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**THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RURAL DALIT HOUSEHOLDS
OBSERVATIONS FROM TWO VILLAGES IN TAMIL NADU**



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THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND RURAL DALIT HOUSEHOLDS OBSERVATIONS FROM TWO VILLAGES IN TAMIL NADU

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has become a deadly threat to human beings throughout the world. World Health Organization (WHO) declared the outbreak of COVID-19 a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. The Indian government took extra-ordinary measures to contain the transmission of the coronavirus that causes the disease, and imposed a nation-wide complete lockdown of economic activities except emergency services on March 24, 2020. This situation lasted till May 31, 2020 after which the lockdown measures were gradually relaxed and tightened in measured ways. The complete economic lockdown has disrupted the normal life of the entire population. As with all natural and man-made disasters, the poor and marginalized are most vulnerable and therefore suffer the most damage from the impact of the pandemic. A major cause for the suffering of the poor and the under privileged is the lack of access to resources. Dalits, referred to as Scheduled Castes by the constitution of India, are a social group consisting of people deemed to have been born into lowest castes. Dalits have been discriminated against in every walk of life in the rural areas. They continue to live in segregated settlements in villages, and are over represented among the landless and the poor, forming a significant marginalized community in India. The 2011 Census of India finds that Scheduled Castes form 16.6 per cent of the total population.

This note attempts to examine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Dalit households in rural India. Specifically, this note investigates the impact of the pandemic on employment, indebtedness and coping strategies, food security, and education, with a special focus on two villages in Tamil Nadu. The note is based on data collected from telephonic surveys conducted by the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS) as part of its Pandemic Study Unit (FAS – PSU).

CONCEPTS AND METHOD

The FAS-PSU survey was conducted through telephone interviews between mid-September and mid-October, 2020 from 164 informants in 26 villages across 13 States of India. Detailed socio-economic surveys of 24 of these villages have been conducted by the FAS over the past decade under a programme of village studies titled the Project on Agrarian Relations in India (PARI). A socio-economic classification of households was undertaken based on previous survey for all the

PARI villages.[‡] This was based on the three classical criteria used to differentiate the countryside, namely, control over the means of production, relative use of family and hired labour, and the surplus that a household is able to generate within a working year.

Households were categorized broadly into the following five classes (Ramachandran 2017):

1. Manual Workers: Households where major income comes from hiring out their labour on the land of others as well as at tasks outside of crop production.
2. Poor Peasants: Households engaged in agriculture, with low asset value and land holding, high use of family labour, hiring out their labour to other cultivators.
3. Rich/Middle Peasants: Households engaged in cultivation, with relatively higher land holding and asset value, low use of family labour, not often hiring out their labour to other cultivators.
4. Landlords/Big Capitalist Farmers: The households that own substantial amount of land, generally the best land in the villages; the members of landlord households do not participate in the major agricultural operations on the land.
5. Other non-agricultural classes such as those Self-employed in business, Remittances from internal migration, and so on: Households with majority of annual income from said activity.

One or two credible informants were selected from each socio-economic class in all the villages. The 26 villages represent a socio-economically diverse cross-section of villages in India. The questions in the interviews sought primarily to understand the effects of the pandemic on agricultural production, employment, income, and food security in rural India. The interviews were conducted with full consent of the informants.

[‡] In Kerala, two village panchayats were surveyed by the Economic Analysis Unit, Indian Statistical Institute, Bangalore, in 2018–19, and sample households were selected for the present survey based on the size of total operational landholdings (less than 1 hectare, 1–2 hectares, and more than 2 hectares).

