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Farmer turns to Twitter to sell cabbages, fails to find a buyer

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BENGALURU: Turns out a bumper crop is bad news for farmers in times of Covid-19.

On April 18, vegetable farmer Kannaiyan Subramaniam uploaded a video of his cabbage field on social media platform, Twitter. Within hours, it went viral. In the 15-second video, the 30-year-old vegetable farmer in Voddarahalli village in Karnataka's Chamarajanagara district, located on the border with Tamil Nadu, said that he had nearly 100 tonnes of cabbage ready for harvest in his 3.5-acre farmland. He offered to sell his entire crop for ₹3 lakh. The video has received more than 305,000 views, 25,000 retweets. Subramaniam is yet to find a buyer.

With markets shut and people homebound due to the lockdown, vegetable farmers across India are saddled massive losses. In the past 24 hours, other farmers too have taken to social media platforms to seek buyers, including a watermelon farmer from Bijapur, a tomato farmer from Sarjapur and a banana farmer from Tuticorin.

According to an April 8 report by financial research firm Credit Suisse, despite a bumper harvest in the Rabi season, the arrival of

Kannaiyan Subramaniam in his field in Voddarahalli.

fruit and vegetables in the country's 7000 wholesale markets has fallen by 50% to 95%, as only a fraction have been functioning after the lockdown was enforced on March 25. In 2019-20, farmers sold 284 million tonnes of horticultural produce worth ₹5 lakh crore. Even assuming only a 50% fall in market arrivals over a month of lockdown, vegetable farmers would have lost in excess of ₹20,000 crore.

Subramaniam sold his previous harvest of cabbages for ₹11.50 per kilogramme. "I'm not looking for profit. I would be happy if I can recover my cost and the cabbages reach those who don't have enough to eat," he said, two days after posting the video.

Subramaniam rang up the agri war room helpline set up by the government to help farmers' with transportation passes, farm equipment access and disease management. "The officials told me they couldn't do anything about procurement directly but offered to connect me to traders who could only pay ₹2 per kilo. The trader said even that price could not be guaranteed," he said.

Usually, market agents from distant parts of Tamil Nadu and Karnataka would visit Subramaniam's farm and harvest the required quantity of cabbage themselves. If Subramaniam wanted to sell his produce at big market centres of Erode or Chennai for a higher price, he would harvest, sort, package and transport the vegetables directly to traders there. Since the lockdown, agents haven't been able to come to his farm.

"Hiring a mini-truck that can carry about 5-6 tonnes of cabbage to the market isn't viable. During the lockdown operators charge more than ₹30,000 for one consignment from my village to the wholesale market in Chennai," Subramaniam said. On Monday, he said he was in talks with MP Tejasvi Surya's team, who has offered to buy 15 tonnes, nothing was finalised as yet. "No matter how you dice it, there is no way I can even break even," he said.

Straight from farm: Organic vegetables being sold in Dibrugarh • SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT

Lockdown a boon for organic vegetable growers in Assam

Owing to transport curbs, residents go in for local produce

RAHUL KARMAKAR
GUWAHATI

The COVID-19 lockdown has hit commercial vegetable growers in Assam, but restrictions on inter-district transport have come as a boon for small-scale organic farmers whose produce used to be edged out by cheaper "imports".

The "lockdown positive" has come with a downside, though. Most growers have almost exhausted their harvest, forcing them to network with others of their ilk in adjoining districts for meeting the shortfall.

"Tomatoes were sold out last week and the last of the capsicums were sold today (Monday). Some vegetables are not yet ready to be harvested and I need a gap of at least a month to sell the cabbages and cauliflowers," said Tutu Sonowal of Bogoriguri Borbam village, about 28 km from Dibrugarh town.

An SOS to Dibrugarh district's Deputy Commissioner Pallav Gopal Jha last month opened a window of opportunity for Mr. Sonowal and 334 other farmers who have since been delivering vegetables door to door.

Mr. Sonowal, who grows vegetables on 7.28 acres along with his three brothers, took land on lease and hired the vehicles of his relatives and neighbours for delivering them to places within a 30-km radius.

'New model'

"We are getting used to the new business model. Had this pandemic not struck, we would probably not have thought of selling beyond the village," he said.

At Sengamarihabi near the Bogibeel bridge across the Brahmaputra, Pran Ballav Barhoi and nine others of the Seuj Bhagabat Self-Help Group have been trying to cater to the growing demand for vegetables.

"There was a time when bulk buyers chased me away for trying to sell broccoli, a vegetable our district had never seen before. The demand is high, but we are not taking advantage by raising prices or using chemicals for increasing yield," he said.

Mr. Barhoi said his group had developed a network with 40 organic farmers in Tinsukia and Dhemaji districts to supply the vegetables they are running out of.

According to Mr. Jha, the district's local growers sold over 7,02,000 kg of vegetables worth over ₹1.41 crore since March 27. This, he said, was possible because of restrictions on bringing vegetables from commercial hubs in northern and central Assam and the enterprise of the growers.

Consumers have appreciated the initiative. "It clearly shows Dibrugarh is self-sufficient," said Diganta Saikia, a tea planter.

Home gardening blooms around the world

It's a soothing, family friendly hobby that eases concerns over food security

REUTERS
CHICAGO

Jaime Calder all but gave up on gardening after moving from the fertile soils of Illinois to dusty Texas, but the novel coronavirus has changed her mind.

