

From the Field

Reimagining Cities: Assuring the Right to Food for the Migrant Poor in Pune City

Kuldeepsingh Rajput*

Abstract

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is seeking to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture. It guarantees every citizen with access to adequate food throughout the year through sustainable food systems. Although India has made considerable progress in tackling hunger and poor nutrition in the past two decades, the Global Hunger Index indicates that India suffers from a level of hunger that is 'serious'. During lockdown, the poor food security structure and its functioning have been observed. The urban informal migrant labourers are the most vulnerable to hunger and experienced acute food scarcity. By addressing food security and rights interventions, our cities would be inclusive. The paper discusses the issue of rights to food with regard to the urban informal sector, migrant labourers and experiences during COVID-19 response work in Pune city.

Keywords

right to food, migrant, informal urban labourers

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and sudden lockdown resulted in the breakdown of various existing systems. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this pandemic exposed our broken system. Local authorities in

* Department of Sociology, Savitribai Phule Pune University, Pune, India.

Email:rajputkdr@gmail.com

The author was associated with Centre for Youth Development and Activities, Pune (CYDA) in the COVID-19 Response Task.

the State had taken steps to curb the spread of the pandemic throughout the city. In Pune the city police have done a commendable job in implementing the curfew. Some places were considered as containment zones and attempts were made to close these off by labelling them as hotspots. These attempts and rapid response slowed down the spread of the virus. Yet many questions were raised over the current scenario and its repercussions, arguing that a lockdown is the only solution to this pandemic which may lead to other major problems.

The sudden lockdown, along with the irresponsible role of the media, an unprepared administration and its failure to channelise the system have negatively impacted the various sections of the society in different ways. It has also led to an adverse and significant effect upon migrant labourers who are engaged in the informal economy in cities. As per the reports, due to this pandemic, many factory workers and wage earners have not received their wages and their employment is terminated without any prior warning. These unanticipated changes have created a financial as well as an emotional turmoil for them. The situation has become desperate as the pandemic has affected the livelihoods of their families. This raises concerns for their vulnerabilities and poses questions on existing structural inequalities.

The major victims of lockdown are migrant labourers who are left stranded in cities without food and water. This adverse impact on migrant labourers is multi-dimensional and intersectional. The majority of the stranded migrant labourers are engaged in the informal economy. Employment in the informal sector is the last resort for many and the only hope for millions of people. Although the informal sector manifests low productivity, it has employed those who otherwise would have been rendered fully unemployed. It is a source of survival for a large number of families who have migrated mostly from rural areas. The role of the informal sector in the city development cannot be denied. Cities are an important destination for migrants and the rising contribution of cities to India's GDP would not be possible without migration and migrant workers (Bhagat, 2011). Migrant labourers play a significant role in bringing prosperity and development to the city. The internal migration is an integral part of development and cities turn out to be important destinations for migrant labourers (UNESCO, 2013).

Unfortunately, policymakers turn a blind eye towards the informal economy and for ages it has been conveniently ignored. It is a paradoxical

situation. Although migrant informal labourers are indispensable contributors to urban development, they are invisible and do not get their due weightage in development policies. At the same time, during the lockdown these migrant labourers are stigmatised as ‘carriers of infection’ and forcefully and intentionally side-lined and kept away from coming to the forefront to help others. The State has failed to address the problems of migrant people as there are no records of migrant labourers employed in the informal sector in the government documents. This makes us rethink about our cities, growing informality and invisible labour and its neglect.

One of the serious issues faced by migrant labourers during the pandemic period was that of food scarcity and hunger which pushed them to walk miles to their home towns. Shutting down of worksites, no employment and high dependency on food forced them into return migration and raised several questions about the existing food security system. Their hunger and helplessness made people ponder over their rights to food as a critical concern. The United Nations World Food Programme warned and estimated that the COVID-19 pandemic could almost double the number of people suffering acute hunger, pushing it to more than a quarter of a billion by the end of 2020 (UN, 2020). Therefore, while reimagining cities, it is important to address the problem of food security faced by informal migrant labourers. It has also created a threat in achieving sustainable development goals.

