HUNGER, COVID-19 AND THE INDIAN ADMINISTRATIVE STATE

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The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on face-to-face interactions and the movement of persons (the 'lockdowns') produced a widespread crisis of hunger, felt most acutely by migrant workers and those who were outside the reach of India's highly organised but rigid Public Distribution System (PDS). This study focuses on what Indian state governments did to respond to the needs of these people, who were at the 'margins of government welfare'. This task is particularly a challenge for the risk-averse, (nominally) rule-bound Indian state that is disinclined to allow for discretion in spending of government funds, making purchases and allocation of largesse. It is all the more reluctant to delegate power to exercise discretion and make qualitative judgement to lower levels of government. For this reason, states seemed to need to devise a framework of rules for the identification of beneficiaries, even in the middle of a humanitarian crisis. As a related problem, states also did not necessarily have the organisational wherewithal to take up rapid, decentralised and locally grounded interventions. The organisational wherewithal, so to speak, could come in various forms. Some examples of this, which we saw at play, were decentralised government, the capacity to make non-state collaborations and institutionalised systems for the 'continuous updating' of beneficiary lists. More fundamentally, however, what is needed is the capacity for high levels of government to be able to formulate responsive policy and to be able to trust in the ability of their subordinate ranks to carry out new interventions, often in case-specific and individualised ways. This study relies principally on government orders and press releases, which are supplemented to a limited extent by articles in the news media. Long interviews with knowledgeable experts helped contextualise and make sense of this material.

INTRODUCTION

The Government of India announced a nation-wide lockdown on 24 March 2020 to contain the spread of the highly infectious and dangerous COVID-19 virus. The lockdown itself, however, became the cause of a crisis of hunger of a massive, and as yet uncalculated, scale.

At the time of declaration of the lockdown, it was planned as a short but very severe shutdown, where all but the most essential services were denied movement. In the weeks leading up to the lockdown, many state governments had already started to order partial lockdowns. Many businesses and offices had also begun to voluntarily shut down or reduce human face-to-face interactions, and people had started avoiding non-essential services and encounters. As a result of these lockdowns and voluntary restrictions, low-paid and blue-collar workers in India's vast informal economy had already suffered from disruptions in their incomes. This impact was considerably exacerbated by the national lockdown.

The lockdowns revealed the scale of the economic vulnerability of India's working poor. In a study of the impact of COVID on incomes (published on 11 May, 2020), close to 35 per cent of the households surveyed had reported that they were unable to survive for more than a week without any additional assistance, whereas 14 per cent of households reported that they were already out of funds (Bertrand et al., 2020). Only 30 per cent of households reported themselves as being able to survive for a month or more without any additional income (Bertrand et al., 2020). A rapid study of the situation of migrant and low-paid workers in Delhi in the days leading up the lockdown showed that that they were desperately searching for food (Parulkar & Naik, 2020). A survey of migrant workers carried out 32 days into the lockdown also reported that many were on the brink of starvation, not having eaten in four days, and that more than half had only one day's food supply left or less than Rs 100 in hand (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020).

This crisis was even more intense for millions of migrant workers who were stranded in their host states with no social safety nets, food stocks or coping mechanisms. These migrant workers and their families travelled thousands of kilometres home, on foot or in buses, trucks, tempos and in specially organised government trains (which were too few in any case) in the hope of being in place where they had some land, social and familial ties, a lower cost of living and possibly a better claim on government welfare. Their reverse migration was, however, made much more difficult by the fact that the lockdown closed off all regular means of inter-state or even inter-district travel—the Indian Railways had shut down its operations and long-distance buses were being stopped at district and state borders. By official orders migrants had to remain where they were. A month later, on 29 April, some travel relaxations were announced, but the movement of migrant workers remained severely restricted until the end of May. In spite of these restrictions, according to reliable estimates, close to 30 million migrant workers made their way home in the time of the pandemic.[1] By late May, the combination of hunger and distress had resulted in at

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[1] Official government estimates by the Chief Labour Commissioner and the Solicitor General in his statement in the Supreme Court range from 2.6 to 9.7 million. The estimate of 30 million is by Chinmay Tumbe, an economist and a member of the Government of India's Working Group on Migration, Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, in 2016, as reported in the news (Chishti, 2020).

least 752 deaths, attributable in some way to economic hardship of the lockdowns (Violence Lab, 2020).

Much of this distress and trauma could have been anticipated given the structure of the Indian economy, but in fact it was not, and the response of the Indian administrative state should be seen in the context of high-level failures. The COVID-19 situation put many different types of pressures on the government, including the management of the disease, its proliferation and its management and treatment, as well as the management of the economic impact of the pandemic. This study focuses narrowly on the response of state governments to the *crisis of hunger* produced by the pandemic in India.

This crisis of hunger, characterized not by a net shortage of food, but by large numbers of people being deprived of the means to buy it, skirts close enough to what we might have classified as a famine risk, except that we are used to thinking of famines as regional emergencies that result from crop failure. The government response to hunger crises in independent India (as distinct from its response to chronic malnutrition and hunger) is built on, and in some respects improves upon, a long colonial legacy of famine management (Mander, 2016). In some part, these improvements are credited to India's democratic polity, the expansion of the state, and the adversarial and collaborative roles played by non-governmental actors in bringing attention to the crisis, highlighting the shortcomings of government response, and by working along with or supplementing government relief work (Drèze & Sen, 2002). The actual responsibility for government response is naturally, in India's federal arrangement, left to state governments, but the fiscal and policy arrangements for addressing large crises usually need access for special funds and programmatic assistance from the central government (Banik, 2007).

However, previous analyses document some of the challenges and limitations of government relief which sounds familiar today: the challenge of beneficiary identification, coordination failures between central and state governments, and the operational capacity to deliver relief. Colonial era reviews of administrative famine-response noted, with some disapprobation, the tendency of officials to 'concoct' tests to determine the proper recipients of government aid including (i) the distance test, requiring beneficiaries to travel long distances for relief,(ii) the residence test, by which beneficiaries had to live in poor-houses or worksites, (iii) the test of cooked food, a source of repulsion on account of caste and inter-dining restrictions, and (iv) the labour test, by which subsistence wages were provided in exchange for hard labour. A related problem was the entrusting of discretion to subordinate levels of the state, which needed "sufficient checks against dishonesty and neglect" (Drèze & Sen, 1990, p. 29). Notwithstanding the significant institutionalization of welfare that has taken place since, today's policies for relief continue to grapple with the problem of ensuring that resources are directed to the neediest, and how sufficient checks and controls can be imposed on lower officials.

The Public Distribution System (PDS) has been central and critical to the overall national response to the crisis of hunger, simply for the fact that it provides basic survival minimum food rations to over 800 million people. The PDS has been transformed—over several decades of negotiation between the state, technocrats and the activist community—into a legally mandated and

institutionalised system (Brierley, 2019), which perhaps does a better job than in the past at addressing hunger and nutrition (Drèze et al., 2018). The central government announced early on in 26 March 2020 that it would provide free-of-cost, additional and advance rations for people who were covered by the PDS (Government of India, 2020a).