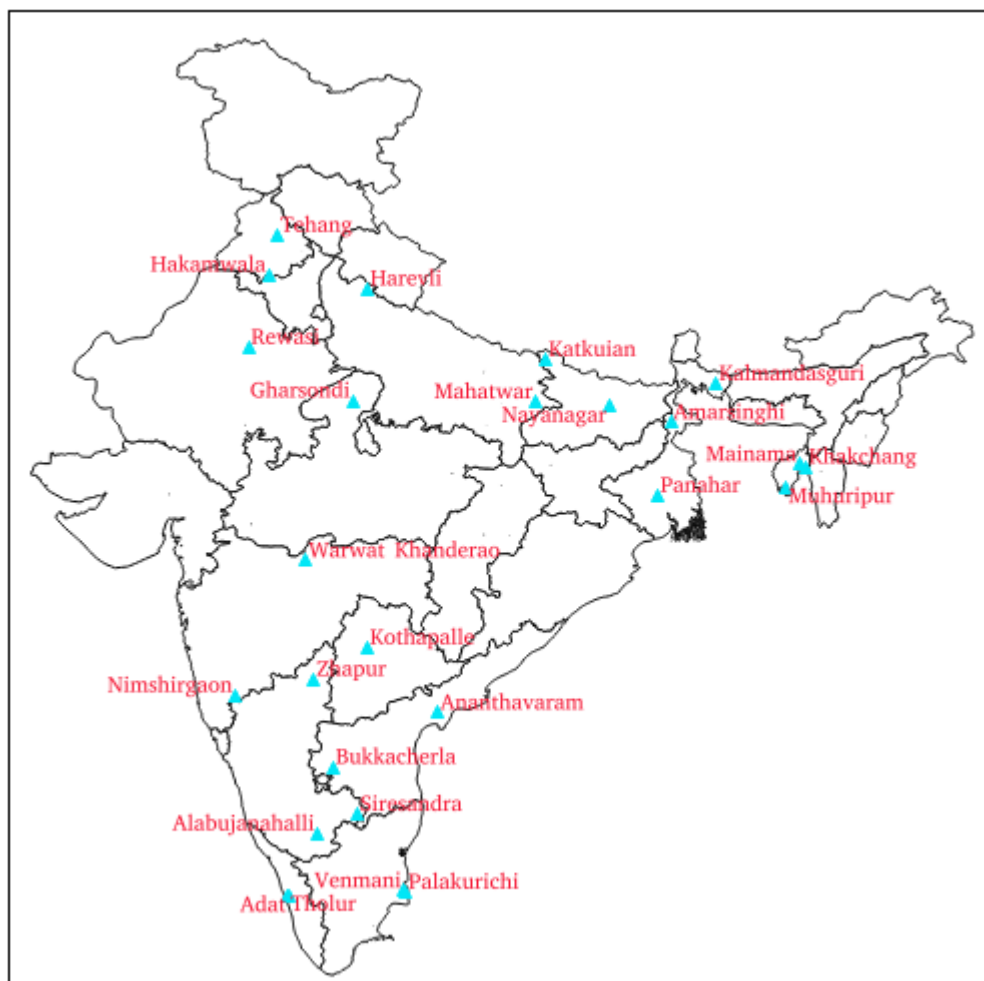


Figure 1 *Location of study villages*

Of the total 164 informants, 47 were from Dalit households, and 8 from households that belonged to the Scheduled Tribes. Of the total 164 informants, 22 were from landlord/capitalist farmer households, 36 from rich/middle peasant households, 45 from poor peasant households, 38 manual worker households, and the remaining 23 from households engaged in business and other non-agricultural activities. Dalit households were belonged to all socioeconomic classes except the Landlord/Capitalist farmer class, though almost half of the households were belonged to the class of manual workers (Table 1).

Table 1 Distribution of informants by social groups and socioeconomic classes, 26 villages, India, in number and per cent

Socioeconomic Class	Scheduled caste		Scheduled tribe		Others		All	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	in	Number	%
Landlord/Capitalist	0	0	0	0	22	18	22	11
Farmer								
Rich/Middle Peasant	2	4	2	25	32	31	36	23
Poor Peasant	16	34	4	50	25	22	45	27
Manual Worker	21	45	2	25	15	14	38	24
Others	8	17	0	0	15	16	23	15
Total	47	100	8	100	109	100	164	100

Source: FAS-PSU survey 2020

Table 2 Distribution of surveyed households in two villages of Tamil Nadu, by social groups, in number

Village	Scheduled caste	Most backward class	Backward class	All
Palakurichi	6	2	3	11
Venmani	6	-	1	7
Total	12	2	4	18

Source: FAS-PSU survey 2020

Of the 18 households surveyed from the selected two villages in Tamil Nadu, 12 were belonged to the Scheduled Castes (Table 2). The distribution of households by socio-economic class is shown in appendix table 1. Dalit households were mostly poor peasant and manual worker socio-economic classes. The landlords/big capitalist farmers operated up to 60 acres of land, while rich/middle peasants cultivated more than 5 acres up to 15 acres of land, and poor peasants cultivated five acres or less in both villages.