The magazine editor and her family of five planted collard greens, chard, onions, blackberries, watermelons and peppers expanding their garden while buckling down at home during the pandemic.

People around the world are turning to gardening as a soothing, family friendly hobby that also eases concerns over food security as lockdowns slow the harvesting and distribution of some crops. Fruit and vegetable seed sales are jumping worldwide.

Its supplementary gardening, said Ms. Calder. "There's no way this would sustain a family of five. But we're amping it up, so we can try and avoid the store a little more in the coming months."

Russians are isolating in out-of-town cottages with plots, a traditional source of vegetables during tough times since the Soviet era and rooftop farms are planned in Singapore which relies heavily on food imports.

Furloughed workers and people working from home are also looking for activities to occupy their free time, after the cancellations of major sporting events and the closure of restaurants, bars and theatres. Parents too are turning to gardening as an outdoor activity to do with children stuck at home after schools shut.

"Planting a few potatoes can be quite a revelation to a child," said Guy Barter, chief horticulturist at Britain's Royal Horticultural Society, which has seen a five-fold rise in queries for advice on its website during the lockdown. Gardeners without yards are even planting potatoes in trash bags, he said.

Gardening could trim retail demand for produce but trips to the grocery store will still be necessary. Bert Hambleton, retail consultant for Hambleton Resources, said supermarkets will continue to see an overall increase in produce demand as would-be restaurant-goers eat at home instead of dining out.

The U.S. seed company W. Atlee Burpee & Co sold more seed than any time in its 144-year history in March as the contagious respiratory virus spread, Chairman George Ball said.

When they cannot find seeds in stores, would-be gardeners in Britain are seeking advice on how to extract them from tomatoes and squash purchased in supermarkets, he said.

In Russia, demand for seeds rose by 20%-30% year-on-year in March, according to online retailer Ozon.

Seed demand typically goes up in tough economic times, said Tom Johns, owner of Territorial Seed Company in Cottage Grove, Oregon. The company temporarily stopped taking orders over the phone due to a surge in demand and reassigned some phone workers to physically fill online orders, he said.

"It doesn't take long for people to become very concerned about the food supply – either the cost or getting it," Mr. Johns said.

Johnny's Selected Seeds in Fairfield, Maine, saw a 270% jump in orders the week of March 16, after U.S. President Donald Trump declared a national emergency over the virus.

Back to the roots: Jaime Calder with daughter Billie in their vegetable garden at Texas. • REUTERS

How oil price crash impacts sugar, what it means for India

PARTHA SARATHI BISWAS
&HARISH DAMODARAN
PUNE, NEW DELHI, APRIL 23

IT IS not only oil that has tumbled, with prices of West Texas Intermediate grade crude closing at an unprecedented minus $37.63 per barrel on April 20, before recovering a tad to $13.78 by Wednesday. On April 21, prices of raw sugar for May delivery at New York crashed to 9.75 cents per pound, the lowest closing for a nearest-month futures contract since the 9.70 cents recorded on June 9, 2008. Even commodities such as corn and palm oil have seen price declines following the slide in crude. A look at the connection:

We know about oil. But why have global sugar prices also collapsed?

All commodities have taken a demand hit from subdued economic activity and lockdowns imposed by many countries to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. But sugar is one commodity that, until quite recently, was on a bull run. Most estimates showed global production in 2019-20 (October-September) to fall short of consumption by 8-9 million tonnes (mt). On February 12, the front-month raw sugar futures contract at New York actually closed 15.78 cents per pound, the highest since May 2017. A drop from that to below 10 cents is rather steep.

One reason for this collapse is the closure of restaurants, weddings and other social functions not taking place, and people avoiding ice-creams and sweetened cold beverages that might cause throat infections. The impact of coronavirus-induced lockdowns on out-of-home consumption and institutional (as opposed to direct household) demand for sugar is obvious. Prakash Naiknavare, managing director of the National Federation of Cooperative Sugar Factories, projects sugar consumption in India alone to dip by 1.5-2 mt in 2019-20, from the normal 25.5-26 mt levels.

Is that the only reason?

Sinking crude prices appear an even bigger factor. The juice from crushing sugarcane can be crystallised into sugar or fermented into alcohol. When oil prices are high, mills —especially in Brazil—tend to divert cane for making ethanol (alcohol of 99%-plus purity) that is used for blending with petrol. In 2019-20 (April-March), only 34.32% of cane crushed by Brazilian mills went for manufacturing 26.73 mt of sugar. The rest was used to produce 31.62 billion litres of ethanol. But with oil prices tanking—WTI crude was quoting at $53-plus two months ago—mills will not find it attractive to divert cane for ethanol. Brazil's mills, which have started crushing (the Indian season is from October), are seen to produce up to 36 mt of sugar and hardly 26 billion litres of ethanol this year.

How will this affect India?

Dip in sugar consumption, together with higher Brazilian output, is bad news for both Indian sugar mills and cane farmers. Before COVID-19 happened, the Indian industry was expecting to export 5.5-6 mt of raw sugar in 2019-20. Mills had already entered into contracts of some 3.8 mt, out of which 3.05 mt have been shipped out so far. With ex-factory realisations from exports at Rs 2,250-2,400 per quintal and the Centre providing a subsidy of Rs 104.48 (it was termed lump-sum assistance towards defraying marketing, internal transport, port handling and ocean freight expenses), the industry's woes from excess stocks were seemingly behind it. This was to be aided both by exports and lower production (26 mt, from 33.2 mt in 2018-19).