By its design, however, the National Food Security Act, 2011 (NFSA), which provides the legal mandate for the PDS, covers only beneficiaries who are identified, and they are eligible for welfare only in their home states. These beneficiaries had to be previously identified through rigorous government process. Moreover, 'caps' imposed on states limited the overall number of beneficiaries who could be identified in this way.[2] This excluded migrant workers stranded in places to which they had travelled for work until mid-May when the central government declared that it would provide PDS-equivalent rations to migrant workers in the states to which they had migrated, by which it was estimated that it could cover up to 80 million more people(Government of India, 2020b). Current reports suggest that the uptake of this grant has been limited, perhaps because of administrative difficulties in identifying and accounting for migrants separately from others (Irava, 2020; Sharma, 2020).

There was very little central government support for others who fell outside the identified pool of PDS beneficiaries.[3] Whatever measures were announced still excluded many types of needs and food distress, including a large number of workers who were not poor enough to have been identified as beneficiaries in normal times but now needed public assistance to meet their basic food requirements. There were also people who would have been previously excluded from ration card eligibility on account of inadequacies of documentation and process. Moreover, the central government's rations allocations covered only cereal (wheat or rice) and dal (1 kg per family per month), and it could not have been adequate for people who had no other income or savings.

Calls from scholars and activists to universalise the PDS do not seem to have been taken seriously, even though it was pointed out that the country had enough food stocks in public granaries to make this possible.[4] So while many states did in fact extend food relief to those outside the PDS in different ways, these extensions were conditional and limited in multiple ways.

For this reason, I looked at what state governments did to address the critical needs of those at the *margins of government welfare*, i.e., migrants and those without ration cards. Studying this

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[2] For more about system-wide coverage issues and the 'caps', see estimates by Jean Drèze, Reetika Khera and Meghana Mungikar (IndiaSpend Team, 2020). For an analysis of issues with the PDS coverage in the context of the pandemic, see Khera and Somanchi (2020).

[3] Initially there was only an announcement of meals to be provided at 60-odd homeless shelters nation-wide. The Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, Government of India, has a dashboard of COVID initiatives, which lists 26 shelters and a further 29 initiatives for migrant workers, which are also possibly temporary shelters. See https://pmay-urban.gov.in/covid-19/state/3 and https://pmay-urban.gov.in/covid-19/state/9 (updated as of 28 June 2020). Subsequently, the central government also directed states to use State Disaster Relief Funds for migrant shelters, which extended the intervention to cover new shelters set up by state governments for the pandemic.

[4] For example, Amartya Sen, Abhijit Banerji and Raghuram Rajan, two Nobel Prize–winning economists and the former Governor of the Reserve Bank of India respectively, wrote a newspaper editorial appealing to the government to universalise PDS ("'Huge Numbers May Be Pushed into Dire Poverty or Starvation...we Need to Secure Them,'" 2020). The Right to Food Campaign made an open appeal to the government to universalise PDS in a letter that was signed by a large number of activists and grass-roots organisations (Right to Food Campaign, 2020).

particular aspect of state responses helped me understand what the state's ability to adapt and innovate could be made up of. For this, I looked at state government responses because in India's federal scheme, food and humanitarian relief are anyway largely the work of state governments, and more so in this case because central policy direction and fiscal support has been particularly slow and inadequate.

The Indian state is bound by rules and unwritten norms, some of which are derived from constitutional principles and administrative law. This does not of course mean that the Indian state is not lawless but rather that its official form needs a nominal outline of rules. The interventions studied here would not have been possible without state recognition that these were extraordinary times. The central government invoked powers under the National Disaster Management Act, 2005, to notify the lockdown and issue national guidelines for the management of the pandemic. Subsequently, many of the orders and administrative arrangements for food relief by central and state governments also drew on the justifying logic of disaster management.[5]

However, rules and norms are to be accounted for in state action, albeit in subtly altered form, even in emergency relief operations. The Indian government is particularly averse to allowing for discretion in the spending of government funds, making purchases and allocation of largesse. It is also averse to allowing for discretion or qualitative judgement to be exercised at lower levels of government, an assumption that is rooted in the long-standing and pervasive view that 'India's government workers are corrupt, unresponsive and caught up in distortionary local political and social networks' (Mehta & Walton, 2014, p. 11). This, in turn, leads to a state that is 'obsessed with rules, from the "passion for paper" within its bureaucracy, to the rights based approach' such as in the National Food Security Act, 2011, 'itself a product of a substantive (and cognitive) coalition between activists, some bureaucrats and politicians' (Mehta & Walton, 2014, p. 58).

In theory, rules and procedures are needed to limit the scope of administrative power that is available to unelected officials (McCubbins et al., 1987). But too much legalism in the setting of procedures can seriously undermine the effectiveness of the state to respond to rapidly changing human needs and circumstances. This is an old debate in the design of welfare interventions. A neutral, precise and rule-bound framework for selecting recipients of government welfare protects the public against an arbitrary and non-accountable state, as also against stigma, discrimination and moral judgement by officials. This is, however, only justifiable if there is a balance between rules and discretion, otherwise all sorts of unfairness can result from the inflexible application of these principles to diverse and complicated social situations (Titmuss, 1971).

To bring this to the present context, in the formulation of new food relief interventions, states had to make departures from conventional practice, and bureaucrats and politicians had to sign

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[5] The National Disaster Management Act, 2005, has provisions amenable to wide interpretation, but it was clearly not designed for a protracted economic disruption of this nature, and it provided no blueprint for the provision of food and welfare. Its definition of 'disaster management' includes 'evacuation, rescue and relief' and 'rehabilitation and reconstruction', which just about covers it. Moreover, its largely defunct institutional structure played hardly any role in the planning and implementation of relief measures, except in a few states. The point here, however, is that it provided enough legal cover for special measures to be undertaken, wherever governments chose to take up these measures.

off on these departures. The new interventions then had to be implemented by subordinate officials, and state secretariats had to trust in the ability of their subordinate ranks to carry out new interventions. Administrative superiors also had to allow for subordinate officials to be able to exercise discretionary power, often in case-specific and individualised ways. Needless to say, this goes against the grain of how implementation problems are formulated and addressed in normal times, when solutions primarily focus on tools and techniques for disciplining the frontline by ensuring that rules are followed and discretionary power curbed (Aiyar & Bhattacharya, 2016).

State governments also needed to be able to draw on sources of extra capacity in order to achieve scale and scope in their relief operations. Some of this no doubt came from within the government—from district administrations, local governments and government school teachers who could be tasked into relief operations. Governments also needed to be able to engage meaningfully in collaborative efforts with non-state actors. These 'cross-sector collaborations' (Bryson et al., 2006) helped provide expertise for the formulation of policy, put more people on the ground for frontline operations, and led to alternative channels for information and feedback. The food and funds brought by non-state collaborations were relatively free of government procedure and could be deployed with greater flexibility.

The best cross-sector collaborations between state and non-state actors are the ones that result from failure, in that the state recognises what it lacks and proactively draws this in from other collaborators(Bryson et al., 2006). This is not a sign of weakness but in fact a type of capacity to recognise the differential strengths of state and non-state actors and to formulate partnerships that serve the public interest. The capacity to convene collaborations requires pre-existing networks and prior relationships, both formal, in the sense of prior contracts, partnerships and structured ties, as well as informal contact and trust between the parties to the collaboration (Bryson et al., 2006).

