect of significantly restoring supply chains; this is an area for further research.¹¹

STATE RESPONSES

Throughout the lockdown, the Central Government urged State governments to adhere to the guidelines it had issued. When the Ministry of Home Affairs was not issuing guidelines, it was making entreaties to State governments. For example, with respect to the exceptions allowed to agricultural operations, the Home Secretary, in a April 3 letter to the Chief Secretaries of States wrote, “Exceptions mentioned in March 27, 2020, have not percolated to the field level” (DO No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A)) and requested that the same “must be communicated to all field agencies” (DO No. 40-3/2020-DM-I(A)).¹² On the same day, in another letter to States, the Ministry of Home Affairs noted that “at the ground level different interpretations are being made on the items given exceptions, which hinder smooth flow of supply chain of these essential items.”¹³

These letters might lead one to believe that the essential problem with the lockdown was a failure in the flow of information from top to bottom and the consequent lacuna in the implementation of the lockdown on the ground. Though this might be true to some extent, this narrative ignores a more fundamental issue of how State governments, which were spearheading efforts to manage Covid-19, were

¹¹ Narayanan and Saha (2020) document several private initiatives, but their impact remains to be seen.

¹² The exceptions included farming operations by farmers and farmworkers, procurement of agricultural productions, operation of mandis, and movement of harvesting- and sowing-related machinery.

¹³ In the same notification, it observed that “Queries have been received as to what constitutes food and grocery. Since it is neither feasible nor desirable to mention each item of food and grocery in the guidelines, the State/UT Governments are advised to interpret these terms to mean all items of food and grocery that are usually consumed by people on day to day basis.”

themselves dealing with these aspects.¹⁴ To understand this, we need to read the Government of India's notifications in conjunction with those issued by various State governments, which often preceded the Centre's announcements.

First, it is useful to recall that many States had begun effecting controls over the movement of people before the national lockdown on March 24. Kerala, Tamil Nadu, Punjab, Rajasthan, and Telangana are a few States that implemented some form of a lockdown before the national lockdown was announced. Several districts in Uttar Pradesh were brought under lockdown early, whereas States including Maharashtra, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, and Goa had already begun limiting economic activity. Many States had therefore already begun preparing for the possibility that agri-food supply chains would be disrupted.

Though a comprehensive account of actions taken by all States would be beyond the scope of this paper, we first discuss the ways in which different States had prepared to allow for farm-to-consumer agricultural operations during an economic shutdown. We then focus on three cases that illustrate our main argument.

State-Level Notifications on Food Essentials and Agriculture

Punjab was among the States providing early clarification that agricultural operations constituted essential activity; its list encompassing agricultural activities was issued on March 21 (IFD(1455)-2020/855). The following day, the Telangana Government declared that "Agriculture, Horticulture, Animal Husbandry, Fisheries and Agricultural Marketing would be fully functional during the state lockdown," though this was not originally announced until March 31 (G.O.Ms.No.45). The Government of Tamil Nadu in its March 23 order likewise delineated all permitted activities including input supply and seed production and testing, among others (G.O.(Ms).No.97). The order also emphasised that agriculture, horticulture, animal husbandry, and fisheries-related shops and markets would function. The Tamil Nadu Government also announced free storage of produce in registered warehouses, cold storage for two months, a two-month waiver of interest on pledge loans, and a waiver of mandi fees of one per cent for two months (G.O.(Ms)No.053). These are but a few examples of States that explicitly alluded to activities in the agricultural sector ahead of the restrictions they imposed.

At the distribution end, several States explicitly listed food items as "essential" before the national lockdown. Most States had issued orders directing local administration to ensure that there was no disruption in the supply of essential commodities like vegetables, basic groceries, milk, egg, poultry, fish, and cattle feed (under

¹⁴ Though unrestricted movement of essential commodities across States was allowed on paper by the Government of Tamil Nadu, Kerala faced a problem with its excess milk supply. The Kerala Government stated that because the neighbouring States were not allowing transportation of milk for conversion to milk powder, the excess milk would be given to migrant workers and individuals covered under the Integrated Child Development Services via the anganwadi centres (Go(Rt) No.111/2020/AHD).