OBJECTIVES AND STRUCTURE

As discussed, Dalits are a social group that forms about one-sixth of the population of India. In order to look at the effect of the pandemic on rural Dalit households, we first look at the general

effect of it on rural society, and see how these effects compare and contrast for rural Dalit households. The following aspects are examined:

1. Employment
2. Agriculture
3. Coping strategies and Indebtedness
4. Food security
5. Education

The immediate impact of the pandemic for rural India was felt with the nationwide lockdown of most economic activities, creating a downward pressure on rural employment and incomes. Agriculture, which was otherwise not significantly affected by the pandemic, had to play a crucial role in addressing this pressure. The coping strategies undertaken as a result of these immediate effects, especially to mitigate the income loss, would play crucial roles in averting longer term impacts such as impoverishment and malnutrition. Education is a key sector that warrants examination especially for the Dalit community, as it seen as a key path towards achieving equal opportunity for the community. Any losses in this sector would have long term implications as well.

Employment

The FAS-PSU survey, conducted in September-October 2020, collected information on both agricultural and non-agricultural employment of the household members. A note that focuses on employment and wages in rural India by Patra et al (2021) using the FAS-PSU data observes that there is a sharp deceleration in wage rates for major rural occupations at the all India level since lockdown. It notes that nominal wages in agricultural work mostly stagnated, and in fact led to a decline in real wages when deflated by the consumer price index for agricultural labourers (CPI-AL). Further, regarding non-agricultural employment, of which migration is a major componet, it noted:

“Due to travel restrictions, workers could not go outside the village for agricultural and non-agricultural work. This had a huge impact on overall days of employment particularly for the male workers. However, MGNREGA work played a fall-back to the casual worker households, but it was not sufficient enough to fulfill the gap. Some of the workers in Venmani village stated that "The number of labour days has decreased significantly because there was no way to go outside the village for work."

One of the findings of an earlier study by Modak et al (2020) based on village survey data during the first lockdown as follows:

“Non-agricultural work, which was crucial in the lean agricultural season, had completely collapsed. In the complete absence of non-farm employment, workers, and even artisans, were being forced to seek employment in agriculture. The reduced mobility due to the lockdown also implied that workers who otherwise regularly migrated for work were now competing for agricultural employment. As a consequence, a downward pressure on rural wage-rates was already beginning to be felt. The Covid-19 lockdown has broken down the complementary relationship between agricultural and non-agricultural work, where the surplus labour from the former was usually absorbed by the latter.” (Modak, Baksi, and Johnson 2020)

While Dalit households were less than a third of all surveyed households, more than half of the people engaged in wage work were from Dalit households – in both agricultural and non-agricultural employment. Non-agricultural employment was simply become unavailable, while agricultural wages declined in real terms as well. The loss of income from employment is an immediate short term impact that the pandemic had on a significant section of Dalit households as they are over-represented among manual workers.

Employment and Wages in Tamil Nadu Villages

In the villages of Palakurichi and Venmani, the agricultural season begins around July-August and lasts till February-March. Location at the tail end of the Cauvery delta, lack of access to ground water, and lack of other water markets, all result in a situation where cultivation is limited to one crop of paddy in the village. Therefore, the days of employment available in agriculture are limited. The preponderance of towns and cities at a commutable distance has meant a large share of the village population is engaged in semi-skilled and unskilled wage work in such places such as construction work, painting work, and electrical works. There is also a significant trend of short term migration for casual work to bigger urban centres within the state such as Chennai, Coimbatore and Tiruchirapally. One such respondent from a Dalit household reported thus:

“Return from Chennai happened when they started letting the migrants come back by bus a few days after the lockdown was initially announced. We did not face much trouble

on the way home. We wore masks while working for MGNREGA. Other than that there was no work at all for us during the pandemic.”

Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) is one of the social safety net programmes which should provide 100 days of unskilled wage employment to all households from the rural areas that volunteer to do the unskilled work. This is a major source of non-agricultural work available within the village. Tamil Nadu has done relatively well in terms of disbursing MGNREGA work, and this is supported by the survey data as well. Among the surveyed households, 26 workers from 12 households reported that they were engaged in MGNREGA work. These 12 households received on average 60 days of work, earning Rs. 200 per day. More than ninety per cent of those who reported MGNREGA work were from Dalit households.