In moments such as this, the competence and capability of the bureaucracy is put to test, as also its 'embeddedness' in the sense of having dense sets of interactive ties that connect the apparatus of state administratively and politically with a broad cross-section of civil society (Evans & Heller, 2015). The effectiveness of the state is also a political problem, for neither competence nor embeddedness can be separated from politics (Evans & Heller, 2015). I am conscious of this, but for the moment I focus on what 'what' states did and 'how' they did it. There are underlying questions of 'why' or the willingness and alacrity of governments in the provision of food relief, their political priorities, and their understanding of the state's role and responsibility in relation to the public. There are also disparities in how much room states have for fiscal manoeuvre. As yet, little is known about the effectiveness of measures that were taken up by states. Some states at least regularly and publicly updated data relating to their relief interventions, and where possible, I have referred to state published data. For other states, however, I was not able to find any systemic data about what they were doing. More information and analysis of these aspects will no doubt deepen our understanding of the material I have studied.

Government orders and directions, government press releases and government-disseminated information constitute the principal research material of this study. I interviewed knowledgeable local experts in each of the states included here, and referred to articles in the news media to a limited extent. In part, the choice of research material was determined by the subject of the study, but there are also severe constraints on what I could have done as this research was carried out in May–July 2020, when there were COVID-related restrictions on non-essential travel and face-to-face interactions.

Even so, the material at hand gives us some insight into what state governments did to respond to the hunger crisis. The study looks at the states of Madhya Pradesh, Haryana, Bihar, Kerala and Delhi. These states were not selected as a sample but mainly to follow some of our my interests in localized political economies of specific regions and states and for my familiarity with or access to information about the state. This study is not, in any way, meant to be a report card or an assessment of the performance of states.

PROCEDURAL AND PRACTICAL CHALLENGES OF FOOD RELIEF

For this study, I categorised food relief into three broad types. First, PDS-equivalent rations given to people who were not previously PDS 'beneficiaries' but have been temporarily granted equivalent status. Some states also provided additional food items, spices and cooking oil along with PDS rations or provided cash supplements for the purchase of essential food items. Second, cooked meals provided at food centres or delivered at various locations. Meals were also provided at relief camps, shelters and quarantine centres. Third, the delivery of emergency relief in the form of ration kits or ration supplies, usually in response to specific information about food distress. Emergency relief was also sometimes delivered as cooked meals.

For the Indian state, to be able to identify beneficiaries is so much of a concern that in fact it sometimes seems to be the principal issue around which welfare and relief interventions are designed. In 1997, the PDS was reorganised as a 'Targeted' PDS, and following this, considerable effort has been put in to improve the systems and processes by which beneficiaries can be identified (Khera, 2011; Khera 2020). The states are responsible for identifying beneficiaries, for which they use their own criteria and process. In this, the states have devised their own checks and balances, approvals and verification processes, and they are subject to overall caps (mandated by the central government) in the number of beneficiaries they can identify. Few states have been able to implement a system for beneficiary identification that is dynamic and amenable to continuous updating, but in general the states that have decentralised the identification and verification process to some extent and those that rely on recent data, especially those that have instituted systems for continuous updating do better than those that have not (Drèze et al., 2018).

The PDS institutional framework, however, does not have any mechanism for rapidly identifying people in order to grant them temporary PDS-equivalent status. It was therefore no simple matter for states to set up a new mechanism to do this in the time of the pandemic. In some of the states, we found that an alternative procedure for identifying temporary beneficiaries closely

followed the original in the sense that beneficiaries needed to be 'identified' by a state-sanctioned survey and subsequently approved by the district administration.

Delhi was perhaps the only state that managed to set up a process by which beneficiaries could self-identify themselves through an online application and self-certify their own eligibility. Beneficiaries could also self-certify in Kerala, but the state did not manage to extend this benefit to migrant workers who did not have a local 'proof of residence', unlike the Delhi scheme which was residence-neutral. In Madhya Pradesh, the identification process was opened up in multiple ways. The state ordered that beneficiary status be granted to people identified by recent local government surveys. The state also created a new policy that allowed considerable discretion to district collectors, who could then use this power to accept beneficiary names proposed through various sources including civil society organisations.

Where states granted discretionary quotas of PDS coupons, which could be allocated by officials and politicians as per case-specific requirement, as in Kerala and Delhi, the overall number of such coupons was small and manageable.

All of these processes took time to implement, all the more because of the reluctance of bureaucracies to sign off on any short-cuts and special measures declared. However, smaller parcels of relief, such as emergency rations kits could pose less of an identification challenge. States could trust the district administration, the local government staff and even the non-state volunteers to make discretionary decisions about the grant of emergency relief in this form, but this was either structured as smaller parcels of relief (as in Delhi) or limited to specific identifiable situations (as in Kerala). Bihar granted supplements to people identified as vulnerable by self-help group (SHG) volunteers (Jeevika Didis) but could not use this mechanism to grant temporary PDS status.

In Madhya Pradesh, on paper, it was left to districts to determine how they would identify needy people and how much relief could be allotted to them, as long as this allotment was carried in the presence of an official and noted in an official document. In practice, however, this was implemented as a temporary PDS intervention, if at all, rather than an emergency relief intervention, and was therefore much slower than an emergency relief intervention could have been.

For some states, cooked meals were easiest from a beneficiary identification perspective, but to set up and sustain the operational arrangements for cooking and distributing a large number of meals was complicated. Some states were able to provide a large number of cooked meals, which was of particular salience in the early days of the lockdown. In other states, however, the state administration was unable or unwilling to provide cooked meals.

States had to also consider differences in their situation and context. In Delhi, Kerala and Haryana, the policy had to consider the needs of migrant workers, but even within them, there are significant differences of approach. Bihar had to design its approach for a very large number of returning migrants from other states and the needs of its local population but did not consider non-natives of the state. In Kerala and Madhya Pradesh, different elements of the states'

responses catered to residents and migrants, whereas in Delhi and in Haryana, the policy was largely neutral of domicile.

A brief summary of state government food relief interventions to address or mitigate the COVID-related hunger crisis is provided in Table 1. These will be elaborated upon and discussed in subsequent sections.

TABLE 1: *Food relief interventions by state governments*

State	Form of relief intervention
Madhya Pradesh	Temporary PDS for 3.2 million already identified in social welfare surveys. Temporary PDS for additional names received by district administration, including from local activists. Panchayats allotted funds for local relief for needy persons including food grain, shelter and cooked food. *We do not know how many benefited from any of these measures, as there is no data available from the state.*
Haryana	'Distress ration coupons' for beneficiaries identified by district administration and by local committee surveys (1.5 million households were issued coupons over May–June).
Bihar	Survey carried out for temporary PDS, Rs 1,000 per family given to families identified in survey, but the process for granting PDS status is not completed. Cooked meals in food distribution centres and quarantine camps;[6] 400,000 meals per day at peak time. *Data is inadequate, and we do not know how many benefitted from these measures.*
Kerala	Additional PDS for the above poverty line (APL) category ration-card holders (up to 4.6 million, although uptake may be lower). Temporary PDS for state-residents who sought to avail of it (*no data*). Temporary PDS for up to 25,000 identified groups, institutional homes (*no separate data for this*).

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[6] All states had relief camps and quarantine centres. In Bihar, I covered this aspect only because of the relatively large number of Bihari migrants who work in other states and returned to Bihar in this period. It is estimated that 4.4 to 5 million people from Bihar migrate to other states for work. It turned out to be quite a challenge for the Bihar government to cope with the numbers of returning migrants, for whom it had to provide food and shelter.