The current plunge in world prices, plus Brazil's likely production surge, would upset these calculations. Naiknavare, however, is counting on Indonesia's increased import requirements and its decision last month to slash the duty on Indian raw sugar from 15% to 5%. Indonesian refiners are projected to import 3.3 mt of raws this year, up from 2.6 mt in 2019. "They buy mostly from Thailand, which is experiencing a bad drought that could lead to its production falling from 14.6 mt in 2018-19 to 9 mt. It opens up an opportunity for us," he says.

What is the situation with respect to cane farmers?

Exports slowing down and not much domestic lifting of sugar by institutional consumers has significantly undermined the ability of mills to make cane payments. Uttar Pradesh's factories have till now crushed cane worth roughly Rs 32,000 crore in the 2019-20 season, but managed to pay only Rs 16,456 crore. The state government, last week, announced a scheme of mills giving "willing farmers" one quintal each of sugar for the next three months, in lieu of cane payments due to them. Maharashtra mills, too, had paid only Rs 11,310 crore out of their total cane dues of Rs 12,539 crore as on April 15.

Moreover, the industry's problem is not from sugar alone. The lockdown has reduced offtake of alcohol, be it potable liquor or ethanol for blending with petrol. UP mills, according to the state's cane commissioner Sanjay Bhoosreddy, may produce around 100 crore litres (one billion) of ethanol this season, compared to 51.5 crore litres in 2018-19. But with cars and two-wheelers not running, oil market companies aren't very keen to procure ethanol.

Are other agri-commodities impacted?

Prices of corn, which is also used for making ethanol, fell to their lowest since September 2009 at Chicago on April 21. Likewise, palm oil, again a feedstock for biodiesel, ended 7.5% lower at the Bursa Malaysia futures exchange. Corn prices can, in turn, drag down other cereals, just as palm oil could to soyabean and other oilseeds. They are all ultimately linked to oil, whose prices matter as much to petroleum companies as farmers.

How to store mangoes and savour them for longer

The mango season is here! However, according to the Maharashtra State Agriculture Marketing Board (MSAMB), the supply of mangoes has gone down by 60% compared to last year. But with online bulk orders, families are making the most of whatever stock they get by preserving mangoes using age-old family recipes. Here's how:

— Rishabh.Deb@timesgroup.com

Pics: iStock

SUN-DRY TO ENHANCE THE TASTE

Sun-dried mangoes are also being used as an essential flavour while making fish curries and Indian main course dishes. Home chef Kalandi Mohapatra from Nashik says, "During the early season, when mangoes fall from the trees, they are collected and cured in salt and chilli powder in a pot. You can make the Odia dish, Amba-Charu, with these." Soak a few pieces of the sun-dried mango in water. Once soft and pulpy, it can be cooked for a few minutes with *tadka*. It goes well with rice.

LET'S START WITH A MANGO DRINK

Be it a mimosa, or Aam Panna with desi jeera *tadka*, *kairi* (raw mango) rules the summer drink category. Mumbai-based chef Anisha Negi recently bought raw mangoes in bulk and made large quantities of pulp and drinks that will last for months. "My grandmother used to store around five litres of mango pulp, with only a sprinkle of salt on top and in air tight container. It would last about 40 days in the refrigerator," says Anisha.

MANGO JELLY

- Put mango pulp in a pot and place over the stove (medium heat)
- Add 60% sugar of the pulp's weight
- Add 2 spoons of lemon juice. Stir continuously
- Once a jelly like structure begins to form, add another 2 spoons of lemon juice and stir
- Store when gel-like form is attained

Shelf life: Six months

MANGO PULP

- Blend ripe mangoes to make a smooth paste
- Add 1 litre of boiling water
- Add 2 tablespoons of lime
- Add 12 tablespoons (approx) of sugar
- Pack in a clean bottle and let it cool, before storing

HOW TO PRESERVE MANGOES?

- Soak in brine using a solution of salt in water. **Shelf life:** One year
- Mango bars (*aam papad*), made with sun-dried mango pulp. **Shelf life:** Six months

IITs may not increase fee this year as HRD weighs options

Amandeep Shukla
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NEW DELHI: The union human resources development ministry is considering asking the premier Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) to not take up their fee this year on account of Covid-19, and the economic distress it has caused -- something the IITs said they would be open to.

IIT Delhi said it has already decided to not hike the fees for its post graduate courses.

"There is a view in the HRD ministry that premier institutions can step forward and take decisions which will benefit the student community as a whole, that the IITs should try to not hike fees. There have been discussions on this and the ministry could request the IITs to not implement a fee hike this year," said a government official who asked not to be named.

AN OFFICIAL SAID THE MINISTRY COULD ASK IITs TO NOT IMPLEMENT A FEE HIKE THIS YEAR TO HELP THE STUDENT COMMUNITY, GIVEN THE ECONOMIC STRAIN THE PANDEMIC HAS CAUSED

The decision on the fee for undergraduate courses is taken jointly in the IIT council, which is headed by HRD minister Ramesh Pokhriyal Nishank while individual IITs take a call on the fee structure of other courses they offer. "The matter is at present in the discussion stage," said a top official in the HRD ministry who asked not to be named.

IIT Bombay Director Subhasis Chaudhuri said his institute will go by the decision of the IIT council.