Apart from MGNREGA work, only two households reported any non-agricultural work, both of which belonged to the Dalit community. One woman was employed as a coir worker within the village in addition to MGNREGA work, while her husband found employment as a mason for 15 days near the village. Another man was able to go for painting work in Nagapattinam for 10 days in early October once the transport restrictions were eased to some degree. On the other hand, unskilled and semi-skilled work such as loading and unloading work, carpentry, masonry was completely unavailable.

A respondent from Palakurichi said:

“[He] used to work as an electrician, construction worker and some other non-agricultural work like head-load work at the Direct Procurement Centre. But after the lockdown, all such non-agricultural work has disappeared. He started going for MGNREGA work for few days. But it was very difficult to find any other work in nearby urban centres.”

The availability of employment in small towns and cities in commutable distances has started to recover once bus services resumed operations in August-September, 2020. A respondent who worked as a painter for 10 days in Nagapattinam reported as follows regarding the matter:

“For Painting job [we] only started to go since buses were available, and we are going by buses (Rs. 25 one-way ticket price.) Employers do not provide transport, sometimes those who are friends with vehicles may take us.”

Agriculture

Agriculture continues to be a predominant economic activity in rural India today, even as those who engage in agriculture are not without differentiation. In the pandemic, the lack of income from non-agricultural employment outside the villages resulted in additional pressure on agriculture to generate employment and income. Dalit households in rural India continue to be significantly overrepresented among the landless and agricultural labourers; and Dalit households engaging in cultivation are often small farmers - a class which are more vulnerable to the shocks from factors such as input and diesel price hikes and supply chain disruptions.

A note on agriculture during the pandemic by Modak and Bhattacharya (2020) using the FAS-PSU data makes the following observation

“There was an increase in the acreage and output under kharif crops in 2020–21. This increase was, first, because of good and timely rainfall, and secondly, many households, including those with migrant-worker earnings in a normal year, returned to farming during the pandemic year, leasing in small plots of land. Thus, in some areas, the increase in acreage and output in kharif production was driven by the loss of work for migrant labour.”
(Modak and Bhattacharya 2021)

However, there was increases in cost of inputs, diesel, and hired labour which significantly increased the aggregate cost of cultivation of the kharif crops and as a consequence, it would have severe effects on income particularly for the small and marginal farmers.

Agriculture and agricultural labour in Tamil Nadu villages

A total of 18 households were interviewed from Palakurichi and Venmani villages, of whom 12 households owned land. All of them were cultivating paddy in the kharif season. Six of these cultivators were Dalit households, who had a cumulative cropped area of 27 acres, while the corresponding figure for six non-Dalit households was 123 acres (see Table 3). The data clearly explicate that there was an unequal distribution of land operated by social groups and the average land cultivated by the Dalit households was low as compared to that of MBC and BC households.

Information on number of farmers using inputs, such as, manure, fertilizer, seed, pesticide, irrigation and hired machine have also been collected during the survey. A close examination of

data on inputs indicate that there appears to be no difference in the number of farmers using the inputs and there was marginal difference in the nominal cost of inputs between the current year that is at the time of the survey and previous year's cultivation. Only non-Dalit farmers have used their own machine - tillers for ploughing the land. Together with a hike in diesel prices, this suggests the real cost of cultivation may have increased or at the very least did not come down. This is significant considering the added pressure from the collapse in non-agricultural employment discussed earlier.

Table 3 Land owned by the sample households, by social groups, in Palakurichi and Venmani

Social groups	Palakurichi			Venmani		
	Landless	Cultivators		Landless	Cultivators	
		Number	Area (in acres)		Number	Area (in acres)
SC	2	4*	11.00	4	2	16.00
MBC		2	48.00			
BC		3**	69.00		1	6.00
Total	2	9	128.00	4	3	22.00

Source: FAS-PSU survey 2020

Note: *one person also involved in business and another person involved in migration/remittance; ** one person was involved in business.

Dalit households in Palakurichi and Venmani form a substantial share of the small peasantry of the villages. One of the distinctive features of the marginal and small cultivators is that they are involved in both hiring-in and hiring-out of labourers for agricultural operations in India (Dhar 2017). Agricultural labourers perform work on agricultural farm owned by others.