	Cooked meal parcels for home delivery and pick-up, free for identified beneficiaries or on paid basis. Served up to 300,000 meals at peak time. Ration supplies for migrants (360,000 persons per day covered in April) and other destitute families (3,766 in the first month of lockdown).
Delhi	Temporary PDS for 3.8 million households through self-enrollment, including those identified by members of legislative assembly (MLAs), members of parliament (MPs), etc. Cooked meals, up to 1 million people were fed two meals daily at peak time. SOS rations sent to 50,000 families by SOS team, plus Delhi Police parallel effort.

EXTENDING PDS TO TEMPORARY BENEFICIARIES

Many states used the PDS institutional structure to extend food relief efforts by, one, providing additional benefits to existing beneficiaries and, two, by enrolling new temporary beneficiaries.[7] In Kerala and in Delhi, the state governments added an 'essential items kit': in Kerala these could be claimed by anyone regardless of income status, whereas in Delhi they were given to PDS and temporary PDS beneficiaries along with their ration entitlement. Kerala also added an extra allocation of 15 kg to APL or non-priority households ("Kerala to Distribute Free Rice," 2020), by which it covered 4.6 million households that held state ration cards but were not 'below poverty line' and therefore had a much lower entitlement in normal times. The Haryana government provided mustard oil and sugar along with rations (Govt of Haryana, 2020a, 25 Mar) The Bihar government added Rs 1,000 cash supplement along with rations, with the idea perhaps to help families make these essential purchases (Govt of Bihar, 2020a, 25 Mar). Only in Madhya Pradesh there seems to have been no provision for anything other than wheat, rice and dal provided through the PDS system.

All the states we looked at also made some effort to extend the reach of their PDS to temporary beneficiaries. For this, the Madhya Pradesh government relied on its Samagra Samajik Suraksha, a pre-existing state government programme for the unification of all its social welfare schemes.[8] As a part of this scheme, panchayats and municipalities in the state had carried out surveys of various types of vulnerable population groups, of which 3.2 million were not PDS beneficiaries. District collectors were now instructed to extend PDS benefits to them, after carrying out an inquiry to satisfy themselves that families in these lists were 'eligible under some category of PDS' (Govt of MP, 2020c, 8 Apr).

District collectors in the state of Madhya Pradesh were also given a series of open-ended instructions: to provide food and transport for returning migrants, for which funds from the state government would be made available (Govt of MP, 2020a, 26 Mar), to provide dry ration free of cost to stranded, homeless and poor people, for which they were allotted 2,000 quintals of food grain (Govt of MP, 2020b, 27 Mar), and that additional allocations of food grain had been made which could be used for the homeless, migrant labourers and stranded people in accordance to their requirements and in the presence of the responsible officer appointed by the district collector (Govt of MP, 2020c, 7 Apr). We learned from interviews that district collectors used these allocations of food grain principally for providing PDS-equivalent rations, delivered through fair price shops, although the instructions had not specified quantities or modalities of identification and delivery. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and activists proposed lists of names to district officials, and many of these were also approved and allotted PDS equivalent status.

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[7] This was in addition to the fact that rations were made 'free' in all states, either following the central government's announcement on 26 March 2020 or a few days prior to it. In Madhya Pradesh, two-months' advance rations had already been provided after an order issued on 28 February 2020, well in advance of the central government direction.
[8] According to a recent study, this scheme probably allows for the continuous updating of PDS lists (Drèze et al., 2018), but we could not independently verify this feature.

However, we have conflicting information about the effectiveness of these instructions, and there is no data from the state government about how many people or families benefitted in this way.

Haryana and Bihar undertook new surveys. In spite of the difficulties of implementing this strategy in the COVID period, Haryana seems to have succeeded in adding new beneficiaries. It ordered that the district collector should issue 'distress ration coupons' to those without ration cards such as migrants (Govt of Haryana, 2020b, 14 Apr). In a subsequent order (Govt of Haryana, 2020c, 17 Apr), it directed that beneficiaries of these coupons were to be identified through a survey to be carried out by a local committee established for the purpose and consisting of teachers, Election Commission booth-level officers, accredited social health activist (ASHA) and Anganwadi workers (Govt of Haryana, 2020d, 25 Apr). Lists prepared through this survey were to be sent by the district collector to the Department of Food and Civil Supplies, where verification was to be carried out. We are told local committees had completed the surveys within one week of initiation and that subsequent approvals were completed in 10–15 days. The Haryana government's PDS management information system (MIS) shows that in the subsequent months of May and June the state issued 471,000 and 570,000 coupons respectively, although less than half the number of beneficiaries actually availed of this facility.[9]

The Bihar government instructed its Jeevika programme[10] to survey and identify new beneficiaries, provide them with cash assistance and prepare documentation on their behalf for the issue of ration cards (Govt of Bihar, 2020c, 19 Apr). These surveys were entrusted to volunteers from its women's collectives ('Jeevika Didis'). The applications and supporting documentation were to be collected by village-level Jeevika groups and forwarded to issuing authorities through the Jeevika institutional structure. Timelines were set for speedy approval of applications received and the issuance of new ration cards. At around the same time, applicants whose ration cards were already pending or were due for corrections were granted a type of temporary status by the Bihar government: orders were issued to give them relief funds (Rs 1,000 per family) and expedite their ration card applications (Govt of Bihar, 2020c, 19 Apr). According to media reports, the state government issued new ration cards against pending applications in April("Bihar Ration Card 2020 List Released", 2020), and according to information provided through interviews, the Jeevika Didis did in fact manage to issue cash assistance to some needy persons identified by them (although we do not know how many). However, there is no information available to suggest that the government issued new ration cards on the basis of these applications, either from the government's own statements or in media reports. Interviewees from Bihar told us that the state was not able to clear the administrative process for adding new beneficiaries.

The Bihar strategy in fact made only minor modifications to pre-COVID protocols (from 2016–17) for receiving ration card applications and requests for modification through Jeevika groups. The state is reported to have made improvements in recent years in the management of its PDS, but

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[9] https://epos.haryanafood.gov.in/DRTS_Int.jsp

[10] 'Jeevika' refers to the World Bank–aided Bihar Rural Livelihoods Project. Women's SHGs, formed as a part of the project, undertake credit and savings activities, as well as community building and empowerment activities. Their mandate has apparently expanded over time to take up para-state activities, like identifying PDS beneficiaries.

present coverage of ration cards in the state is well below the NFSA quota allotted to the state (Puri, 2017). It has also been pointed out that Bihar still has more PDS leakages than other states, has limited logistic capability in the management of its PDS, and its Food Department is so understaffed that it relies on PDS shop owners to do tasks that are performed by government officials in other states (Drèze et al., 2018). This is the reason why the state had issued instructions to Jeevika groups to identify additional beneficiary families in recent years, which was continued in the COVID period.

The Kerala government announced that non-ration card holders would be provided with rations at the state fair price shops, and local sources say that non-ration card holders could avail of this facility by presenting their Aadhar card and an affidavit (self-declaration) of their income status ("Kerala to Distribute Free Rice," 2020). We could not, however, get details on the administrative process for the implementation of this provision or a status report of how many people had been able to access rations in this way.

