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UNDERSTANDING IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON WIDOW FARMERS IN WARDHA DISTRICT OF MAHARASHTRA

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Abstract

Present paper tries to understand the impact of lockdown on economic and social capitals of widow farmers. To understand the situation which had been created by the lockdown, researchers have conducted telephonic interview with ten widow farmers from Wardha district of Maharashtra. Maharashtra state had become highly Covid19 infected in the beginning phase itself and brought in strict rule for lockdown to contain the spread. The Lockdown however, had significant impact on widow farmers. They fell for huge financial problem and become more vulnerable than ever. Moreover, the unanticipated lockdown left them least prepared for a long term social isolation as they did not get expected support to run their family after the lockdown.

Keywords: Lockdown, Widow Farmers, Farmer Suicide, Wardha

Introduction

The peculiar economic condition in the world which has been driven by Corona Virus Disease of 2019 (COVID-19) affected both the developed and developing countries. This disease soon declared as Global Pandemic

by World Health Organisation. Apart from the economic crisis, the virus created a severe health crisis as well globally. In response to this, many countries adopted lockdown method to control the spread of COVID-19 outbreak including India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a 21-day nationwide lockdown in India from midnight of 25th March in a nationwide television broadcast (Hebbar, 2020). However, despite the decision by Government was appreciated initially, the data reflected that the Government did not achieve the objectives of nationwide lockdown effectively. As the infection of virus started spreading horrendously, Government continued the lockdown through major phases till 31st May 2020. Subsequently, government introduced the un-lockdown process by providing number of relaxation since 1st June 2020. Despite of all these measures, India Government could not succeed to control the hiking number of cases. Simultaneous to the health crisis, the economic sector also gradually reflected the hard end effects of nationwide lockdown. In such an economic context, it is important to understand the impact of lockdown on various economic sectors, particularly the agriculture sector as it is one of the important economic sectors in India.

According to The Food and Agriculture Organization of The United Nations, women comprise over 40 percentage of agriculture labour force in the developing countries (FAO, 2011). The challenges of women farmers are associated with each and every steps from kitchen to market. More importantly in a patriarchal society women have little access to the land entitlements and other livelihood activities. As the current agrarian scenario is very unlikely due to farmer suicides happening across the world, the plight of women farmers are far below to the standards. India is one of the most affected countries by farmer suicides cases. As per NCRB data, India has crossed more than 3 lakhs farmers suicides cases (NCRB, 2015). Within the country, Maharashtra state is having number one position for farmer suicides cases since decades.

The impact of lockdown had more effect on labour class, daily wagers and farmers. The index of 8-core industries fell by 38.6% in April. Three months later in June 2020, the index was still 15% lower than it was a year

ago. Professional forecasters' estimates compiled by Reserve Bank of India (RBI) during late July–early August 2020 showed that real GDP was expected to shrink 22.8% in the quarter ended June 2020 compared to the corresponding quarter of the previous year (Vyas, 2020). Such an economic crisis had detrimental effects on women farmers than the male farmers. Moreover, as nearly 90% of the farmer suicides in the country are committed by males, there exists a sharp rise in number of widows. As a result, the large number of widows or female members in suicide affected households are suddenly forced to take up agriculture activities without a choice. The number of women-headed households is increasing as a result of farmer suicides (Kumar R. and Chitra KP, 2020). The present study tries to explore the consequential effects National Lockdown on women farmers.

Objectives and Methodology

The main objective of the study is to know the impact of lockdown on women farmers in Wardha district of Maharashtra state in India. The impact of lockdown on women farmers in this study has been identified through economic and social capitals. The situation of lockdown and pandemic do not allow researcher to collect data from field itself. So, here, researchers have contacted the women farmers through phone call and conducted telephonic interview with 10 widow farmers with their concern. Participated widow farmers are also victim of farmer suicides, involve in the agricultural activity and also head their family. Telephonic interviews have been conducted in the last week of August, 2020. Moreover, also secondary data have been used to support the study and understand the factual situation. Considering the nature of the study, qualitative methodology was applied for the study and descriptive research design was adopted. The data transcripts from the telephonic interviews have been coded and analysed thematically to explain the impact of lockdown on women farmers.

