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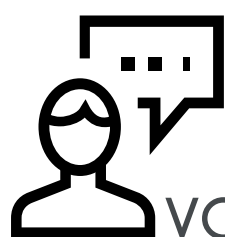
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VOLUME 01 – POST 03 **THE LOCKDOWN: HUNGRY PEOPLE AND FAILED GOVERNANCE**

Present Economic Condition of Dalits in Rural Bihar: Study Report

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VOLUME 01 - POST 03

THE LOCKDOWN: HUNGRY PEOPLE AND FAILED GOVERNANCE

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The Lockdown: Hungry People and Failed Governance

Present Economic
Condition of Dalits in Rural
Bihar: Study Report



On 24 March, Indian prime minister announced the news of national lockdown as a measure to combat spread of corona virus. The lockdown was successively extended till 31 May, 2020. Generally speaking, the impact of the lockdown on various segments of our population has been highlighted at various levels.

During the lockdown period, we have received news from our sisters and brothers of dalit communities in rural Bihar about the hardships faced by them. We have also heard stories of hunger. Hunger and other economic hardships faced by



the most economically vulnerable households in rural Bihar have gone unnoticed. It is our considered conclusion that the present economic situation confronted by the most vulnerable households in rural Bihar needs to be highlighted to enable the government to urgently address the concerns.

This study is an honest and reasonable attempt from our side to bring the reality of hunger and deprivation encountered by a majority of dalit households in rural Bihar into mainstream discourse in the state and to the notice of the government for urgent action.

At the outset, we admit that the study results are more suggestive than conclusive. The relatively small sample size and other limitations of the study prevent us from stating that the results are conclusive. However, our findings do suggest that there is an urgent need for the government to take note of the prevailing economic situation of dalit and tribal communities in rural Bihar in the context of the lockdown and thereafter.

It is hoped that the findings of the study would draw the attention of the state government and the general public as a first step towards alleviation of the hunger and serious economic distress faced by the dalit communities in rural

Bihar, especially by the most vulnerable communities such as the Musahars, the Doms, the Khairas, and others.

This study is undertaken by the Alliance for Dalit Rights, Bihar. The Alliance is grateful to Fr. (Dr) Anto Joseph who coordinated the study for the Alliance and those who assisted him in the completion of the study in a short time. We are also grateful to all the respondents whose responses are presented as the findings of the study.

Methodology

The objective of the study was to comprehend the present economic reality among the dalit and tribal communities in rural Bihar among whom the individuals of the alliance live and work. The study is, therefore, limited to dalit and tribal communities in Bihar.

The study is based on data collected from 1400 dalit and tribal households selected through purposive random sampling. The districts and development blocks were purposively chosen from the point of view feasibility in collecting data in a short period of time. The panchayats, hamlets, and households from the purposively chosen districts and blocks were selected randomly. Structured questionnaire was prepared to collect information on the economic wellbeing of households during the period of the lockdown and on availing of benefits of welfare schemes. The data collected through structured interviews by experienced enumerators were analyzed using SPSS software.

Table 1: The Sample

Sample	Size
Districts	14
Development Blocks	28
Panchayats	56
Villages/Hamlets	112
Households	1400
Scheduled Castes	85.4 %
Scheduled Tribes	14.6 %
Women Respondents	63.9 %
Men Respondents	37.1 %

Three findings summarize the study: There is widespread hunger among the dalit and tribal communities in rural Bihar; a large number of them have not received the benefits of welfare schemes that would have immensely helped them to tide over the crisis; and they want the government to urgently provide them with employment.



Salient Features of the Sample

The sample consisted of a total 1200 households. The primary source of income and monthly average income of the households prior to the lockdown situation is given in Table 2 and Table 3 respectively.