The state also granted temporary PDS status to 25,000 households (or household-like units in hostels, convents, etc.) that were identified by state and local governments (Joseph, 2020). We could not find a formal identification criteria, but it seems likely that this was allocated on an ad hoc basis and in response to information about distress. Efforts were also made in the state to provide in-state portability of ration cards for people who were stranded away from their homes in the state and could not make their way to their designated fair price shops. We understand that the state has been able to work out in-state portability, after some initial difficulties.

It is likely, however, that in Kerala the extension of PDS benefits to temporary beneficiaries was less of a priority for three reasons. First, the state had a well-organised structure by which local government and district authorities could find and identify people in need of food relief, and these authorities had the funds and discretionary authority to be able to respond directly to the requirements of these people. Second, 73 per cent of the state's population are covered in the PDS system, which is far in excess of the 46 per cent supported by the central government NFSA subsidy allocated to the state (Khera & Somanchi, 2020). Third, the state developed a focused approach to identify and respond to the needs of migrant workers, who would ordinarily not have been covered by its PDS.

Delhi, on the other hand, made a sharp departure from conventional practice by extending PDS-equivalent status to non-ration card holders through a policy that allowed beneficiaries to self-identify themselves. By this policy, Delhi could address gaps in the city-state's PDS coverage and cater to its pandemic-affected 'newly poor', both native and migrant, who would not have perhaps needed food security assistance prior to the lockdown. This policy accounts for Delhi's metropolitan and mobile character, in which the distinction between natives and migrants is far less obvious than it would be in a state like Kerala. It also allowed Delhi to identify beneficiaries in spite of the fact that the lower tiers of its administration were at least partly outside the direct organisational control of its state government.

In order to avail of temporary rations, applicants were expected to enrol themselves online through a portal established by the government (Govt of Delhi, 2020d, 5 Apr). Applicants, however, had to provide Aadhar card details for themselves (and all their family members), and the enrolment process required for them to have access to a smartphone and Internet services. Each application was then scrutinised and approved by the government, after which an e-coupon was issued to the applicant's phone. To redeem this e-coupon, the applicant needed to present herself at the designated distribution centre with her Aadhar card (in original) and a smartphone or print copy of the e-coupon.[11] The Delhi government also issued 2,000 ration coupons to MPs and the state assembly, and another 20,000 ration coupons to the state's minister of Food, Supplies and Consumer Affairs, which could be allotted directly and by discretion to people who did not have Aadhar cards or any other documentation (Govt of Delhi, 2020g, 27 Apr).

In another departure from convention, the Delhi government designated government school teachers and Education Department staff to operate its designated distribution centres for e-coupon holders. Supplies for these designated distribution centres had to be released from the PDS (controlled by the Department of Food, Civil Supplies and Consumer Affairs), and handed over to the Education Department (Govt of Delhi, 2020b, 2 Apr). Improvements in Delhi government schools, brought about by improvements in management, infrastructure and teacher training, are a matter of much prestige to the state government in Delhi, and perhaps for this reason, the use of school buildings and teachers for this was an obvious choice. It no doubt allowed for closer coordination between the ruling Aam Aadmi Party, non-affiliated volunteers and government officials than would have been possible with the state's Food Department.

The government first announced the e-coupon system within days of the lockdown, but there were administrative difficulties in getting it off the ground, which delayed its deployment for several weeks. There were also delays in arranging supplies of rations at the designated distribution centres. Moreover, the number of applicants far outstripped the planned allocation: the government had initially planned for 100,000 e-coupon beneficiaries but eventually extended this to 3.8 million beneficiaries (Bedi, 2020).

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[11] In practice, officials asked for a print copy, and beneficiaries might have been put to considerable difficulty arranging print copies in the time when print shops and local transport were shut because of the lockdowns. Additionally, beneficiaries who did not own the smartphone from which they made the application would have needed to arrange a printout of the e-coupon.

EMERGENCY RELIEF MEASURES OUTSIDE PDS

Cooked meals

State government efforts to extend PDS to temporary beneficiaries was limited, and sometimes undermined, by procedural and administrative hurdles. The Delhi temporary beneficiary policy was adventurous, and the Madhya Pradesh policy made as much administrative shortcut as possible, but even so, the PDS institutional framework could only be stretched so far. Ultimately, the institutional design of the PDS does not make it amenable to quick response or emergency relief. State governments could, however, provide emergency relief, in the form of cooked meals and ration kits, outside the legal and institutional architecture of the PDS.

Cooked food in particular did not pose any beneficiary identification problems as arriving at a cooked meals distribution venue is seen, implicitly, as an acceptable form of self-identification. Cooked meals are crucial for the management of short-term emergency situations and for serving stranded and dislocated people who have no means to make their own cooking arrangement. Cooked meals can also serve well as a stopgap, until such time that people can be surveyed, listed and approved for the issue of temporary PDS status. State governments also needed to make arrangements for cooked meals to be provided to people at quarantine camps and relief shelters.

However, in order to provide cooked food, the state needed to be able to make very localised arrangements for the preparation and distribution of food. Quality and quantity are difficult to manage, particularly over a long period of time. Moreover, as it is difficult to cross-verify how many meals are eaten, it is possible there is some overreporting of how many meals were provided. Perhaps for these reasons, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh did not engage directly with any large initiative to provide cooked meals.

We learned in interviews that initial efforts to provide cooked food by the district administration in Ambala were discontinued on the grounds of high cost and the difficulties in maintaining quality, and that district administrations in the state were subsequently directed to coordinate NGO efforts to provide cooked food instead. NGOs in Yamuna Nagar, another district in the state, were directed to ensure they served only the most basic food (rice and dal cooked together as *khichdi*) in order to ensure that no one except the neediest would avail of these food parcels (Jain, 2020).

In Madhya Pradesh, the collectors were encouraged to utilise some of the ration stocks allocated to them to provide cooked food, but we learned from interviews that they were reluctant to take this up, perhaps for similar reasons. The Madhya Pradesh government also instructed its panchayats to make arrangements to provide food and shelter to needy persons, and for this purpose they were directed to use specified amounts from funds available to them (Govt of MP, 2020a, 26 Mar), but we do not know about the scale or extent to which this was done.

Even so, governments in Bihar, Delhi and Kerala seem to have made considerable effort to provide cooked food in the early days of the COVID period. In Bihar this effort was driven and

implemented entirely by the state government, using district administration staff and government school teachers in implementation roles. In Delhi and Kerala, however, the governments were able to extend their efforts in collaboration with civil society and volunteers and by making strategic use of political party networks. In the case of Kerala, it is possible also that the state was able to make better deployment of limited resources by ensuring it could identify and respond to the needs of particularly vulnerable groups in a timely manner.

Bihar directed district officials in the state capital and other urban centres to establish relief centres that would provide food and shelter to needy and vulnerable urban residents (Govt of Bihar, 2020b, 26 Mar), but this effort did not achieve any substantial scale. By mid-May the state government reported that it was operating 162 centres, in which it had served 74,263 meals.[12] The Bihar government, however, catered to a large number of returning migrants,[13] who needed to be checked first in camps at the state border and then housed for a two-week period in quarantine camps in their home districts. By mid-May, the state was operating 4,671 quarantine camps, housing around 200,000 people, who were either served cooked meals or provided with facilities and supplies for cooking their own food. In early June, the state reported that a total of more than 400,000 migrant workers were staying at 11,167 quarantine centres at the block level and that 1 million migrant workers had been discharged and had returned home after completing their mandatory quarantine period (Khan, 2020). Returning migrants were also provided a set of clothes, a plate, a glass and a *katori*, a bucket and a mug, and all basic toiletries on arrival (Thakur, 2020). On completing their quarantine period, they were given Rs 500 and reimbursement for travel in cash.