The director of another IIT, who asked not to be named, said that he understood the logic behind the step but would like to see what the other IITs have to say. "The HRD ministry has already requested private schools not to pressure students into paying fees. It also wants them to not go for big, arbitrary hikes in view of the situation. In this light, the ministry will be seen as walking its talk, if its own institutions took the lead," said the first official.

The official added that apart from the IITs, the Indian Institutes of Information Technology too could be requested to spare the students a fee hike this year

UGC to suggest academic calendar this week

It will review suggestions by panels

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

Panels set up by the University Grants Commission (UGC) have submitted recommendations on the revised academic calendar and suggestions for holding examinations at a time when the country is under lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Commission's members are likely to discuss the recommendations via video-conferencing on Monday and issue advisory guidelines for institutions of higher education by the middle of next week, according to UGC officials.

Meanwhile, Press Trust of India reported that a panel headed by Central University of Haryana Vice-Chancellor R.C. Kuhad had recommended that the new academic year begin in September, instead of July. Another recommendation was that universities conduct their year-end examinations online if they had the resources to do so. If not, they should wait until the lockdown is lifted to set a date for the hand-written examinations.

No semester exams yet

Most colleges and universities have not yet held their semester examinations to close the current academic year.

Apart from Dr. Kuhad's panel, another panel headed by Indira Gandhi National Open University Vice-Chancellor Nageshwar Rao also submitted its report on improving online education in the midst of the lockdown.

CONTINUED ON ▸ PAGE 6

UGC to suggest academic calendar this week

While UGC secretary Rajnish Jain would not confirm these reports, he noted that any guidelines on these matters issued by the Commission would "not be binding, but only advisory in nature".

"The situation in every State is different, including the rate of COVID-19 infections. Also, some universities may be small and be able to provide online facilities to all students. Others have thousands of students and fewer resources. We cannot mandate one standard solution for all. There will be flexibility in the guidelines," said Dr. Jain.

The vice chancellors of State universities also felt that the decisions of State governments would play a key role in decisions regarding a revised academic calendar. "The role of UGC is only as a facilitator," said the vice chancellor of a law university, speaking on the condition of anonymity. "It may have more control over central universities. Most States have set up their own advisory panels similar to UGC's panel, which will make their own recommendations," the vice chancellor added. "Supposing a university is located in a hotspot area, which still has high infection rates late in the year... Ultimately, each university will have to make its own decisions based on the needs of its students."

Another vice chancellor, who was consulted by the Kuhad panel, agreed that each institution would have to make its own decisions, but felt that the UGC guidelines would provide a valuable indicator.

(With PTI inputs)

With over 200 R&D projects, IITs lead India's corona fight

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New Delhi: India's scientific effort to contain and eliminate the threat of the novel coronavirus is being led by 18 IITs, with experts engaged in 208 dedicated R&D projects under seven different categories. As some of their work starts yielding results, IIT-Guwahati has shown the way cornering the biggest pool of projects, followed by IIT-Madras and IIT-Hyderabad. Nearly 50% of the key research in India's premier technical schools are happening in six of the old IITs.

Majority of the researches are happening in the field of personal protective care equipment (45 projects), followed by sanitisation (33) and treatment (30), both pharmacological and non-pharmacological. The other areas include testing kits, medical equipment/ robots, surveillance and data analytics, AI to model epidemic patterns and disease dynamics. IIT-Madras and IIT-Guwahati are researching in all seven categories.

With projected funding of over Rs 120 crore in the next 18 months for these research projects, even the comparatively new IITs are pitching in. The year-old IIT-Mandi has three research projects, IIT-Palakkad is researching in 10 key areas and IIT-Goa in one. Many of the researches are at advance stage. According to T G Sitharam, director, IIT-Guwahati, "Various projects are already in production stages, like the commercialised ones which include full PPE suits, UV-LED disinfectant, drone technology for disinfection of large areas which is not in use in a few states. Then there is full face protective shield which is being manufactured and being delivered on daily." The IIT is also ready with prototypes of antiviral spray for PPE, hydrophobic coatings for masks, gloves, robots for waste collection and delivering medicine and food to patients in isolation wards.

A diagnosis and vaccine development research has also been signed with a company for commercialisation.

On the research underway at the IITs, V Ramgopal Rao, director, IIT-Delhi said: "There's a lot of research happening in IITs. Almost every week we are releasing something to the society. If institutions don't do it now it is not justifiable."

Full report on www.toi.in

MOST PROJECTS WITH IIT-GUWAHATI

AREA OF RESEARCH & NUMBERS

IITs	Personal Protective Care Equipment	Testing Kit	Sanitisation	Medical equipment/ robots	Surveillance	Treatment: Pharmacological & non-pharmacological	Data analytics, AI to model epidemic patterns & disease dynamics	Total
Kharagpur	4	4	1	2		2	1	14
Madras	5	5	5	5	3	2		25
Bombay			3	1	2	4		10
Delhi	5	2	1	1		3		12
Kanpur	1		1	2	1	1		6
Guwahati	12	2	2	12	1	2	3	34
Total	27	13	13	23	7	14	4	101

Other IITs doing COVID-19 researches are Roorkee, Bhubaneswar, Hyderabad, Jodhpur, Indore, Palakkad, Dhanbad, Jammu, BHU, Mandi, Patna & Goa

Total researches under way is 208 | Total projected funding is Rs 120 crore

Punjab set for a bumper wheat harvest

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CHANDIGARH: Punjab is set to record a bumper wheat production this season with the state recording 250% more procurement in a short span of nine days and its arrival is on till June-mid, food and civil supplies minister Bharat Bhushan Ashu said on Saturday. The state has set a record by procuring 2,797,108 metric tonnes of wheat in nine days against the procurement of 1,285,981 metric tonnes in the previous year till April 23, the minister said.