Food Security

The concept of food security is not about filling the empty stomachs of hungry and starving individuals but it has a broader meaning. Food security has four basic dimensions: availability, access, utilisation and stability. Food security is related to the total amount of food which is physically present in the country. India is sufficient in the production of food grains. After independence, food production in India was around 55 million tons and in 2017-18 India had produced around 284.83 million tons of food grain (Singh, 2019). It indicates the commendable progress of food production and agriculture in India. The second dimension is about access to this available food stock. Every citizen of the society should have access to food otherwise the objective of food security will not be achieved. Therefore, this dimension plays an important role in achieving food security.

Accessibility is mainly associated with the food distribution system and parallel networks. Secondly, the purchasing power and the per capita income of citizens play an important role in the planning of accessibility to food security. The third dimension is food utilisation which implies the proper biological use of food, requiring a diet providing enough energy and vital nutrients, drinkable water and adequate sanitation. Effective food utilisation largely depends on knowledge within the household of food storage and processing techniques, basic principles of nutrition and proper child care. The fourth dimension is stability, which relates to the continuity of the other three dimensions. The stability ensures that the availability, the access and the utilisation remain sustainable. The major and prevalent issue in achieving food security is about the accessibility of food by its beneficiaries.

Right to Food: A Denied Right?

There is no specific mention about the right to food in the Indian constitution. However, the constitution has incorporated a wide range of social and economic rights of citizens. The Right to Food is inherent to a life with dignity, and Article 21 of the Constitution of India which guarantees a fundamental right to life and personal liberty should be read with Articles 39(a) and 47 to understand the nature of the obligations of the State in order to ensure the effective realisation of this right (National Human Rights Commission of India, n.d). The urban poor, particularly migrant informal labourers, face issues related to enough and nutritious food deprivation at destination cities. It has not been properly taken care of by policymakers. Providing the right to food for these migrant labourers is one of the effective ways to create inclusive cities.

The experiences and studies of some organisations regarding food security are useful. The Disha Foundation (Maharashtra) found that due to irregular employment, migrant families face acute food scarcity, with some acknowledging that women and children are often forced to beg in the streets to supplement their family income. The Aajeevika Bureau (Rajasthan) found that most migrant families are unable to access low-cost fuel options for cooking, including Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG), since they are relatively expensive and require proof of residence. They end up paying exorbitant prices to purchase kerosene from the black market, which constitutes a major drain on their incomes (UNESCO, 2013). During the pandemic, migrant labourers' right to food was violated repeatedly.

Public Distribution System, Portability of Ration Cards and Accessibility

In India, the Public Distribution System (PDS) functions as a mechanism for providing access to subsidised food such as wheat, rice, sugar and kerosene to the beneficiaries. The PDS was evolved as a system of management of scarcity through the distribution of food grains at affordable prices. The Indian PDS is the largest safety net programme in the country (Niti Aayog, 2016) and the largest distribution network of its kind in the world (Balani, 2016). With the help of this system, beneficiaries could purchase food grains at subsidised rates from the ration shops in their hometowns by presenting their ration cards. Contrary to this, the poor people such as labourers who migrate to different States, were denied the subsidised food at ration shops due to the lack of portability of ration cards. Therefore these migrant people are compelled to purchase the rations at soaring market prices which usually takes most of their savings. To address this issue and out of the concern for migrant people's rights to food, the central government made a policy decision regarding ration card portability.

In 2019, The Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution announced intra-state access to PDS and planned to launch the 'One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC)' scheme from July 2020. By providing intra-state access to the Targeted Public Distribution System (TPDS) under the online database of ration cards i.e., Integrated Management of Public Distribution System (IMPDS), the government tried to ensure that no person will be deprived of their right to food due to poverty. This is an important provision for inter-state temporary migrants who frequently migrate to different destinations. They can avail themselves of the benefits of an entitled quota of food grains from fair price shops at destination States. In India, States like Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Telangana and Tripura have started providing inter-state portability of ration cards. However, during the lockdown, this has created a mixed impact.