All of the nine people who reported that they were engaged in any agricultural work for the past six months were from Dalit households. Five Dalit households (notably from different socio-economic classes) reported members engaged in agricultural labour; they were engaged in both hiring in and hiring out labour for agricultural operations. None of them reported more than seven days of agricultural work since the lockdown was announced till September 2020. All of them went to work within the village or in nearby villages. Most of the workers as well as those who hired in agricultural labour reported wages to be Rs. 500/day for men and Rs. 200/day for women.

Nonetheless, one Dalit woman who was engaged in agricultural work said:

“As daily wages we get Rs. 200/day + Tea + Vada/biscuit. But since the times are difficult, we 4-5 people together go for work and get piece rated contracts. The average income is around Rs. 50 per person in a day. This is very low, but the times are difficult. I went for about two months (labour days are only about 15-20 days) during the last six months within the village as well outside the village. I was engaged in transplantation and/or weeding work.”

The nominal wage rate in agricultural labour in the village is reported either to have declined or stagnated. As noted earlier, when deflated using CPI-AL, the real wages have in fact, declined.

In sum, the pandemic has created a situation where employment opportunities have declined sharply and wages are stagnating at best. Agricultural wages did not increase and often declined, even as more people depended on it in a greater degree. Dalit households in the villages tend to be markedly dependent on wage work as a source of income, and therefore the loss of income from these fronts affected them significantly. Dalit households that are engaged in cultivation did not see a significant reduction in cost of cultivation. The loss of income from employment as well as added pressure on agriculture is an immediate short term impact that the pandemic had on a significant section of Dalit households as they are over represented among both wage workers as well as small and marginal peasantry.

Coping Strategies and Indebtedness

Coping strategy is a method evolved by one to meet the consequences of an unforeseen event. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced the rural Dalit population to resort to various coping strategies not unlike the rest. The FAS-PSU survey investigates coping strategies adopted by rural households during the pandemic.

A note that focuses on food security and indebtedness during the pandemic by Niyati and Vijayamba based on FAS-PSU data makes the following observations:

“A little over a third (58 out of 164) of study households took loans to manage the livelihood crisis imposed by the pandemic. More than 80 per cent of these households

took loans from informal lenders. [...] Sixty per cent of all Scheduled Caste households reported taking loans, whereas the proportion for other caste households was 26 per cent.

Sixteen per cent of the households sold different types of assets. Scheduled Caste households (21 per cent) sold more assets than others (14 per cent). Distress sale of livestock holdings was prevalent.” (Niyati and Vijayamba 2021)

Entering in fresh debt and sale of assets when faced with decline in incomes and employment opportunity, as well as decline in food consumption, indicate distress. Dalit households being overrepresented here is indicative of the vulnerability of their position in the pandemic.

Support from governmental and non-governmental sources to help the population mitigate the crisis differ from region to region.[§] While the degree of support, also dependent on the effectiveness of disbursement of provisions, change from region to region, Dalit households tend to be significant beneficiaries of such actions at the very least owing to their vulnerable situation regarding incomes and debt pressures.

The cascading effects of the pandemic for the Dalit households, as discussed in earlier sections, result in them facing tremendous pressure to meet living expenses. This pressure is further compounded by the systemic barriers they face as a community especially in rural India such as differential access to credit and differential access to public institutions such as the Panchayat office or village revenue office.

Coping Strategies and Indebtedness in Tamil Nadu Villages

The state of Tamil Nadu has a notable presence of microfinance institutions that engage in joint liability lending. They have had considerable success in penetrating the rural credit market, and the villages of Palakurichi and Venmani are no exception. High rates of interest and coercive collection

[§] Every farmer in India is eligible receive Rs. 6000 per year given under the *Pradhan Mantri Kisan Samman Nidhi* in three instalments of Rs. 2000 each. During the lockdown, the Government of India have released its first instalment of Rs. 2000. PM Jan Dhan Yojana is national mission for financial inclusion that was launched on 28th August 2014. Cash assistance of Rs 500 was given to women holders of Jan Dhan accounts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some state governments have engaged in direct income transfers while some others have taken measures via mechanisms such as Public Distribution Systems, mid-day meal equivalents from schools and anganwadis, and community kitchens.

methods for repayment are some of the major concerns often associated with microfinance lending.

