

# EASE THE FLOW

Amid lockdown, hurdles for free movement and trade in agricultural produce must be cleared immediately

**T**HE GREAT BENGAL Famine of 1943, as Amartya Sen famously documented, wasn't brought about by a decline in food availability. Instead, it was a result of people not having access to food due to a collapse of "exchange entitlements". The situation today, arising from the nationwide lockdown to combat the novel coronavirus, is far from a replay of that horror story. Forget any production shortfalls, the Food Corporation of India's current wheat and rice stocks are over 3.5 times the required normative buffer reserve. Government godowns are also overflowing with surplus stocks of pulses. This, even as farmers are set to harvest a bumper crop of wheat, chana, mustard, onion and other rabi season produce. Not only are supplies plentiful, the shutting down of hotels, restaurants and catering businesses has led to demand destruction from institutional buyers. With abundant availability and demand now largely restricted to direct household consumption, there should be no scope for panic buying, hoarding and people going without food, as was the case during the Bengal Famine and many other natural calamities.

What India is at present facing is not a "supply", but a "supply chain" problem. Thanks to inter-state movement restrictions and arbitrary actions by local authorities to enforce the lockdown — including closing down produce collection centres and warehouses of organised retailers — the links in the chain connecting farmers to consumers have broken down, in turn opening up arbitrage opportunities for unscrupulous speculators. The only way to prevent this is to ensure seamless flow of produce and trucks not being held up at state borders. The lockdown guidelines have clearly defined food among the essential goods whose transport and supply are not to be subjected to any hindrances. That message, also articulated by the prime minister himself, has somehow not percolated to the ground.

The danger from inter-state movement restrictions on farm commodities — and also labour and other inputs used in their processing, packaging and distribution — is not to consumers in metros and large urban centres. The state food and civil supplies departments will ultimately ensure that the wholesale markets in these cities receive enough produce to feed their consumers. It is the people living in small towns and far-flung places, whose voices are less likely to be heard, who are going to bear the brunt of lockdown. Even in the Bengal Famine, Sen showed that the maintenance of essential food supplies to Calcutta was accorded very high priority by the authorities; the three million who died then were mostly the rural masses or those who did not survive after trekking from the districts to the city. That lesson from history should not be forgotten. If anything, this is the moment to free movement and trade in all agricultural produce. Well-functioning markets are the best guarantee against any collapse of exchange entitlements in the ongoing battle against COVID-19.