Food Security During the Lockdown and Unlock Phases

It has been found that during the lockdown, the government's initial announcement of Rs 1,740 billion and measures to provide extra rations through its TPDS for the first three months, doubling the quantity and

free distribution of 5 kg of rice or wheat and 1 kg of pulses and additional provisions of cash, have been helpful to poor and vulnerable families (Parajuli, 2020). In May 2020, the Finance Minister announced that under the ONORC scheme, 80 million migrant workers who do not possess ration cards will be provided with 5 kg of food grain (wheat or rice) and 1 kg of pulses per month during May and June. A total of 0.8 million metric tons of food grains and 38,000 metric tons of pulses were to be distributed by the end of June. Further, the Central government announced the extension of the timeline for distributing food grains under the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (ANBA) to migrant workers. The scheme is now implemented effectively in a large number of States across the country. There are certain challenges in the implementation and the success which need to be analysed. At present, in Maharashtra the inter-state portability of ration cards and the ONORC Scheme has been closed and again the migrant labourers who have returned to their destination cities have started purchasing food grains at market prices.

Experiences during the Lockdown in Pune City

During the first lockdown in Pune city, many migrant labourers faced serious food security problems. Their miserable situation highlighted the urgent need for building a strong network of food security for vulnerable sections. The plight of jobless migrant labourers was escalated due to the non-portability of ration cards which left them solely dependent upon response programmes by non-government organisations and the local police. Many migrant labourers were left with no choice but to go back to their native places. The extensive engagement of organisations and relief teams contributed to addressing the hunger and food security issues of the migrant urban poor. Although organisations provided cooked and uncooked food items, it was not enough to cater for the urban poor migrants. There was a mismatch in demand and supply, not only in terms of the number of needy people but also other reasons such as food habits, the belief system of purity-impurity, untouchability and the sense of dependency. During the relief work, various cases have been studied which indicate ground realities about the necessities of protecting the right to food of migrant labourers.

Case One: In Pune while distributing cooked food, some migrant labourers were very sceptical in accepting it as they had doubts about the purity of

foods. Questions were raised by the beneficiaries which included who made it and how it has been made?

A young construction worker from Chhattisgarh at the Katraj site in Pune city refused to take cooked food, as his wife and other women at the site would not accept it as they doubt who made it. He insisted on the raw materials so that they could cook.

The case clearly indicates the feeling of sacredness and purity associated with food. They have their own culture of food and that has been accepted and respected. If proper distribution of food grains had been carried out, such situations could have been avoided.

Case Two: A construction worker from Uttar Pradesh working at the Hinjewadi housing site, and also coordinating as a leader of migrant communities, expressed that many construction worker families were waiting for the food. He said:

“No one has come past two days. We called on the number given to us and they replied that they are trying to reach. Finally after two days we received food grains, but children were starving due to hunger. We are in a dreadful state.”

Migrant labourers were scattered all over Pune city during the lockdown period and many of them were not reachable. On the other hand, they did not know whom they should contact with regard to their problems. Due to the strict implementation of the lockdown rules by city police, very few had travelling passes within the city. Delivering food to the needy on time was a tough task because of the restrictions on commuting. Although migrant families were continuously seeking food, it was practically difficult for volunteers to reach them with limited travelling permission.

Case Three: A migrant construction worker on the Wagholi site said he is not aware of such a scheme and no one informed him about it. He is purchasing food grains at market prices. Other labourers are also doing the same. He said:

“Even today we are buying food grains at market price. Even do not know if we will get food grains at subsidised rates through our ration cards. All our money is over and contractor does not receive our calls anymore. We have no other option left, we will go back walking to our villages.”

The central government announced that every migrant labourer will receive subsidised food whether he has a ration card of his State or not. Indeed, this was a relief to migrants. It was a late decision as millions of labourers faced various problems related to food. In Pune city, government school teachers were given the duty of supervision of the proper implementation of food distribution at PDS shops. It was effectively implemented in rural areas as the number of migrant labourers were limited and easily possible to keep records of distribution. In cities, there is no database of migrant labourers. In the particular case of construction labourers, around 20,000 labourers are spread across the city at various sites. They are not registered with the welfare board or any union hence they remain invisible. Also, due to the lack of awareness about welfare measures, they do not raise their voices for their rights. As a result, many of them are still purchasing food grains from the open market.