Table 2: Percentage of Households by Primary Sources of Income

Income Source	Percent Population
Daily Wage labor	79.62
Daily Pheri / small shops	05.39
Cultivation	04.60
Migrant Labor	11.70

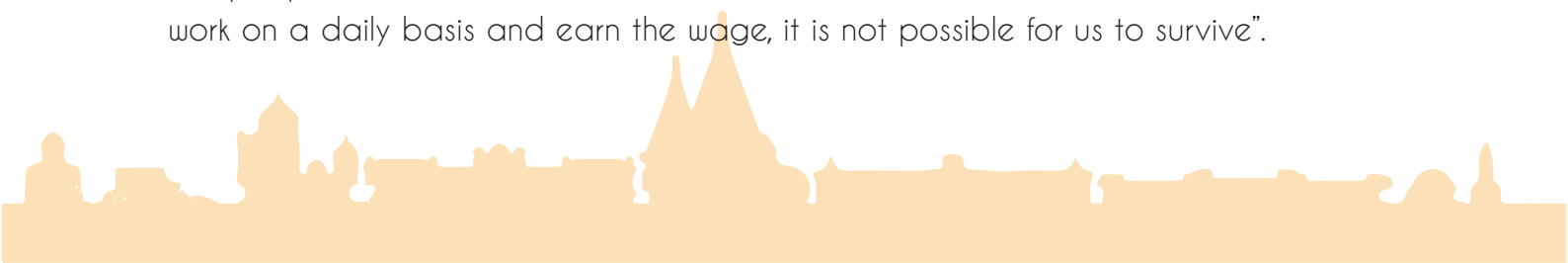
The table suggests that except for those who have cultivation and remittance income as the primary source of income, for the rest, nearly 85 per cent, daily earning is the source of income. This fact is expressed in what they say about their condition: "ham kamate hai to kate hai, nahin kamate hain to kahan se khayenge".

The monthly income earned by nearly 50 per cent of the sample households in rural Bihar is reported to be below Rs. 3000.00. The same for another 29 per cent is reported to be in the range of Rs.3000 to Rs. 5000. The majority of those who had income above Rs. 5000 have remittance income as the primary source of income.

Table 3: Percentage of Households by Monthly Income

Monthly Household Income Range	Per cent Households
Below Rs 3000	48.60
3000 to 5000	30.00
5000 to 8000	14.30
Above 8000	07.10

The people themselves summarize their condition thus: "We earn and live. If we do not work on a daily basis and earn the wage, it is not possible for us to survive".



When the Lockdown was announced...

Table 3 and 4 highlights the food security of the sample population on the day of announcement of the lockdown. Nearly 15 per cent had no grain stock at all; and nearly 49 per cent had grains to last only for a few days. Only about 2 per cent dalit households were in a way 'food secure'. Of course we can consider another 19 per cent households which had grain stock at least for two months as food secure households.

Table 4: Food Grain Stock at the Time of Lockdown

Grain Stock Availability	Percent Households
1. Available for the one year	02.0
2. Available for atleast two months	18.8
3. Available for about a month	15.3
4. Available only for a few days	49.4
6. Not available at all	14.5

A similar situation is found regarding cash available with them on the day of lockdown announcement. It is reported that 27 per cent households did not have any cash with them when the lock down was announced; and 36 per cent had only a few hundred rupees available with them. About 32 per cent of households had a few thousand rupees while about 5 per cent had sufficient cash to meet emergency situations such as the lockdown.

Table 5: Cash in Hand at the Time of Lockdown

Cash Availability	Percent Households
1. There was enough cash in hand	04.5
2. A few thousand rupees	32.4
3. Only a few hundred rupees a	36.1
4. No cash	27.0

The conclusion is inescapable! At the time when the Lock Down began, a substantial percent of dalit households in rural Bihar had neither food grains nor cash to ensure their food security and nutritional food intake beyond a few days. Is there a situation of 'bhookmari' in rural Bihar among the most economically vulnerable communities? The answer is simple as one among them put it: Kamate hain to khaté hai, nahin kamate hain to nahin khaté hain; ab aap samajhiye bhookmari hai ya nahin".

Was there Hunger; Starvation?

The study explored from the respondents if they encountered hunger; if they had to substantially cut down on food. The responses were startling! Nearly 90 per cent respondents acknowledged that they faced acute problems to avail food during the period of lockdown. Nearly 74 per cent of those who had responded as saying having food hardships is reported to have gone hungry; some for two days, some for a few days, some every now and then.



Table 6: Did you encounter food related hardship during April – May Period?