Media reports suggest that quarantine camps in Bihar were functional (Srivastava, 2020), but there was criticism from the inmates about the lack of facilities in some of these camps. There are also media reports of inmates escaping quarantine and of 'ghost' quarantine camps, which were reported in official data but actually had no supplies or inmates (Raj, 2020). By early June, the government began to scale back arrangements for returning migrants, but this was the same time that the flood of returning migrants seemed to overwhelm the arrangements that the state government had in place. On 15 June, all the quarantine camps in Bihar were closed even though migrants were still returning to the state in ever-larger numbers (Swaroop, 2020). There is little evidence of the state engaging with local NGOs, activists and volunteers in the management of quarantine facilities, which could perhaps have helped extend the state's capacity to manage these facilities. The Jeevika programme was directed to arrange local volunteer-run kitchens, but this did not take off, perhaps for the reason that the requisite funds and administrative support were not provided.

In contrast, the Delhi government's arrangements for providing cooked food were scalable and could be sustained over a longer period of time. Initial difficulties were resolved within the first few weeks of start of the cooked meals programme. In the days immediately after the lockdown, the Delhi

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[12] Daily updates are published on the website of the Department of Disaster Management, Government of Bihar. This number is from the report published on 14 May, 2020. http://disastermgmt.bih.nic.in/COVID-19/COVID-19.htm. The government, however, does not provide comprehensive day-wise information of its relief efforts.
[13] A report by Aajeevika Bureau and TISS (2017) estimates that 4.4 to 5 million labour migrants from Bihar work in the other parts of the country.

government ordered that its night shelters should provide two cooked meals a day, but there were several challenges to getting this off the ground. The night shelters in Delhi are run by NGOs, on contract and on behalf of the government. As night shelters do not ordinarily provide meals; they do not have kitchen facilities. Moreover, night shelters are located in places that need night shelters— principally in areas of Delhi where there are homeless people—which were not necessarily the same places in which food relief was needed. It was also extremely difficult for people to reach night shelters in the days immediately after the announcement of the lockdown as there was no public transport, and there were reports that Delhi Police (with threat of force and in some cases with the use of force) prevented people from walking to night shelters for food. The NGOs also had some initial difficulty organising the funds and the wherewithal to provide cooked meals.

In response to these issues, the cooked meals programme of the Delhi government was expanded to provide cooked lunches and dinners at designated government school buildings named as hunger relief centres (Govt of Delhi, 2020a, 26 Mar).[14] These relief centres were managed directly by the government through local caterers or NGOs who were issued contracts to provide cooked food.

The Delhi government's cooked meals programme reached a peak at around four to five weeks from the start of the national lockdown, and it was subsequently scaled back. By end April/early May, the Delhi government was providing lunches and dinners for close to 1 million people every day through night shelters and hunger relief centres. In addition, the Delhi government ran day and night shelter facilities, in which meals were also being provided. By early June, the Delhi government was serving around 100,000 lunches and only a few hundred dinners.[15]

It seems likely that the scale-up and later reductions in the provision of cooked food in Delhi matched with cycles of demand. Local activists and volunteers said that by the end of May, large groups of migrant workers had left the city. The temporary PDS distribution and ration kits (discussed in the next section) would have also become operational by this time. However, issues relating to the quality of the response in Delhi could never be fully addressed, even though district collectors were directed to arrange for the monitoring of food quality (Govt of Delhi, 2020c, 4 Apr). Civil society volunteers were appointed by the Delhi government to coordinate all issues relating to food relief with the district administration, and the government coordinated directly with civil society groups and activists for the coordination of hunger relief centres (Govt of Delhi, 2020f, 7 Apr). The government would therefore have received direct and timely information about problems through these links.

In interviews, we were told that as the days became hotter in May, it had become increasingly difficult for entire families to walk to the nearest food centre for each meal. There were times when people had to return hungry as the food ran out or very inadequate quantities were served, and there was disappointment from the fact that every meal consisted of khichdi, with absolutely no variation or addition to the menu.

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[14] In a subsequent order, district collectors and deputy commissioners of police were directed to make a joint assessment of the requirement for cooked food in their areas and to open additional food centres if necessary.
[15] The Delhi government provides comprehensive information about the number of cooked meals served in night shelters and hunger relief centres. See delhishelterboard.in/occupancy-report/food.php.

At the back end, we understand that the quantity and menu is determined by the standard contracts issued to caterers and that there is little room at the local level in the Delhi relief centres to innovate, raise additional funds or change the model of delivery. By sticking to the most basic type of meal, with all the attendant inconveniences and indignities, the model was, however, set up for self-selection of the neediest beneficiaries. In other words, those who turned up at the relief centres were obviously needy enough, and no further surveys, listings or identification procedures were needed. The structure of the response could also protect the government from any possible allegation of profligacy, never mind that it disregarded the possibilities of local innovation or the dignity of beneficiaries.

In sharp contrast to this, Kerala ran a highly localised community kitchen model, in which the kitchens were organised by village panchayats and municipalities (in Kerala's administrative terminology, these are the local self-government institutions or LSGIs). The Kerala initiative was smaller—at its highest point (between 30 March and 4 April), the state provided around 300,000 meals, from 1,300 community kitchens. In early May, approximately 400 of these community kitchens were being run by women's SHGs, organised under the state's Kudambashree programme.[16]

A standard model for establishing and running community kitchens was provided to the LSGIs (Govt of Kerala, 2020d, 28 Mar). Cooked food in Kerala was targeted: free-of-cost packed meals were home delivered only to those who were identified by the LSGIs as people who needed it (Govt of Kerala, 2020b, 20 Mar). Meal packs were also available on demand, for a fixed and partly subsidised cost, for pick-up or home delivery to anyone who asked for it (Nidheesh, 2020). The subsidy cost of the paid meals was provided by the state to LSGIs, whereas LSGIs were expected to fund free meals from their own resources and from community contributions raised by them (Govt of Kerala, 2020c, 27 Mar).

We understand that the local community actively partnered with LSGIs in the production and management of cooked meals (Bechu, 2020; Cris 2020). Available accounts suggest that the cooked meals programme in the state was human-resource intensive and that management of the entire operation was highly localised. We did not find any obvious complaints about quality, wastage or inadequacy, suggesting that the delegation of responsibility to LSGIs worked out quite well for the state. Unlike Haryana or Delhi, there is no indication that the quality of the meals was purposely kept low in order to discourage free-riders, as LSGIs could control who the free meals were sent to. However, the cooked meals programme was expensive to sustain, and by mid-May, it was almost entirely closed (Govt of Kerala, 2020a, 1 Jun). This was replaced instead with smaller-scale cooking arrangements for quarantine centres and relief camps. By this time, the state claims it was also able to ensure that dry ration supplies were made available to all those who needed it, thereby reducing the need for the cooked-meal interventions (Praveen, 2020).

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[16] Comprehensive information about COVID relief measures in the state of Kerala is available from the state COVID dashboard: https://dashboard.kerala.gov.in/ck-view-public.php.