G.O.RT.No.210 by Andhra Pradesh). Many rules naturally varied across States, for example, Andhra Pradesh, in its March 23 order, declared that residents could only shop for essential needs within two kilometres of their residence (G.O.RT.No. 211). Such variations across States are natural because States were largely working to manage the pandemic independently of the Central Government.

The attention to distribution pertains to government schemes as well and show how Kerala's initiatives stand out. For example, on March 30, Kerala announced free supply of foodgrains through the public distribution system (PDS) to Antyodaya Anna Yojana and priority households starting April 1, later adding more food items in a kit. The Women and Child Development Department too issued orders, as soon as school closures starting March 11 were announced (pre-school to class seven, initially), for distributing food to children in anganwadi centres (aged six months to six years) as well as to pregnant and lactating mothers at their homes to avoid the disruption in the supply of food to this vulnerable population. Many States including Tamil Nadu, West Bengal, and Odisha took similar measures.

When the national lockdown was announced, though States continued to respond to local situations, there was an added responsibility of clarifying the notifications of the Government of India and the challenge of maintaining some form of consistency with the national lockdown guidelines. Thus, for example, to clarify the list of activities allowed during lockdown, the Government of Kerala elucidated items that would be permitted, drawing on the Kerala Essential Services Maintenance Act 1994 (6 of 1994, No.16/2020/HOME), a day after the national lockdown was declared.

Another example pertains to truck movements. In Odisha and West Bengal, as early as March 25 and 26, the State governments had issued orders (212/SWR and No.30-CS/2021, respectively) that *dhabas* (roadside eateries), repair shops, and shops for spare parts would remain open (at least one every 20 km). The Government of India published an equivalent clarification for these shops on April 3. Odisha declared that travel passes were valid throughout the State, whereas West Bengal, which had issued restrictions for interstate movement of non-essential goods on March 22, clarified orders to permit movement of food and agricultural produce, among other goods. The State also did away with the pass requirement for individuals engaged in ongoing agricultural, animal husbandry, and fisheries activities via a March 25 order (No.27-CS/2021). Here, as with examples provided earlier, many States were managing a host of rules and regulations to ensure the maintenance of agri-food supply chains even before the national lockdown was announced.

Several States also went beyond national guidelines, both during and after the first lockdown, to accommodate specific priorities of the State; in the absence of Centre-State coordination, this was likely to not find mention in the national

guidelines. For example, Andhra Pradesh permitted sericulture activities (April 18), Punjab permitted apiculture (April 1), Kerala issued assistance to its fisherfolk and permitted coconut-based industry to operate (April 6 and April 17, respectively), and West Bengal permitted the e-auction of tea (April 21). With this background, we focus on three cases that illustrate our argument on the relative responsiveness of States vis-à-vis the Central Government.

Procurement Operations

Public procurement of foodgrains is a key activity in many States. Most of the wheat supplied to the PDS and for stockholding is procured during the rabi season, especially from Punjab, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh. Paddy procurement too takes place during this time. While the Food Corporation of India spearheads these initiatives, States such as Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, and Odisha have adopted decentralised procurement, wherein States procure on behalf of the Centre and hands over surplus grain (that beyond its own distribution needs) via food-based schemes. The Central Government's publicly available guidelines explicitly mentioned MSP operations, first on March 27 and again in the April 15 consolidated guidelines.

In contrast, Odisha, where paddy procurement was underway in March, issued orders even earlier on March 18 (No. 6256), observing that ongoing paddy procurement activities would continue if needed, with extended hours of operations to reduce congestion due to chances of crowding in the PACS/LAMPCS/WSHC premises or mandis.¹⁵ The Government of Chhattisgarh too had declared that under the provisions of the ECA of 1955,

all the things supplied under the PDS and the services essential for their procurement and storage namely gunny bags, sulphas, pesticides, dunnage bags, etc. and their management, storage and distribution

would be considered essential (F 4-9/2014/29-1). Activities such as loading-unloading for milling and storage as well as transportation and the operation of rice mills where the procured paddy is milled were also deemed essential. Meanwhile, on March 22, the Government of Telangana noted explicitly that

paddy procurement shall be decentralised to village/gram panchayat level, by opening more procurement centres, by engaging IKP groups, PACS and Agricultural Marketing Committees.¹⁶ The arrival of paddy to procurement centre shall be regulated by issuing time slot coupons. (G.O.Ms.No.45)