Area of Study

Wardha district of Maharashtra state is the area of study where telephonic interviews have been conducted for the study. District Wardha is one of the smallest and the least populated districts in the Maharashtra State. District boundaries are fixed by river Wardha and so the district is called Wardha. River Wardha flows along the entire northern, western and partly southern border of the district, separating it from Amravati and Yavatmal districts. Wardha district is having 946/1000 sex ratio, 87 percent literacy rate and highest number of uninhabited villages (403) in the state (Census of India, 2011). Wardha district is also one of the parts of Vidarbha region. Vidarbha is the eastern region of Maharashtra state made up of Nagpur Division and Amravati Division. It occupies 31.6% of total area and holds 21.3% of total population of Maharashtra (Vidarbha, 2020). Vidarbha region is one of the most farmer suicides zone of Maharashtra. Vidarbha region includes 11 districts out of 36 districts of Maharashtra (GoM, 2020). According to Wardha district office, from January 2001 to October 2017, 1447 farmers have committed suicide in Wardha district alone (Office, 2017). Most of the cases belong to small and marginal farmers. The factors behind farmer suicides in Wardha districts are associated with repeating crop loss, indebtedness and climate changes (TISS, 2005). Wardha is a drought prone district where production of cotton and oil is the important non-agricultural economic activities.

Impact of the Lockdown on Widow Farmers

The condition of the suicide affected family with women farmers bearing all responsibilities is very pathetic. Since, most of women farmers belong to small and marginal farming classes, they have very limited alternative resources to depend upon. Most of the women farmers are under huge indebtedness and other challenges. The global pandemic has brought extra unanticipated challenges to women farmers who are already affected from farmer suicides. As Lockdown effected most economic sector including agriculture and how women farmers were affected by it is discussed here in the term of economic, social and health capitals.

- I. Economic Capital:** Financial Capital is a parameter to identify the savings and regular inflows of money. The study on economic capital of widow

farmers are more necessary in the overview of the pandemic. Most of women farmers are identified as daily wagers who run their house. During the lockdown, daily wagers have been suffered more than ever. Those women farmers who are affected by farmer's suicides have developed excess depression in addition to the existing problems in their livelihood.

- a) **Extra burden of expenses:** Lockdown was unexpected for people especially for the labour classes who suffered at all levels. Lockdown emerged as more adverse to widow farmers who found purchasing of masks and sanitizer/soap an extra burden of expenses. New education mood during lockdown was also crucial to widow farmers as most of them did not have multimedia mobile phone. The induction of online classes forced some of widow farmers to borrow for smart phones so that their children can continue their online classes. But mostly, widow farmers were failed to buy smart phone and their child were unable to attend online classes. Even, agricultural product prices had increased due to lockdown. Public transportation was not available during Lockdown and they were using reserved auto to anywhere. A widow farmer during telephonic interview said that;

“My son lost job for 3 months due to lockdown. My daughter is in 12th. She needed a smart phone to attend online classes. We had soybeans planted in the land, but due to excessive rainfall, the yield was reduced. I arranged the money and got a smart phone for the daughter's education. Right now we are not getting financial help from anywhere and we are also not getting daily wages. These are difficult times for us” (Anita; 29th August, 2020).

These situations are not normal for a widow farmer. Many widow farmers from the field reported experience of difficulty and various kind of problem due to lockdown and insufficient support from the local or central government.

- b) **Impact on daily wagers and salaried:** Suddenly lockdown closed small industries/shops. Wardha district has more small scale industries where labours are working on daily wages. Unexpected lockdown affected these

industries and most of the labours were forced to remain at home for three months.

A widow farmer during telephonic interview said that;

“My son used to work in a shop but due to the lockdown he lost job there and I did not even get daily wages. We spent the first three months by arranging money somehow”. (Rekha, 29th August, 2020).

Such situation were common to almost all widow and women farmers in the field.