Ration kits and food supplies

Ration kits and supplies were an important half-way point between the PDS and cooked meals. This section refers to kits and bulk supplies that were given outside the PDS, which were distinct from ration kits given along with PDS entitlements to identified beneficiaries. The distribution of rations outside the PDS framework was not as procedurally complicated as it was to make temporary PDS beneficiaries. As a result, relief could be delivered sooner and to people who were out of reach of the PDS. It also had a few advantages over the supply of cooked meals. Beneficiaries often expressed a preference for ration supplies rather than cooked meals. Supplies allowed for people to be able to cook their own food, in ways that they preferred, and to supplement what it was in the kits with what they could buy themselves. It also helped people avoid the indignities and discomforts of queuing up daily for cooked meals.

Across the country, NGOs and non-government volunteers arranged ration kits or cash for basic rations or even made arrangements with designated shops, in order to supply needy families with basic food supplies for a week or longer periods. However, state governments seemed reluctant to get too deeply involved themselves. In Haryana and Madhya Pradesh, the state governments directed district administrations to coordinate civil society interventions of this nature and forwarded calls for assistance they received to NGOs registered with them. In Bihar, there was little evidence of active state coordination with NGOs, although the government reported that it was in touch with Bihari groups who were providing relief for migrants from Bihar in other states.

On the other hand, in Kerala and Delhi, we found that there were systematic state-driven programmes for the distribution of ration kits and supplies. Given Kerala's extensive PDS coverage and the fact that state residents were made eligible for PDS and grocery kits, regardless of whether they had ration cards or not (although at varying levels of entitlement depending on income and ration-equivalent status), its ration-supply interventions could be largely focused on migrant workers. Even in this, Kerala developed a localised and human-resource-intensive approach, which involved direct and sustained contact with vulnerable groups (Kerala Institute of Local Administration, 2020).

The Kerala government instructed LSGIs to identify guest workers and several other vulnerable population groups (Schedule Castes and Scheduled Tribes, urban slum dwellers, etc.) as needing special attention in the lockdown (Kerala Institute of Local Administration, 2020, 17 May). The district collectors were given overall responsibility for the welfare and security of guest workers in the state, but on an everyday basis, we understand that LSGIs managed many of the local arrangements (Arnimesh, 2020).

LSGI surveys were directed to identify different types of guest workers through surveys and to assess whether they were independent or engaged through contractors, which states they were from and which languages they knew. They were advised to establish communication with guest workers by identifying Malayalam speakers from their group and to include, from the side of the state, officials and volunteers who could speak in the local language of the workers. LSGIs were also responsible for seeing that the camps had all required facilities. The list of facilities included

toilets, waste disposal facilities and plug points for charging mobile phones. The state government also subsequently made arrangements for 'top-ups' of pre-paid mobile phones of migrant workers (Arnimesh, 2020).

Initially, many LSGIs delivered cooked meals from their community kitchens to migrant workers, but this quickly became unpopular because of differences in the food preferences of migrant workers. LSGIs were then advised that guest workers might prefer to cook for themselves and adequate cooking facilities and provisions, including grocery items preferred by them, may be provided (Krishnakumar, 2020). Subsequently, the state also arranged ration kits for migrant workers, which included basic food grains and other essential grocery items. In all, the Kerala LSGIs catered to around 360,000 people per day in migrant labour camps in April and 3,766 destitute families all across the state in the same period, which is not overall a very large number, but from available accounts, it seems as if the targeting was quite localised and effective.

In Delhi, the state government had obvious limitations in being able to make localised arrangements for identifying and responding to the hunger crises, but it was still able to overcome some of this through a responsive 'SOS' intervention. For this, an 'SOS team' was set up, which sent ration kits and cooked food in response to calls for assistance. SOS calls were received from multiple channels: district magistrate offices, MLAs, chief minister's fellows, district coordinators and the designed hunger helplines. Information also came through slum federation networks, media reports and direct calls that were made to members of the SOS team through informal networks ("Delhi govt sets up emergency team", 2020).

The SOS team was able to respond to requests without having to redirect people to official channels or having to ask them to make formal complaints, and no local surveys or area assessments had to be made. The team devised a simple procedure by which it made a verification phone call to the people for whom assistance was requested, and it then coordinated the logistics of relief dispatch and distribution directly with the beneficiaries of relief or with other local volunteers. In all, insiders estimated that by end-June, the SOS team would have delivered 50,000 relief packages and served around 300,000 people.

The agility of Delhi's SOS modality is explained by the fact that there was very little bureaucracy involved in the response. The team comprised political party volunteers of the ruling Aam Aadmi Party, who worked along with independent non-political volunteers, which in turn comprised a mix of young and senior (and well-recognised) public-spirited individuals and NGO heads. Supplies, funds and transport vehicles for the SOS response were arranged through donations, which were organised largely through political party networks. Even though the SOS response was quite integrated with the state's overall relief operation, the actual role of the bureaucracy was limited to receiving requests on official phone lines and arranging curfew passes for everyone involved in providing relief.

In parallel, the Delhi Police also ran a similar relief effort, which included the distribution of ration kits (as well as cooked meals). By its own internal estimates, the Delhi Police distributed 430 tonnes of dry ration, in small ration kits in the first five weeks of the lockdown. We

understand that materials and funds for Delhi Police relief were also arranged through charities and donations solicited by the Delhi Police, but it was delivered directly by police personnel. In an interview with a police officer involved in relief operations, we confirmed that no funds were separately allocated for the police to undertake relief distribution, and all the resources deployed were raised directly by the police through donations.

Several government orders in Delhi directed district-level police authorities to work in coordination with the district collector, to identify food requirements and to resolve issues relating to food distribution. The Delhi Police was also directed to appoint a senior officer to Police deputy commissioners to collate information about requests, demands and complaints about food and shelter received by ground-level police personnel, and to coordinate with the police 'Incident Commander' for resolution of the same (Govt of Delhi, 2020e, 7 Apr). The orders did not mention how these requests and demands were to be resolved, but we expect it was through funds and provisions collected by the police. There is no similar mention of the Delhi government's SOS team in written orders, but local third-party accounts suggest that the SOS team was seen as very much a part of government relief efforts.

There is no obvious reason why the Delhi government and the Delhi Police were unable to provide government funds for their relief work, except that institutional rules and ways of working would have constrained their operational flexibility and responsiveness if these were government-funded interventions. It is interesting from this perspective that in order to put together and deliver the SOS and Delhi Police relief work, civil society volunteers, NGOs, party activists, Delhi state officials and the Delhi Police were able to coordinate their efforts, often directly through WhatsApp groups, which seemingly bypassed official channels as well as institutional tensions and rivalries between them. Several of the people involved, and their institutions, had very recently been at loggerheads over the north-east Delhi Hindu–Muslim riots, in which civil society groups and activists saw the state and police openly side with Hindus and against Muslims. The close involvement of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in the Delhi Police relief work has also been pointed out (Sagar, 2020).

ORGANISATIONS, PEOPLE AND SYSTEMS

It is apparent that state governments had a very wide range of options for what they could have done, in spite of written and implicit rules that constrain bureaucratic action. This is not to say that rules and convention were not a limitation, but that it was possible even within this framework to have achieved some degree of responsiveness. But for this, states needed to have people and systems they could trust, and some states were better equipped in this respect than others. Table 2 has an overview of the organisations and groups that were involved in the implementation of relief in the states we have looked at, as reflected in government orders and all the information we were able to access about the relief interventions.