Response	Percent Households
Yes	89.6
No	10.4

Exploring further, the study enquired if the households had to cut down on food during the period. That was the case for a vast majority of the sample households! Nearly 90 per cent households had to cut down on food as a daily practice. In a situation where the basket of food normally consumed by the most economically vulnerable communities in rural Bihar is insufficient in terms of its nutritional content, one can imagine what it means to encounter a situation of further cutting down from the normal food basket. For example, one explained: “we normally cooked two kilos of rice in a day; and during the lockdown we cooked only one kilo a day”. Another explained what it meant to cut down on food: “We cooked rice what is enough for one time. But we added water and consumed it such that it can last till the next day”. Another explained: “daal evam sabji hamare naseeb nahin tha; we ate rice with water or with salt”. Some said, “bache aur barde bhi taad ka phal khakar pani peete the, bhook mit jaata tha”. They also informed us that they used to eat the fruits of palm tree and drank water to quench their hunger.

How shall we conclude these responses and what the respondents have narrated? Is there hunger among the most vulnerable households in rural Bihar? The above findings and what we

have encountered among the in rural Bihar, we are categorical in concluding there had been serious situation of hunger during the Lockdown. It is for anyone to guess what would the long term impact of hunger and drastic reduction in the food basket consumed by the poor? There is already much poverty and malnutrition among the most vulnerable dalit communities in Bihar. The period of lockdown was a nightmare!

The Performance of Government Welfare Schemes

The above scenario necessarily explores how far the welfare schemes enabled the households to withstand the enormous economic hardship they had faced. The findings suggest that there is much to be desired in this respect. A substantial section among the dalits and tribals in rural Bihar did not have access to the benefits of welfare schemes during this period of extreme hardship, hunger, and even starvation.

The government - central and state - had announced a number of welfare measures to enable the poor to cope with the hardships during the lockdown. We explored if the households availed the benefits of these crucial schemes. The following are our findings:

Ration under Public Distribution System

Food security ensured through Public Distribution System is the lifeline of the poor. Accessibility to ration under the NFSA is so essential for an average dalit household to survive even during normal times. One would, therefore, would expect that no one among them fail to have access to ration during this period of lockdown. However, that was not the case!

- o Nearly 17 per cent in April and 36 per cent in May did not receive regular ration
- o Nearly 22 per cent in April and 40 per cent in May did not receive free ration

Table 8: Did You Receive Regular Ration April and May 2020

Reponse	Per cent Households in April	Per cent Households in May
Yes	82.80	64.40
No	17.20	35.60



Table 9: Did you Receive Free Ration in April and May 2020Response

Response	Per cent Households in April	Per cent Households in May
Yes	77.60	60.30
No	22.40	39.70

Lock Down Cash Benefits

Both the Union Government and the State Government had announced cash benefits to the poor during the lockdown. In one village, we were told, a person had gone to the bank three times to find out whether or not the money has been transferred to his account. He walked a distance not less than six kilometers to reach the bank. He informed us that he had to walk empty stomach all those three days! The following are the findings:

- o Nearly 47 per cent households did not receive Rs. 1000 till the end of May 2020
- o Nearly 40 percent did not receive Rs. 500 under Jandhan scheme in April and 59 per cent did not receive in May

Table 10: Did you Receive Rs. 1000 from the State Government?

Received either in April or May	Percent Households
Yes	53.20
No	46.80

Table 11: Did you Receive Rs. 500 in April and May 2020

Response	Percent Households in April	Percent Households in May
Yes	60.00	41.80
No	40.00	59.20



Rural Employment Scheme

MANREGA is considered a major scheme revived by the government to offer help to the rural households during the time of lockdown. How has this scheme performed? The finding is devastating. The study finds that Nearly 93 per cent households did not receive employment under the scheme in April and 94 per cent did not receive employment in May. If this is the condition of a scheme that could have immensely helped the households to withstand their loss of income from regular wage labor, one can imagine the extent of governance gap that exist at various levels in the state..

Table 12: Have You Received Employment under MNREGA ?

Response	Percent Households in April	Percent Households in May
Yes	07.20	06.40
No	92.80	93.60

Mid Day Meal and ICDS

Midday Meal and ICDS programs are integral component of ensuring food security for children below 6 years, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women. During the lockdown, it was announced that an equivalent amount shall be transferred to each household for ensuring that children and women are not deprived of balanced food intake during the lockdown. The government did intend; however, the findings suggest that it remained, by and large, at the level of announcement.