Punjab contributes 30%-35% wheat to the national kitty.

Ashu said that the procurement was delayed by 15 days, instead of starting April 1, due to the pandemic as the state had to put in place adequate safety arrangements.

The state has set up 1,867 marketing yards and converted 2,200 rice mills as temporary procurement centres.

Ashu said there is no shortage of gunny bags in the state and, at present, the department has more than 2.58 lakh bales of gunny bags.

However, Ashu added that due to the lockdown the government is facing 50% labour shortage.

Punjab is expecting to harvest about 185 lakh tonnes and the market arrival is likely to be about 135 lakh tonnes.

The minimum support price of wheat is ₹1,925 per quintal.

Punjab chief minister Capt Amarinder Singh has written to Prime Minister Narendra Modi reiterating his demand for incentive or bonus to farmers bringing in their produce after April 30 to check overcrowding at markets.

(With agency inputs)

Healthy, organic choices at your doorstep

PHOTO: HTCS

(L-R) AP Sinha, CEO Go4Life Milk, Ajay Yadav, head, Strategic Initiatives, Anil Sharma, head, Sourcing

As the lockdown period has restricted physical activity, many have shifted to eating healthy and are making organic choices for fitness and immunity.

However, switching to healthy eating choices in these crucial times leads one to the question of sourcing fresh, high quality and hygienic produce without stepping out of the house. One such brand, Go4Life, has emerged as a key hero. The brand is working with multiple state governments to ensure that fresh, organic, pesticide residue-free fruits and vegetables, milk, groceries etc are delivered at your doorstep with utmost safety and precautions. The brand promotes scientifically proven traditional approaches to boost immunity, with organic food products that are natural immuno-modulators, such as indigenous desi cow's milk known as A2 Milk.

A homemaker from Gurugram, Sirisha M, says, "We have been taking Go4Life's A2 Milk for the last three years. We were searching for A2 Milk on our doctor's recommendation for our son and am very happy with their quality standards."

What made the founder of Go4Life, Deepak Sharma, come up with the solution of providing fruits and vegetables harvested from fresh water, and milk from indigenous cows to develop immunity, was years of observation. He noticed that pollutants in the environment including pesticides, heavy metals etc were causing immunodeficiency, hypersensitivity, among other conditions. He says, "Even a very low dose of such harmful chemicals damages immunity. The same individual may look healthy without any gross deformity. Many such chemicals may also harm not only the immunity of that individual, but they also exert teratogenic effects in the next generation and such immunopathological alterations can be passed to future generations."

Delivery is currently available in Gurugram and will soon be expanded to Delhi-NCR.

Contact: www.Go4Life.in or 9811189189. HTC

No hike in tuition fee of IITs, IIITs this yr: Govt

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NEW DELHI: Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) and Indian Institutes of Information Technology (IIITs) will not increase tuition fees for the academic year 2020-21 because of the crisis triggered by the coronavirus disease (Covid-19), human resource development (HRD) minister Ramesh Pokhriyal 'Nishank' said in New Delhi on Sunday.

"After consultation with the chairman of the standing committee of the IIT Council and directors of IITs, it has been decided that these institutes will not increase the tuition fee for academic year 2020-21 for any course," the minister said.

IIT-Delhi has already said it has decided not to hike the fees for its post graduate courses. Sunday's decision meant that all 23 IITs will stick to their fee structure followed for both undergraduate and postgraduate courses in the 2019-2020 academic session.

"There is a view in the HRD ministry that premier institutions can step forward and take decisions which will benefit the student community as a whole...," said a government official.

A decision on the fees of undergraduate courses are taken jointly in the IIT Council, which is headed by the HRD minister, while individual IITs take a call on the fee structure of other courses such as M.Tech or MBA. For most courses, the fee structures are decided before the commencement of the academic session in June-July.

Also, the centrally funded IIITs, or triple ITs as they are popularly known, will not implement a standard 10% tuition fee hike for undergraduate courses, the HRD minister said, adding that he requested these institutes not to increase fees for other courses as well.

"On similar lines, I have requested the IIITs run in the public-private partnership (PPP) mode not to increase the tuition fee for the coming academic year for any of their courses," he added.

The IIIT Coordination Forum is the apex body for deciding policy and directions for 20 such institutes established under PPP. These IIITs are partially supported by government. Separately, the IIIT Council takes decisions related to the centrally funded IIITs.

IIT-Delhi has already said it has decided not to hike the fees for its postgraduate courses. HT ARCHIVE

UGC meeting agenda today: Exams with social distancing

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NEW DELHI: The University Grants Commission (UGC) will on Monday hold a video conference to discuss disruptions triggered by the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) in the academic calendar and the way forward, according to an official aware of the matter. High on the agenda could be holding exams in the time of social distancing.

The commission regulating higher education in India is expected to focus on two reports -- one by a panel on academic schedule headed by RC Kuhad, the vice chancellor of the Central University of Haryana; and the other by a committee on online education headed by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) vice chancellor Nageshwar Rao.