¹⁵ PACS stands for Primary Agricultural Credit Society; LAMPCS stands for Large-Sized Adivasi Multipurpose Cooperative Societies; and WSHC stands for Women Self Help Cooperatives.

¹⁶ IKP refers to the Indira Kranti Patham, a community-based poverty alleviation programme based on self-help groups.

These measures were designed to reduce congestion. Punjab, the largest contributor of wheat, had issued preparatory orders well in advance, on March 21 (IFD(1455)-2020/855).¹⁷

The timeline here suggests preparedness on the part of States undertaking procurement operations. The Government of India's clarifications on procurement came when States had already established appropriate operating procedures.

Marine Fishing

As a second illustration, we take the case of fisheries, which is the fastest growing sub-sector in agriculture after dairy and poultry. Many coastal States began addressing the issue of marine fishing fairly early during the lockdown. On March 27, the Government of Kerala ensured that those using traditional boats could continue to fish but halted mechanised fishing and auctions at landing stations. It went further to direct Matsyafed to ensure that sales were enabled at a price fixed on a seven-day average in consultation with different stakeholders.¹⁸ It allowed retail fish sales through kiosks, stalls, and shops but not large fish markets (G.O.(Rt) No.196/2020/F&P). The Governments of Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu had similar orders, with the Government of Maharashtra explicitly permitting the sale of fish, feed, and related commodities including feed ingredients (G.O. No.14 on March 26, Department of Fisheries). The coastal States of Odisha and West Bengal too issued similar orders with regards to marine activity (215/SWR and 4299/FARD on March 25 and 28, respectively, for Odisha and 56-CS/2020 on March 27 for West Bengal). By the end of March, many key States where marine fishing is of crucial importance had already established guidelines to permit such activity. In contrast, it was not until April 10, as part of a fifth addendum to the lockdown notification, that marine and aquaculture activities were permitted by the Central Government; even this was not as rich in detail as those of many State-level notifications.

Plantation Agriculture

The third example is the plantation sector, a key contributor to India's export earnings from agriculture. Apart from a brief mention about the functioning of the tea industry and plantations during lockdown in an April 3 circular in which the Central Government allowed the tea industry to be open with a maximum of 50 per cent of workers, there was little discussion on this sector. It was only in the April 15 consolidated guidelines where plantations were mentioned in detail. These guidelines allowed the operation of tea, coffee, and rubber plantations and the processing, packaging, sale, and marketing of tea, coffee, rubber, and cashew; these

¹⁷ Among the decentralised procurement states, Madhya Pradesh was an exception with notifications issued as late as April 11, 2020. 73/2020/C2 (April 11, 2020); Andhra Pradesh too had tasked village assistants to facilitate decentralised procurement on April 5, 2020 (G.O.MS.No. 53).

¹⁸ Matsyafed is the name of the Kerala State Co-operative Federation for Fisheries Development Ltd., the apex federation of primary-level welfare societies in the coastal fishery sector in Kerala.

all were allowed to operate with a maximum 50 per cent of workers. The very next day, April 16, the Central Government added a few more exceptions – bamboo, coconut, arecanut, cocoa, and spices plantations and their harvesting, processing, packaging, sale, and marketing. It was only on April 21 that the Central Government explicitly allowed intra- and interstate movement of planting materials, honeybee colonies, and honey and other beehive products and added silviculture under forestry operations.