II. Social Capital: Social capital is the network of relationship among people who live and work in a particular society, which include social resources, neighbourhood, mutual trust and support. The social capital basically associates with power and cast in India. Farmer community has their own social status as a farmer. But in India context, the farming community is very diverse in many ways. The upper cast farmers are those who hold large extent of land. In the context of Maharashtra territory, farmer suicides cases are identified in small and marginal farmer's and big farmers are least affected. Basically, in Wardha district, most of farmer suicides cases happened among Other Backward Caste farmers. Cast, Class and Gender matter in patriarchal society more than anything. During the lockdown many unexpected problem suddenly emerged which effected the normal social relationships and connectivity the widow farmers as well as women farmers were worst affected by the resultant isolation by the lockdown

a) Insecurity: During the lockdown period, people's gathering and movement were very less even in rural area. In such situation women headed the family have suffered more than their male counterparts. In the beginning of lockdown, strict police surveillance restricted the mobilisation of people especially women either to get to their agriculture land or to job sites. The aired atmosphere of confusion and fear by Covid19 had put the women more tied to security concerns of children and others than men and it ceased their chances to get daily labour work. The unassisted traveling of women being an existing problem of safety in the country was further restrained as roads and public spaces were laid vacated

by people. They were neither confident on government support nor their on economic condition..

- b) Communication Gap:** The abrupt lockdown in the country was received by people with much surprise and confusion. People were not prepared to handle such situation. During the lockdown, information was issued from time to time about the convenience being provided by the government to the public. Due to not following the right source of information, many people had to face a lot of problems. Especially those women who are running their house, faced a lot of problems. Being a woman farmer is a difficult task in itself. After talking to the respondents, it was found that most of the women farmers, especially widow farmers here had to face a lot of problems due to not getting the right information on. Even in the city, one day shops were opened on one side and some day on the other side. In such a situation, if we went to buy the same for farming, then it was known that today shops here are not open. Then, in coming to the city, there was also the loss of money over time.

Discussion

Pandemic has sweeping effect in almost all countries especially Asian countries which have been fighting ground to tackle the basic problems affecting their people. As an aspiring Asian country India in fact, has not have sufficient backup plan to support marginal and needy people in an unanticipated crisis like pandemic. One of the most complicated task India faced up during the initial phase of Lockdown was the reverse flow of migrant workers in the wake of pandemic. It resulted that Migrants workers in large numbers walked thousands of miles towards home in the initial month of lockdown. As many government failed to settled people and provide them accommodation or travel facility for returning home there was a large number of casualties in this phase.

During the lockdown, activities contributing to the production and supply of essential goods and services were completely or partially suspended. It affected all categories of people including workers/labours and farmers as well. During this time, government supports were very less than expected. Farming sector which has been under constant crisis had immediate effects

of lockdown due to stopped transportations, and unviability of agricultural products. In such situation, the independent women farmers who are less privileged to male farmers had to depend on others for everything. During the lockdown major changes occurred in lifestyle like smart phone was compulsory to attend online classes, private vehicle arrangement for moving anywhere etc. which were not affordable by all. Women being a widow and having to arrange food to feed their child were excruciated by the situation. They did not get sufficient support except some Rashaan and Rs. 500 in JandhanKhata for few months.

Conclusion

Unexpected lockdown badly affected the lives of migrant's workers, daily labours, small industries and farmers as well. No one was prepared to handle this situation which emerged due to the pandemic COVID 19 and the resulted predetermined nationwide lockdown. Women farmers and widow farmers were already suffering from male dominant policies and agricultural infrastructure. The pandemic played devastating role in hammering the personal and professional standards of living of women farmers who dealt with all levels of job from cropping to selling and child rearing. Many widows lost their core income from daily wages for months and went under debt. Even, some widow farmers increased debt double only in few months due to extra burden of expenses. Furthermore, the travel restrictions during lockdown also downplayed the efforts to deal with the problems. However, most of the respondents said that there were no cases of Covid19 in their village where more relief for farming work given by local administration.

The daily wage labourers were further affected by the massive inflow of returning migrant farmers who also sought work in their locality. Returning migrant workers from city. In such cases, most of farmers were restricted to work in their land itself instead of calling others. It is inferred that, considering the situation, local and central government should have made a list of vulnerable people like women farmers with special focus on widow farmers, so that the problems could be effectively taken care of.

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