"...there are a variety of universities in different regions. Some of the may be in hot spots (of Covid-19) and others are not. The universities which can begin their session early should be allowed (to do so). Others can be given a last date (to begin the new session). However, all this will be discussed. Our aim is to merge technology with equity," a commission member who did not want to be named said.

The Kuhad committee has recommended postponing the admission cycle till up to September, according to the commission member.

But fresh admissions, ideally, can only take place if universities are able to close the 2019-2020 academic session for undergraduate or postgraduate by holding exams and declaring results.

Generally, academic sessions end in colleges and universities in May-June and new sessions begin in July-August. Education institutes have been shut down across India since March 25, when a nationwide lockdown was imposed to stop the Covid spread.

"There are universities like JNU (Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi) or EFLU (English and Foreign Languages University in Hyderabad), which have fewer students. And there are others like the BHU (Banaras Hindu University) or AMU (Aligarh Muslim University), where the number of students... is more. We have to allow them different options depending on their location, size and circumstances," said the commission member cited above.

The panels created by UGC earlier this month has suggested options such as assignment-based evaluation, objective type questions in an internet-based evaluation model and even the traditional pen-and-paper exam in front of webcams to wrap up the academic session, said the commission member.

"There are areas where even the mobile phone signal is weak, leave aside fast internet facility. The success of the solution hinges on ensuring that students' concerns are addressed," this official said, adding that exams for Sanskrit or any regional language could be challenging in an internet-based software.

Some students' organisations have expressed concerns that those in remote areas or those who are under privileged may have to face difficulty if their challenges are not factored in while brainstorming a solution.

Food grain distribution more than doubles since lockdown

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> The railways' transportation of food stocks has played the single most important role
> K MANI, economist

NEW DELHI: Indian Railways has transported 5.2 million tonnes of food grains in the months since the country went under a lockdown on March 25 to curb the spread of the coronavirus disease, more than double the quantity the national transporter carried in the same time a year ago, as the Centre tried to avert the spectre of hunger by making sure every region had plentiful food stock.

With barely seven of India's 2,067 large wholesale food markets functioning in the initial days of the lockdown, the Food Corporation of India (FCI) and Railways went into overdrive to ferry grain stocks from food-surplus states to deficient ones.

"The railways' transportation of food stocks has played the single most important role in combating hunger during the lockdown," acknowledged K.Mani, an economist with the Tamil Nadu Agricultural University.

India's farm output has grown consistently, helping it reach food self-sufficiency. Up from barely 50 million tonnes in 1950-51 to over 257 million tonnes in 2018-19, increasing food grain output has helped India avoid a situation in which the pace of growth in output lags behind population.

Yet, according to economists such as Amartya Sen, it is not the lack of food output, but bad distribution that has caused previous crises in India such as the last major famine of 1943 that killed an estimated 3 million people.

Railways has proved to be a lifeline during this crisis, filling the large gap left by frayed private sector supply chains and a near-collapse of the wholesale markets. "Maintaining continuity in supply chain was stiffer on account of tough working conditions due to lockdown. A constant coordination for terminal release/labour availability with DMs (district magistrates) at district level, state coordinating officers, and at apex level with MHA (ministry of home affairs) is being done by operating officers of Indian Railways," a railway ministry spokesperson said. Meticulous prior planning with FCI on destinations to which the food grains must be carried had also paid off, the spokesperson said.

To be sure, Railways has suffered considerable losses because of the suspension of passenger trains during the lockdown as well as a decline in transport of commodities like coal and coke, the primary commodities it ferries, earnings from which dropped 48.91% to ₹2,336.4 crore in April from a year ago. Earnings from transport of food grains, flour and pulses shot up by more than 90% during the same period to ₹817.96 crore, according to railway ministry data reviewed by HT. The first task for us was to identify surplus depots. Some depots already had railheads. Those were the first ones to be serviced," said a food ministry official, requesting anonymity. Punjab and Haryana account for 80% of outbound freight for wheat while 60% of rice reserves came from Chhattisgarh, Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, according to official data.

Over 1,000 train trips have been undertaken to carry grains, pulses and horticulture produce from state to states since the lockdown. On April 22, the network saw total cargo traffic of 102 trainloads carrying about 280,000 tonnes of grains, the highest single-day movement so far.

The FCI moved 158 trainloads carrying 442,000 tonnes of food grains (22,000 tonne of wheat and 420,000 tonnes of rice) during the first 25-day period of the lockdown to the mountainous north-eastern states, double its normal average of about 80 trainloads per month. One of the landmarks was to reach over 22,000 grains to the farthest depot on the Indian side in Manipur's Ukrul, which borders Myanmar. To ferry food to Arunchal Pradesh, trains have been chugging on a meter-gauge track till Mukuchaleng in Dhemaji district, an outback from where trucks make an onward journey to the higher reaches of Pasighat, a tribal town.

"These truck movements were undertaken in extremely challenging conditions," said Lalrothang, an FCI official in Nagaland, who goes by one name.

Punjab could see more areas under cotton cultivation

Shortage of labour due to COVID-19 pandemic likely to influence decision of the farmers in the State

VIKAS VASUDEVA
CHANDIGARH

Punjab can see around three lakh acres more under the cotton crop this kharif (summer) season against the previous year as farmers could shift from paddy (rice) on account of possible labour shortage in the State.

