

## **COVID-19 Lockdown: The situation in Birdhana village, Haryana**

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Birdhana village, located in the Fatehabad district of the state of Haryana, is a large village comprising over 2500 households. The village has several large-scale farmers, who own over fifty acres of land each, many medium-scale and small farmers, as well as a large population of long-term workers (siris) and casual workers. Farmers in Birdhana grow wheat and mustard in the rabi season, paddy and cotton in the kharif season, green fodder crops for livestock and seasonal vegetables (potato, tomato, okra, bitter gourd, ridge gourd, spinach, etc.). Non-agricultural occupations in which workers are engaged include construction and loading/unloading, drivers, shop assistant jobs and casual agricultural labour. Birdhana has a market with several shops that are owned and run by the residents. These include eateries, agricultural input shops, agricultural machinery repair shops, construction material stores, garment shops and general provision stores.

This essay summarizes the present situation in Birdhana based on telephonic interviews conducted with three informants in the village on March 27, 2020: a medium-scale peasant who owns fifteen acres of land, a long-term agricultural worker working for one-fifth of the total crop produce, and a Muslim blacksmith who owns a small workshop in which he makes various things from metal sheets.

The fields in Birdhana currently have standing crops of wheat and mustard. While the mustard is ready to be harvested now, wheat harvesting must begin by April 10. The harvesting of chickpea, cauliflower and potato was already underway when the lockdown was imposed. Farmers in the village are currently uncertain about whether they will be allowed to harvest their crops. A potato farmer in the village had mobilized fifteen workers to harvest his crop but was stopped by the police. His crop was destroyed because he could not harvest it in time. Farmers are worried that they will incur heavy losses if they are unable to harvest their wheat crop or if the government does not procure the wheat.

Farmers also sow seasonal vegetables at this time of the year for their own consumption and to sell at the local markets. The lockdown that began on March 24 has resulted in the cessation of all activities in the village. Farmers are thus unable to sell the vegetables that they have already harvested. One of the respondents reported being turned away by commission agents at the local mandi when he went there on March 25 to sell cauliflower. "Cauliflower used to sell at the rate of Rs 15 per kg," he said, "Now they are not ready to buy them even at Rs 2 per kg." Eventually, he ended up feeding the cauliflower to his cattle. Another respondent reported that the price of tender (green) chickpeas has fallen from Rs 30 per kg to below Rs 10 per kg.

Even as farmers are finding it difficult to sell their produce, they are simultaneously finding that the retail prices of vegetables even in the local village market have risen considerably. The price of tomatoes has increased to Rs 50 per kg from 25 per kg, while the price of potatoes has risen from Rs 20 per kg to Rs 30 per kg. In Birdhana, medium-scale peasants, poor tenant farmers and agricultural workers do not have much stock of wheat left. A delay in harvesting the wheat crop will create problems

of access to the basic grain for the poorest among them. At the time that these interviews were conducted, ration shops in the village were not functioning.

One of the respondents pointed out that the price of the oil-cakes that are fed to animals has increased from Rs 1180 for a fifty-kg bag to about Rs 1400 per bag after the lockdown. Animal feed shops are running short of supply and have been raising their prices. As a result, the respondent said he was feeding his animals only dry straw and green berseem fodder that he harvested every day from his own field.

All the shops in the village except the local provision stores are closed. The agricultural inputs shops are also closed and farmers are not able to buy seeds for sowing okra, ridge gourd and bitter melon, all of which are usually sown at this time of year. Farmers often keep some land fallow for growing vegetables. Vegetables produced on these small plots of land are not only an important source of regular cash flow for farmers but are also important for diversity of their diet. In addition, peasants who rear livestock used to sell milk twice a day to milkmen who, in turn, sold the milk in the town. The milkmen now come for collection of milk from peasants only once a day. There is anxiety and fear among them as well that the police may stop them from trading milk. A large number of workers who commuted about twelve km to Fatehabad town for casual labour and various other non-agricultural occupations (including street vending, petty trade and shop assistant jobs) were unable to work.

To conclude, the impact of the lockdown thus far has been differential. Non-agricultural workers have been unable to work since the announcement of the lockdown brought all activity in the village to a halt. With the cessation of all agricultural work, farmers have already incurred substantial losses through not being able to sell their produce. There is considerable anxiety over the mustard harvest, which has not begun despite the crop being ready, and over whether farmers will be able to harvest and sell wheat, the most important crop grown by the village. Poor tenants and agricultural workers, who did not have stocks of grain and have had to buy vegetables from the market, would be more severely affected because of a delay in harvesting of wheat and because of a rise in the retail prices of these commodities.

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