In contrast, the State governments acted as early as March 28. For example, West Bengal allowed spraying and irrigation in tea gardens with not more than five persons in a squad (58-CS/2020). Kerala issued detailed guidelines on April 3 with regard to the operation of tea, cardamom, coffee, oil palm, cashew, and clove plantations (Go(Ms)59/2020/GAD). According to this guideline, tea plantations could employ one worker per 0.5 acre for harvesting, and in cardamom plantations, no labour from outside Kerala could be employed, with only one worker per acre. The activities in both coffee and cardamom plantations were restricted to irrigation and essential pesticide application. In an April 11 order, West Bengal allowed operations including plucking in tea gardens with a deployment of up to 25 per cent of the total regular workforce and e-auction of tea in an April 21 order (77-CS/2020 and 87-CS/2020, respectively). On April 18, Andhra Pradesh issued notifications allowing processing, packaging, sale, and marketing of tea, coffee, rubber, and cashew, with a maximum of 50 per cent workers (G.O.Rt.No.88).

Our discussion of marine fishing, crop procurement, and plantations illustrates three specific areas where in the Central Government lagged behind the States in managing and restoring agri-food supply chains. That these are not exceptions is evident from our broader discussion of the timeline of notifications across a range of routine agricultural operations and activities.

The analysis above focused on the timing of notifications to reveal the disjunction in the efforts of the Centre and various States. A relevant question is the impact of the absence of coordination; in other words, did the efforts of the States succeed in maintaining agri-food supply chains in the face of the Centre's absence? Alternatively, when the State did not have clear recommendations, did the lack of the Central Government's advice disrupt agri-food supply chains? Given the limited information and data on these, it is a challenge to identify specific cases of disruption (which could be exceptions rather than the rule) and even more so to attribute these specifically to government action or inaction. That said, there is some evidence that in Punjab, wheat procurement was largely successful, whereas in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, which were somewhat slow to act, the procurement was lower than usual and less well organised.¹⁹ In Kerala and Tamil Nadu, despite

¹⁹ <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/agri-business/wheat-procurement-is-swift-in-punjab/article31484286.ece>, viewed on May 11, 2020.

difficulties faced by fisherfolk and downstream collapse in demand, fishing and the sale of fish using traditional boats continued.²⁰ Likewise, data on tea auctions from the Tea Board of India also suggests auctions resumed in West Bengal.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

A critical consequence of the national lockdown in India in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was that it left agri-food supply chains in disarray. Commentaries on why this happened have tended to point to the limited percolation of Central Government orders to the States or to the fact that States interpreted these orders in their own ways (Hussain 2020; Krishnamurthy 2020, for example). This paper attempted to reconstruct the sequence of actions by the Central Government and select State governments and suggests that the reality is somewhat different. A close reading of the notifications shows that the Centre's response was more reactive than proactive, addressing issues in agriculture only as they emerged. In contrast, many State governments appear to have been better prepared to ensure the maintenance of agri-food supply chains in the face of a lockdown, and many of their actions preceded the national lockdown. It appears that the Centre's actions barely acknowledged the overwhelming role of States and showed little effort to align its own interventions with those of the States.

There is some truth in the view that the smooth functioning of agri-food supply chains failed as State and local-level administrative enforcement mechanisms on the ground did not adhere to guidelines. This is true even of States whose interventions in the agricultural sector have been timely and thoughtful. At the same time, such a critique detracts from the obvious failure in Centre–State coordination. Without timely efforts by States, the unplanned lockdown would have had more serious consequences for the agricultural sector than has been thus far.

The Covid-19 pandemic brings to the forefront questions on Centre–State coordination more starkly than before. It raises several important questions relevant not only for managing emergencies but also for the future of agricultural reform. The Covid-19 pandemic highlights the importance of investing heavily in mechanisms and institutions of coordination, in the true spirit of “cooperative federalism,” as India moves towards more fundamental reform of agricultural markets. Many innovations in agricultural marketing tend to happen at the State level, and any attempt by the Centre to wrest control from the States, rather than engage with them, would be counterproductive.

²⁰ <https://english.manoramaonline.com/news/kerala/2020/04/28/how-small-fishers-in-poonthura-village-benefitted-from-new-auction-system-during-covid-19-lockdown.html> and <https://thewire.in/rights/coronavirus-lockdown-climate-hit-fishers-livelihood>, viewed on May 11, 2020.

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