Also, State government's push for crop diversification would be another factor that could aid the acreage under cotton, farmers and traders told *The Hindu*.

"Farmers are definitely going to sow more cotton this season than the last year. There's currently a shortage of labour and if it continues, there's a good chance that farmers will prefer sowing cotton instead of paddy, wherever it's possible. Labour from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh have an expertise in planting paddy but with many of them back to their native places there will be some difficulty," said Rakesh Rathi, former president of India Cotton Association Limited.

State govt.'s push for crop diversification could also tilt the decision towards cotton cultivation. *FILE PHOTO

"Also farmers may sow less guar crop as its prices have remained subdued and shift to cotton, especially in Abohar, Mansa and other surrounding areas. In Haryana also area under cotton can go a little up," he added.

In Punjab and Haryana, Bt cotton is sown in over 95% of the total area, the rest 5% cotton is usually the indigenous (desi) cotton varieties. Cotton is usually planted from mid April to till late May in most parts of the two States. .

"Paddy is a labour intensive crop and if migrant labour doesn't return in the coming months then surely many farmers, where sowing cotton is a viable option will go for it. I am sure the area under cotton will increase this season in Punjab. Also the government is promoting cotton sowing," said Surjit Singh, president Bharatiya Kisan Union (Krantikari).

The Punjab government has set a target of enhancing the area under cotton cultivation from 9.7 lakh acres last year to 12.5 lakh acres in 2020, in a bid to promote crop-diversification. Government data shows that in year 2018 cotton was sown in 6.62 lakh acres and in 9.7 lakh acres in 2019.

Amid the ongoing curfew, following the COVID-19 outbreak, the agriculture department has coordinated with the Cotton Corporation of India to buy last season's remaining cotton produce from farmers at the MSP and for this – 19 markets in the cotton belt have already been made operational.

Food controller answers RTI queries in 12 hours

SIDHARTH YADAV
BHOPAL

Information sought under the Right to Information (RTI) Act usually takes days, even months, to reach applicants. However, a social worker in Madhya Pradesh's Rewa district was in for a pleasant surprise.

Raghvendra Dubey, the social worker, got a reply to his query in just 12 hours – that too on WhatsApp. He had submitted the application through email at 9.30 p.m. on April 23. He wanted to know how many people in Kot village had been given free rations under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Ann Yojana, to tide over the lockdown. "Villagers had informed us that rations were not distributed to those eligible," said Mr. Dubey.

On the next day, at 9 a.m., his WhatsApp chimed. The district's Food Controller, Rajendra Singh Thakur, informed him that the supply of 113.75 quintals of rice to 2,275 individuals for each month was pending for two months.

Mr. Thakur was on a previous occasion fined by the State Information Commission for delay in giving out information.

Unseasonal rains damage crops as farmers battle multiple setbacks

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NEW DELHI: Heavy unseasonal rains have caused damage to standing crops in a setback to farmers bracing for the busy agricultural season amid the coronavirus disease pandemic and lockdown that have already reduced the availability of farm labour and transport of their produce in parts of India.

An exact estimate of the damage caused by the rain in six states – Punjab, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal — would be available only after surveys are conducted, government officials said, expressing concern that the damage could result in less-than-expected procurement of foodgrains.

Food Corporation of India had expected to procure 35 million tonnes of foodgrains from the rabi season harvest, compared to 34 million tonnes last year because of an anticipated bumper crop. It may now have to revise its procurement estimate.

According to officials, the worst hit appear to be the food bowl states of Punjab and Haryana, where the harvest season was in full swing when heavy rains pounded the ripe standing wheat crop.

In Bihar and West Bengal, the rain has damaged the maize crop and the soon-to-be harvested litchi and mango crops. "Around 10-15% of the wheat crop has been damaged in Seemanchal, Kosi and north Bihar," a state government official said.

Many have expressed concerns that the damage could result in less-than-expected procurement of foodgrains. PTI

Moisture worsens the quality of wheat and maize, which could mean lower prices at the wholesale markets and delays in procurement. "Moisture more than permissible limits of 12% leads to delay in procurement as the crop has to be dried first. It damages the grain, leading to its discolouration," said Punjab's principal secretary (food and civil supplies) KAP Sinha.

Sinha said procurement had to be stalled in two districts – Moga and Ferozpur — because the discolouration exceeded permissible limits.

In neighbouring Haryana, crop loss has been reported from districts such as Karnal, Kurukshetra, Yamunanagar and Kaithal, leading to the government stopping the procurement on Sunday, officials said.

"Like several other farmers, I could not sell my produce as there were no buyers due to rains," said wheat farmer Raghubir Singh of Karnal district.

Officials said the procurement had been tardy because no arrangements had been made to protect the grains from rain.

Mukesh Tiwari, a farmer from Bundelkhand's Dhana village in Sagar district of Madhya Pradesh, said the traders were not offering more than Rs 1,900 to Rs 2,100 for sharbati (sweet) wheat as against the 2019 price of Rs 2,700 per quintal because of discolouration caused by the rains.

"Even the government refused to buy, citing the poor quality of wheat," he said.

OFFICIALS SAID THE WORST HIT APPEAR TO BE THE FOOD BOWL STATES OF PUNJAB AND HARYANA, WHERE THE HARVEST SEASON WAS IN FULL SWING WHEN RAINS POUNDED THE STANDING WHEAT CROP

Farmer Devaki Nandan Pandey of Janakpur village in Sagar district said he had not even visited any government procurement market because he knew they would reject the wheat he had grown because of the moisture content.