**Table 13:
Did You Receive Money in Place of Cooked Meal Served for
Children in Anaganwadi**

Response	Percent Households in April	Percent Households in May
Yes	07.89	06.77
No	92.11	93.21



- o As far as midday meal is concerned, nearly 79 per cent received an equivalent amount in April and 89 per cent in May as announced by the government
- o Nearly 92 per cent respondents in April and 93 per cent in May did not receive any amount for Children below 6 years or pregnant and lactating women.

Table 14: Did You Receive Money in Place of Cooked Meal in Schools?

Response	Percent Households in April	Percent Households in May
Yes	13.80	14.40
No	84.20	86.60

A similar picture emerged regarding the pension schemes. If those eligible for the pensions schemes had received their pension, it would have helped them immensely. However, it was not the case. A majority of them did not receive.

Conclusion

The rural economic scenario demanded that the government ensured that every household received the benefits of at least the above mentioned welfare schemes. The picture that emerges is that government failed these households. The same administrative and practical bottlenecks and corruption remained intact. The findings suggest there was no urgency from the side of the government at appropriate levels to deliver on the schemes. The extraordinary situation encountered by the poor in fact called for extraordinary measures from the government so that the poor are helped and offered confidence.

Increased Indebtedness

As a matter of fact, our study shows that lockdown has contributed to indebtedness among the dalit households.

Table 15: Did you borrow Grains or Money from others during April – May 2020?

Response	Percent Households	
	Grains	Cash
Yes	82.00	84.8
No	18.00	15.2



It is reported in the survey that nearly 82 per cent of households have borrowed grain and 85 per cent have taken loan either from money lenders or from shop keepers for purchase of essential food items. While 65 per cent of those who borrowed money borrowed less than two thousand; 19 per cent borrowed anything between two and five thousand and 9 per cent borrowed more than five thousand during the two months of the lockdown.

According to a question what hardships did the respondents face during the lockdown period of April and May, nearly 56 per cent reported that food scarcity was the major hardship they encountered during the lock down.

Table 16: What is the most crucial hardship that you faced during the Lockdown?

Most Crucial Hardship Faced by Households	Percent Households
Food Scarcity	45.5
Unemployment	11.3
Mobility	32.4
Health Issues	05.0
Others	05.8

What the Dalits Expect from the Government

We put before the respondents a solemn question: 'if you are asked to demand one thing from the government, what would you demand?' The response had been emphatic, categorical spontaneous. About 76 per cent respondents wanted employment from the government; another 19 per cent wanted food (ration both regular as well as special).

Table 17: What would your one Demand to the Government be?

Response Desired from the Government	Percent Households
Employment	75.9
Food	16.7
Others	07.4



Conclusion

The findings of the study highlight that there is economic distress, hardship, hunger, and starvation among a substantial section among the dalits in rural Bihar. This is particularly so among the most vulnerable among the dalits, namely the Musahars, Doms, Khairas, and so on. There is huge gap in the accessibility of these households to welfare schemes that can be of immense help. According to the respondents, the situation still remains the same and that they are afraid, their economic hardships would become worse in days and months to come. They do want the government to reach out to them.

From our side we would add that food security of the big segment of dalits in rural Bihar have collapsed leading to serious situation of hunger and possible starvation. The situation demands urgent action from all of us including the government.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings, the study recommends:

1. Provide regular and free ration to all dalit and tribal households for a period of six months without any terms and conditions such as Ration Card, Adhaar card. Make ration available from the first week of every month.
2. Provide 100 days employment to one member from every dalit / tribal households within the next five months whether or not households possess Job Card
3. Initiate steps for providing nutritious food for all children below 14 years, adolescent girls, and pregnant and lactating women of dalit / tribal households
4. Transfer Rs. 5000 /- to all dalit and tribal households in view of their increased indebtedness and food shortage
5. Appoint competent authorities at the various levels who would be accountable for ensuring cent percent accessibility of dalit / tribal households to all welfare schemes already existing and those mentioned above

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