From these two villages, 15 out of the 18 households reported that they had availed fresh loans/mortgages since the lockdown, and 10 of them are Dalit households (12 Dalit households). Strikingly only 3 new loans were from microfinance institutions, all reported by Dalit households. Seven out of these ten Dalit households also reported pre-existing debts, most of which were from microfinance institutions.

A few responses from the informants regarding the microfinance lenders are given below:

“They paused collecting the dues for about one month at most, after the announcement of the lockdown. People have staged many protests and strikes to confront the ruthlessness of this, but nothing has happened to change the behaviour yet.”

“We pledged 2 sovereigns of gold for Rs. 20,000. We needed money to run the house, as well as to repay MFI loans after the first month of lockdown. A loan of Rs. 10,000 was taken from a local moneylender and repaid with Rs. 100 daily.”

“The MFI people did not collect repayments for one month, but the second month onwards they started asking. So we were forced to pledge gold as discussed.”

Thus, Dalit households took fresh loans, often pledging gold, not only to meet basic expenses but also to continue repaying existing debts predominantly from microfinance lenders. One third of Dalit households surveyed in Tamil Nadu villages reported that they sold assets, mostly livestock, since the lockdown, while only a sixth of non-Dalit households reported any sale of assets. Fresh borrowings and distress sale of assets to meet pressure to repay existing loans during a crisis that the pandemic has created are medium term losses that many Dalit households are encountering.

In addition to the support measures taken by the Government of India, Government of Tamil Nadu has distributed cash assistance of Rs. 1000 to all ration card holders through fair price shops as a one-time relief in Tamil Nadu. However, two Dalit households reported that they had not received any cash assistance during the lockdown. Among all 18 households canvassed, only one household reported that they received money in their Jan Dhan account. 13 households reported that they received a one-time payment of Rs. 1000 from the Government of Tamil Nadu. Apart

from the two landlord households, the three who did not report having received Rs 1000 were Dalit households. Meanwhile, all non-Dalit households received at least Rs. 1000 from the Government of Tamil Nadu.

In sum, a disproportionate share of Dalit households is exposed to medium term losses viz. distress sale of assets and deeper indebtedness. This is in order to meet the short term losses they face such as decline in incomes and employment, while facing increased pressure on cultivation. Even, a disproportionate share of Dalit are not receiving support measures provided by Governments. This is the cascading nature of the pandemic and its aftermath for the Dalit community.

Food Security and Nutrition

Rural India had a substantial section of malnourished populations even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden and prolonged lockdown and its economic impacts start affecting the ability of vulnerable sections of the population to procure food. Public Distribution System (PDS) is a significant mechanism that can help households with access to food and nutrition. The survey data covers sections on PDS and the change in consumption levels of food compared to before the onset of the pandemic. While it is once again, beyond the scope of this note to go into an in-depth analysis, a few observations are in order regarding the impact on food security and nutrition for Dalit households as a result of the pandemic.

The survey data contains self-described levels of change in food consumption since the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, both overall as well as for each type of food such as cereals, pulses, egg, meat, vegetables, milk, fish, sugar, and fruit.

The note by Niayti and Vijayamba (2021) finds 5 villages with 100 per cent of SC households reporting lower food consumption levels compared to the pre-lockdown period. Out of the total 26 villages, there are 13 villages with more than 50 per cent of SC households reported lower food consumption. Table 4 shows that Dalit households report a disproportionate decline in food consumption levels, especially for items not usually available via PDS, such as vegetables, meat, fish and eggs. For instance, 51 per cent of Dalit households reported a decline in consumption of vegetables, compared to 37 per cent for all households.

The functioning and provisions of PDS differ from region to region, even as they play a vital role in food provisioning for households. The note by Niyati and Vijayamba illustrates case studies of households from different parts in the country that were able to survive the lockdown in the absence of income thanks to provisions via the PDS.

Table 4 Number of households that reported decline in monthly intake of food since COVID-19 pandemic, 26 study villages, 2020.