Towards Achieving Food Security for the Migrant Urban Poor

Food security in Pune city and all other cities in India demands urgent attention and appropriate steps need to be taken to revamp the existing food security structure and services accordingly. This issue cannot be addressed properly if due attention is not given to the inherent composition of a city. There is a close connection between growing informality, unplanned urbanisation and exclusionary processes in cities, which need to be explored in-depth to address the food issues for the urban poor, especially migrant groups. The possible ways to achieve food security for migrant labourers and the urban poor could be as follows.

Documentation and Creating a Database of Migrant Labourers

Although the informal migrant labourers play a pivotal role in the developmental process, it is disheartening to note that they are always at the receiving end. Their migration to the city is intended to reduce their poverty but this usually fails and they continue with hazardous and vulnerable lives at their destinations. To address vulnerability, it is important to document them. This migrant population is ignored due to the structure of urban informal employment and the lack of an exact database of internal migration of labourers. In the absence of documentary proof of identity and local residence, regulations and administrative procedures exclude migrants from accessing legal rights, public services and social protection

programmes accorded to residents, on account of which they are often treated as second-class citizens (UNICEF, 2013). Many migrants lack proof of identity and proof of residence in the city. This turns out to be the biggest barrier to their inclusion (Bhagat, 2011).

During the lockdown and unlock phases, the State was unable to reach stranded internal migrants due to the lack of a database. In the press release by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution, it was mentioned that there is no data on the actual or estimated number of migrants across the country. The context of this press release was about the food security of internal migrants during the lockdown. The pandemic experience demanded an urgent need to create an easy registration and documentation process for internal migrants. It is extremely important for the implementation of various welfare measures, and in the case of food security, to keep the buffer stock of food grains at destination cities. The process of organising the unorganised and achieving food security would be impossible without registration and documentation of internal migrant labourers in the cities.

Effective Operationalisation of Food Security Schemes

Another crucial lesson that can be learnt from this pandemic is to pay attention to the effective implementation of social security measures for disadvantaged sections of the society. There are huge numbers of poor citizens who are highly dependent upon government food security measures.

Table 1 reveals the status of beneficiaries entitled to subsidised food grains. Many migrant labourers are unable to bear the expenses of monthly food consumption, therefore it is important to make these schemes function effectively with accountability. There are major omissions in the existing schemes. Various studies and reports have shown that PDS and TPDS suffer from inclusion and exclusion errors and fail to reach the true beneficiaries (Balani, 2013; George and McKay, 2019). A planning commission report points to the fact that about 58 per cent of the subsidised food grains allocated by the central government fails to reach the target population due to errors and leakage in the supply chain process (PWC, 2014). For an effective operationalisation of schemes, there is a need to increase the number of Fair Price shops across the nation and improve their consumer friendly functioning.

Table 1: Number of beneficiaries and Entitlements

Category	Number of beneficiaries (million families)	Entitlement of food grains (kg/family)
Antyodaya Anna Yojna	24.3	35
Below Poverty Line	40.9	35
Above Poverty Line	115.2	15-35
Total	180.4	-

Source: Balani (2013).

Another challenge is related to inclusion and exclusion errors in the documentation process. It has been observed that instead of entitled beneficiaries, ineligible beneficiaries are included and avail themselves of the benefits. It is estimated that about 61 per cent of the eligible population was excluded from the BPL list, while 25 per cent of non-poor households were included in the BPL list (Balani, 2013). In Chhattisgarh, the exclusion of BPL families from TPDS is 2 per cent which is quite low, while in Bihar it is 30.5 per cent. Assam, Bihar, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal show a high exclusion of more than 20 per cent (Balani, 2013)

The existence of ghost cards and leakage made it easy to divert the subsidised food to the open market. To control such leakage, the government has taken various steps which include the initiative of *Aadhar* linked biometrics. Yet the identification and inclusion of true beneficiaries remain a major challenge.