"This year's work is gone. I don't know the price I will get for the wheat now," said Mohan Lal Nagda, a farmer from Rewali village in Neemuch district of southern Madhya Pradesh.

Sanjeev Singh, director of MP's directorate of farmer welfare and agriculture, said: "We are collecting the information from the entire state about the impact of unseasonal rains on wheat and procurement. It's only after the reports (come in) that I will be able to make any comment."

Most states have delayed procurement of foodgrains because of the lockdown that started on March 25. Punjab, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh started procurement on April 15.

As UGC looks to end session, multiple options on its table

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NEW DELHI: Conducting viva exams on webcam, giving more weightage to online modules completed by students and holding internet-based tests are some of the suggestions before the University Grants Commission (UGC), which is deliberating how to navigate the disruptions triggered by the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) and stick to the academic calendar.

UGC, the higher education regulator, held a video conference on Monday and discussed holding exams in the time of social distancing.

The commission, according to people aware of the developments, is of the view that a single option would not be enough for colleges and universities across the country.

"...members gave different suggestions. The commission has felt the views of more stakeholders can be taken into account.... the UGC chairman (DP Singh) has been authorised to issue the guidelines to varsities," said a member who did not want to be named.

Fresh admissions, ideally, can only take place if universities are able to close the 2019-2020 academic session for undergraduate or postgraduate by holding exams and declaring results.

Generally, academic sessions end in colleges and universities in May-June and new sessions begin in July-August. Education institutes have been shut down across India since March 25, when a nationwide lockdown was imposed to stop the spread of Covid-19.

Universities in green zones (districts with no Covid-19 cases) may be allowed to hold pen-and-paper exams, though they will have to strictly follow social-distancing norms, according to members.

Others in affected areas may be asked to conduct exams online or even assess students based on their assignments already submitted to the institutes.

There is also a view that viva exams can be conducted through Skype for MPhil or PhD students.

"The next academic year can start from June or July in some universities, and in August and September in others depending on the situation. It is largely felt that the academic year would end in July 2021," said a second commission member who too spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The commission is also deliberating two reports — one by a panel on academic schedule headed by RC Kuhad, the vice chancellor of the Central University of Haryana; and the other by a committee on online education headed by Indira Gandhi National Open University (IGNOU) vice chancellor Nageshwar Rao.

"We cannot choose one-size-fits-all approach. So we are going to allow freedom to universities," said the second UGC member.

"We are aware that large number of students may have difficulty in taking digital exams. Others may be at a disadvantage if another random criterion is adopted. The universities will have the freedom to take the call, the guidelines will not be binding," this official said.

Some students' organisations have expressed concerns that those in remote areas with poor internet access or those who are underprivileged may have to face difficulty if their challenges are not factored in while brainstorming a solution.

Asked if a grievance mechanism would be created for those who faced difficulties, the second member said UGC already has a grievance mechanism system, but a concerned university can also be directed to take suitable action if complaints are too many.

Assamese students who were stranded in Kota, Rajasthan, after arrival in Guwahati on April 27. PTI

> We are aware that students may have difficulty in taking digital exams. Others may be at a disadvantage if a random criterion is adopted
> OFFICIAL

60% of food processing units have resumed work

Times News Network

New Delhi: Nearly 60% food processing units, over 2,825 units in special economic zones (SEZ) and 350 export-oriented units (EOUs), have resumed operations since the home ministry relaxed lockdown guidelines to restart the economy by allowing additional activities to be taken up in 'green' zones.

MHA joint secretary Punya Salila Srivastava told a media briefing on Monday that MGNREGA works relating to water conservation speeded after they were permitted by the home ministry starting April 20. This has generated employment for 2 crore people, she said.

Likewise, Srivastava added, construction activities, brick kilns and road laying had resumed in the rural pockets, generating employment for both local and migrant workers. "It is however imperative that all precautions are taken and social distancing norms followed as per national directives for COVID-19 management, which require wearing of facial hygiene and health protocols," she stated.

As per the officer, agricultural activities relating to rabi crop were on track with 80% of the wheat crop harvested across the country till April 26. "Over 2,000 main mandis, or nearly 80% of the country's mandis, have resumed operations. Procurement of pulses and oilseeds is underway. 'Kisan Rath' app has made selling and buying of crops easy for both farmers and buyers. Over 80,000 farmers and 70,000 buyers are registered on this

UGC may give academic calendar tomorrow

SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT
NEW DELHI

The University Grants Commission (UGC) has deferred its decision on a revised academic calendar for college and university students, after an emergency meeting on the issue held on Monday evening. The final guidelines are now expected to be released on Wednesday, after receiving further comments from Commission members and inputs from States, said senior officials.

A UGC panel headed by Central University of Haryana Vice-Cancellor R.C. Kuhad had recommended starting the next academic year by mid August to early September, according to a Commission member. It had also suggested a range of options for conducting end-of-semester examinations for the current academic year, from online testing to handwritten exams held after the lockdown is lifted.

Several members made suggestions, especially regarding more flexibility, during the video-conference meeting on Monday, and were requested to submit them in writing by Tuesday, said a person who participated in the meeting.

"The UGC chairman D.P. Singh has been authorised to approve a final decision, and the guidelines will be issued by Wednesday," said a senior official.