Category of Food	All households		Dalit household	
	Number	% of sample households	Number	% of sample households
Overall	72	44	26	55
Cereals (Rice, Wheat, Rawa, Jowar, Bajra etc)	29	18	10	21
Pulses (Masur, Moong, Urad, Gram, Arhar/Tur etc)	28	17	10	21
Eggs	32	20	14	30
Meat	51	31	20	43
Fish	37	23	18	38
Vegetables	61	37	24	51
Milk	52	32	19	40
Sugar	34	21	13	28
Fruit	46	28	18	38

Source: FAS-PSU survey 2020

Food Security and Nutrition in Tamil Nadu Villages

The State of Tamil Nadu follows Universal Public Distribution System and no exclusion is made based on the income criteria.** Rice is given free of cost, while sugar, pulses, cooking oil and kerosene are given at subsidized rates to the card holders.

** Five types of family cards are in circulation in Tamil Nadu viz. 1. PHH - All commodities including sugar, 2. PHH-AAY - All commodities including 35 Kgs of rice, 3. NPHH- All commodities including rice, 4. NPHH-S -Sugar option card (All commodities except rice,) and 5. NPHH-NC - No commodity.

Out of 18 households canvassed from Palakurichi and Venmani villages, all had ration cards from the Public Distribution System though two had not availed of the commodities which are given at subsidized rates to card holders. Of the two who have not availed the commodities, one household was of a landlord/capitalist farmer from BC community. The other was a petty business household belonging to the Dalit community. The remaining have availed at least rice, pulses, sugar and cooking oil. Five households reported that they received some food commodities from anganwadis, and four of them were Dalit households. Two Dalit households reported food relief from non-governmental organizations.

Among seven households out of 18 that reported reduced overall food consumption, six were Dalit households. Almost all of them reported a reduction in consumption of vegetables, meat, milk and sugar, with only two reporting reduced consumption of rice. The following case study of a person from a Dalit household cited by Niyati and Vijayamba (2021) is illustrative of the scenario:

“AD is a manual wage worker from Tamil Nadu’s Palakurichi village (Nagapattinam district). His job is that of a contract worker at a circuit board manufacturing factory in Coimbatore. Between April and June 2020, when he had no work, his household members could manage only two meals in a day. His wife is a casual wage worker in the village, and they have two school-going children. After August, he returned to Coimbatore for work. Between September and October, his wife got 14 days of employment for weeding paddy, at a daily wage of Rs 200. The household received 25 kg of rice, 2 kg of pulses, 1.5 kg of sugar, and 1 litre of cooking oil from the PDS every month. AD’s two children received 5 kg of rice, 1 kg of pulses, and 10 eggs per month per child, in lieu of the mid-day meal they would have got in school. They managed to eat at least two meals a day because of access to PDS, despite an overall reduction in food intake.”

As discussed earlier the key takeaway is that as a result of the immediate lack of income, households of weaker sections in rural India faced a significant challenge in respect of food security. Food security is thus yet another avenue where Dalit households are facing disproportionate challenges. State support, in the form of Public Distributions Systems and the nature of their operation plays a pivotal role in determining the magnitude of deprivation. Tamil Nadu has a relatively robust PDS and it has helped mitigating this problem.

Challenges to food security when persistent and severe enough, pose a risk of malnutrition, especially for women and children. As unlike the previous challenges that have been examined in this note so far, there are risks of long term losses here.

Education

Access to education is held as a pre-requisite for socio-economic change leading to equal opportunity for the depressed class viz. the Dalits. Provision of free and compulsory education for all is a stated goal of the government. Disruptions and limitations in this field faced by the Dalit community therefore warrants particular attention. Reports from UNICEF show that education is one of the fields that have been severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic (UNICEF 2020). Schooling in India has been disrupted heavily as a result of the pandemic, and alternative arrangements such as online classes often require the students to have access to devices capable of displaying videos, sharing files etc. as well as sufficient connectivity to the internet. The unequal access to and ability to provide such arrangements lead to a differential impact among the students in schooling and education across social groups.