The biometric system, digitalisation and technology-led portability of ration cards have their own infrastructural and literacy issues. The electronic point of sale machine through which the delivery is carried out works only if there is a network. To avoid such shortfalls, a mechanism needs to be developed which can offer both online as well as offline services. While creating such a mechanism, due attention needs to be given to the majority of the stakeholders as they are unaware of digital access. Sufficient time should be given for digital literacy.

Universalisation of Food

The PDS in India is the world's largest programme addressing food security. In 2013, the National Food Security Act widened the scope and the levels of subsidised food grains, but there are still serious challenges related to hunger and access to food. Although India has made considerable

progress in tackling hunger and under-nutrition in the past two decades, the Global Hunger Index indicates that India suffers from a level of hunger that is 'serious' (Von Grebmer et al., 2020). This shows that food security, accessibility to food and related developments are uneven, and in this process many have been left behind. Therefore, it is time to move towards the universalisation of the PDS. This could be based on the assumption that only the needy urban poor will benefit by such universalisation as all households from above the poverty level groups will be excluded. Such policy decisions would help to reduce technical barriers, inclusion and exclusion errors and would be helpful in addressing the hunger and food security issues of migrant labourers working in the informal sector in the cities.

Conclusion

This pandemic taught us many things. It is time to look into the matter of the structure and functioning of food security. Migrant labourers are trapped in the urban informal sector and food insecurity makes them even more vulnerable. On one hand they suffer due to the rigid food access system, and on the other hand they cannot go back to their source places due to a lack of employment opportunities. They are at risk due to the food vulnerability which is multi-dimensional as it affects their physical and mental health, working capacity and economic conditions. Policies and schemes for food security have been launched for the migrant poor but in reality the benefits are not reaching them. These points must be reflected in policy implementation. The migrant labourers are not parasites in the city. They are a very important contributory workforce towards the development of the city and they create economic growth and prosperity. Therefore, if we imagine our cities to be inclusive and sustainable, we urgently need to address the hunger and food issues faced by urban migrant groups.

References

- Balani, S. (2013). 'Functioning of the Public Distribution System: An Analytical Report.' Working Paper, 5628. https://econpapers.repec.org/paper/esswpaper/id_3a5628.htm
- Bhagat, R. (2011). 'Migrants' (Denied) Right to City.' In M. Faetanini (Ed.). *Urban Policies and the Right to the City in India* (pp. 43-57). New Delhi: UNICEF.
- George, N.A. & McKay, F. H. (2019). "The Public Distribution System and Food

- Security in India.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 16(17). <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6747310>.
- Nation Human Rights Commission of India. (n.d). ‘Right to Food: A Fundamental Right. <https://nhrc.nic.in/press-release/right-food-fundamental-right>.
- Niti Aayog. (2016). *Evaluation Study on Role of Public Distribution System in Shaping Household and Nutritional Security India*. New Delhi: Government of India.
- Parajuli, B. (2020). ‘How India can improve its food security after the pandemic passes.’ *The Wire*. 18 May. <https://thewire.in/agriculture/how-india-can-improve-its-food-security-after-the-pandemic-passes>.
- PWC. (2014). ‘Barcoded Ration Card & Biometric Food Coupon System for Effective & Efficient Service Delivery, Gujrat.’ https://darpg.gov.in/sites/default/files/Barcoded%20Ration%20Card_Case%20stud_v1.0.pdf.
- Singh, R.B. (2019). *Agricultural Transformation - A Roadmap to New India*. New Delhi: National Academy of Agricultural Sciences.
- UN. (2020). *World Food Programme* Geneva: United Nations.
- UNESCO. (2013). *Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India*. New Delhi: UNESCO.
- Von Grebmer, K., Bernstein, J., Alders, R., Dar, O., Kock, R., Rampa, F,.... Fritschel, H. (2020). *Global Hunger Index: One Decade to Zero Hunger: Linking Health and Sustainable Food Systems*. Bonn and Dublin: Concern Worldwide.