A note by Oshikawa and Chakraborty (2021) that examines the impact of the pandemic on education in rural India based on the FAS-PSU data observe that among 44 Scheduled Caste children in the survey, only 28 had access to any alternative classes, whereas 70 out of 92 children belonging to other castes had access to alternate classes. It also notes that a higher share of Dalit children attend public schools than others, and that private schools tend to take relatively quicker decisions and organise alternative classes owing to relatively better resources. The note also observes private tutoring is more prevalent among those from the upper strata of society compared to those from Dalit, Scheduled Tribe or manual worker backgrounds. Further, it provides tables which illustrate how among the children from Dalit households, the share of those who do not have access to smartphones/laptops, sufficient internet connections, and televisions is much larger than corresponding shares among others. The note also observes similar significant disparities in availability of educated persons in the households. (Oshikawa and Chakraborty 2021)

Education in Tamil Nadu Villages

There were 25 students (13 from Palakurichi and 12 from Venmani) among the 18 households canvassed from the villages in Tamil Nadu. Out of 13 students in Palakurichi village, 6 students

belong to SC, 5 of whom belong to the manual worker households and one belongs to a poor peasant household. Out of 12 students from Venmani, 10 belong to SC, 4 of who are from manual worker households, one from poor peasant household, 2 from rich/middle peasants, and 3 students from others.

While there was an even distribution among students who attend public and private education from the households canvassed, three fourths of students from Dalit households attended public institutions for education. There were 10 students who reported that they did not have access to any alternate classes, and eight of them were from Dalit households. Only 12 students did not have access to smart phones or laptops from both the villages, and all of them belonged to Dalit households. The only three students that reported not owning a television were also from Dalit households. There were 13 students who did not have an educated person to help with schooling, all of whom were from Dalit households.

In other words, out of the 16 Dalit students, 13 were in households with no educated person to help with schooling, 12 had no access to devices like smart phones or internet connections, and 10 were not attending any alternate classes instead of school.

In sum, schooling and education was severely disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and students from Dalit households were the most affected across social groups. The pandemic reveals how fragile and vulnerable access to schooling and education remains for the section of population for whom it is most crucial. The impact on schooling is perhaps the most significant and long term impact that the Dalit community is facing as a result of the pandemic.

CONCLUSION

This note examines the effect of the pandemic on rural Dalit households. The key findings of the note are as follows: First, the pandemic and subsequent lockdown has had an immediate and relatively short term impact viz. availability of employment, particularly in unskilled and semi-skilled wage work. This has created a pressure on rural sources of employment and income such as MGNREGA work and agriculture. Even as both of these were relatively unaffected by the pandemic, neither have managed to provide higher than usual income to rural households. Real wages and cost of cultivation has increased. This pressure coupled with existing debt catalyses fresh borrowings and distress sales for marginalised sections leading to relatively medium term

losses. In the absence of significant expansion in government support, the marginalised sections have experienced decreased food consumption. Education has been severely disrupted as well, with varying degrees of success in creating and implementing alternate schooling mechanisms. The losses suffered through malnutrition and disrupted education would have relatively long term effects.

While everything mentioned above is more or less applicable to the rural society as a whole, the note examines how each short term, medium term, long term impacts are felt in disproportionately compounding ways by the Dalit community. They are particularly vulnerable to each of the losses and seem to suffer the most losses in each category. This compounding cascade as a result of the pandemic – the dependence on casual labour incomes and marginal farming, vulnerability to indebtedness, food insecurity, and fragility of access to education - has exacerbated the marginalisation of the Dalit community.

The note has used data from two villages in Tamil Nadu in order to accentuate these arguments, after providing a brief background to the multi-village and multi-state data collected from the FAS-PSU surveys conducted in September-October 2020.

In order to mitigate the poverty and unemployment of the vulnerable section of the people, the government should generate the livelihood opportunities to enable to earn from their place of residence and discourage their migration for employment to the far off places. Skill and semi-skill training centres should be established in the rural areas to train unskilled engaged informal sectors to take up self-employment both in agriculture and non-agriculture. But the real solution to their problem of the poor lies in the fair and just distribution of natural economic resource endowment.

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APPENDIX TABLE

Appendix Table 1 Distribution of sample households by socioeconomic class and social groups, in Palakurichi and Venmani, in number

Village	Social groups	Landlord/ Capitalist Farmer	Rich/Middle Peasant	Poor Peasant	Manual Worker	Others	
						Remittance	Small business
Palakurichi	SC			2	2	1	1
	MBC	1	1				
	BC	1	1				1
	All	2	2	2	2	1	2
Venmani	SC		1	1	2	1	1
	MBC						
	BC		1				
	All		2	1	2	1	1

Source: FAS-PSU survey 2020