TABLE 2: *Overview of the organisations and groups involved in the implementation of government relief efforts*

State	Organisations and agencies
Madhya Pradesh	District administration Local government Civil society organisations and activists (limited district-level interface with government) Food and Civil Supplies Department[17]
Haryana	District administration Committees formed by district administration Civil society organisations and activists (limited district-level interface with government) Food and Civil Supplies Department
Bihar	District administration Jeevika programme
Kerala	District administration Local government Civic volunteers, local cluster-level volunteers Food and Civil Supplies Department
Delhi	District administration

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[17] Used to refer to the department that administers the PDS in the state. The official nomenclature for the department is sometimes different.

	Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) & NGO contractors—night shelters
	Delhi Police
	Education Department
	Food and Civil Supplies Department
	SOS team of volunteers
	Chief Minister's Fellows and Legislative Assembly Fellows
	Civil society nominees appointed for district coordination
	Aam Aadmi Party activists and volunteers

Madhya Pradesh could perhaps rely on credible and relatively recent survey data collected by its local governments (although we could not find actual numbers of how many were included in this way). It was able to delegate resources and discretion to its district administration, who could then utilize this authority in administratively credible ways. In Haryana, the first state-government policy direction for relief came quite late (14 April), but the district administration was able to quickly put together reliable survey data and a list of additional beneficiaries who were extended PDS benefits. These states were, however, unable or unwilling to establish localised arrangements for providing cooked food or emergency rations outside of the PDS institutional structure. In other words, this means that they could not entrust people and institutions outside the Food Department and PDS shops with the handling of food grains supplied by the state.

The Bihar government's relief efforts suggest weakness in its district administration and in its local outreach. It could not even use its PDS institutional structure to reach any temporary beneficiaries, perhaps on account of longstanding issues of "resilient corruption" and staffing shortages in its food department (Dreze et al., 2018, p. 23). The Jeevika programme provided some sort of para-state, which could deliver emergency cash assistance at least, but the state government seems to have lacked the confidence to issue coupons or ration cards to new beneficiaries. And its closure of quarantine camps at the time when the requirement for them was reaching a peak suggests that it could not sustain the administration of cooked food.

The Bihar government also did not make any civil society or non-state collaborations to extend its reach, perhaps for the reason that it lacked the orientation and expertise to bring about such collaborations. In Haryana, the district administration could at least coordinate some NGO and civil society relief efforts, but without providing non-state efforts with any active government support. Madhya Pradesh relied on local civil society and non-state volunteer groups to provide

information to its district officials about people needing rations and assistance, and it seems to have been able to extend assistance to at least some of those for whom it was requested, suggesting that there were pre-existing localised links and networks that connected the district administration and non-state actors.

On the other hand, turning to the states of Kerala and Delhi, we see that the states were able to extend themselves, far above and beyond conventional practice. This was, however, brought about by some very specific features in the states that merit a closer look, even though their particularity rules them out from being easily transplanted into best practice elsewhere.

All the information we have suggests a very high level of organisation in Kerala's approach, in the sense of having protocols of planning, control and management at different levels of government. The Kerala approach was also the most decentralised, allowing for substantial and qualitative decisions to be made at the local level, which in turn was made possible by the fact that it is indeed a highly decentralised state. Decentralisation reforms were initiated in the state in 1996, when a coalition government of Left parties (the Left Democratic Front or the LDF) launched the 'People's Campaign for Decentralized Planning' (Heller, 2005, p. 86). These reforms have been described as the most ambitious and concerted state-led effort to build local government in India (Heller et al., 2007). This intervention brought about transformative change in Kerala, by deepening democracy and strengthening the state's capacity to deliver public services and welfare programmes (Heller, 2005; Heller et al., 2007). These reforms have, over the decades, been substantially consolidated in political terms with managerial and technical expertise.

In a direct sense, Kerala's pandemic response was made possible by the fact that the state, together with its LSGIs, had substantial frontline capacity, allowing it to be fairly confident of its ability to identify and respond to the needs of each vulnerable family and cluster of houses. Kerala LSGIs were encouraged by the state government to raise their own donations from the public and to collaborate directly with volunteers in the management of frontline operations.[18] The state also ensured that the LSGIs had discretionary power and resources to identify and respond to the needs of the local population, and it provided the framework of rules and directions necessary for this through government orders and easy-to-use instruction manuals.

One can also see how the state deployed its own expertise in managing the crisis through a highly transparent and personalised approach, in which the chief minister and other key ministers and bureaucrats made frequent public briefings and were seen as leading from the front. There is detailed information about COVID and the state's relief measures on a dedicated 'dashboard', and government orders and training materials are easily available on government websites. This openness and information sharing served the very important purpose of reassuring its own public

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[18] According to the state government's dashboard, there were 300,000 volunteers, officially named the Sannadha Sena, who were drafted to assist in the frontline response. We understand that the political party machinery of the Left has helped mobilise and organise the state's volunteer response, but this is not 'extra-government' in the sense that the roles assigned to volunteers are closely integrated with the formal state and include delivery of food and relief materials, purchasing of local materials, identifying needy people, local area coordination, and operating helplines and call centres. As part of their instructions, the LSGIs were directed to designate local resident volunteers for every cluster of 20–40 houses to coordinate local requirements for food, medicines and any other issues faced by the families in his or her cluster with ward representatives and local officials.

of the capacity of the state, its good intent and its outreach, which no doubt helped consolidate support for strong measures to handle the spread of the virus. It also helped improve the stature and reputation of the state in the outside world, which perhaps in turn further consolidated support for the state internally.

Delhi's example provides a useful counterpoint to Kerala in that it was able to develop and sustain a fairly complex policy with none of the assets and resources that were available to Kerala. Delhi instead cobbled together a response that built on expertise drawn in from the political party, NGOs, activists and technical experts. The Delhi government perhaps could not, on its own, identify every vulnerable household or population cluster, but it had a better chance of reaching out in time to respond to humanitarian emergencies with the support of civil society and police stations. These eclectic choices made by Delhi in lieu of a conventional institutional approach could be understood in the context of Delhi's institutional structure, which is unique to its city-state and national capital status.

Delhi was converted from a union territory to a state in 1993, but it does not have full statehood. The elected government of Delhi shares power over important subjects with the lieutenant governor appointed by the central government and with the central Ministries of Urban Development and the Home Affairs. The central government directly controls appointments and transfer postings of the entire senior bureaucracy of the state, giving the chief minister very little legal control over his officials. Moreover, the state government has very limited influence over the municipalities of the state, which are substantially controlled by the central government. On its part, the elected government of the state has the people's mandate, but no real influence on the ground for the lack of local government, land revenue or police powers. Successive Delhi governments have, over the past decades, compensated for this by engaging NGOs (by contract) to run the frontlines of their social welfare outreach, including for water, sanitation, livelihoods and empowerment projects in slums and resettlement colonies, and for running 'night shelters'[19] across the city.

Delhi's governance structure is fraught with conflict and inter-institution jealousies, but in the time of the pandemic, some arrangements seem to have been worked out to have joint decision-making and coordination between the central government, the Delhi government and civil society to formulate and implement a responsive and technically complex policy for food relief. The institution of the Delhi Disaster Management Authority provided a governance unit that includes both the chief minister and the lieutenant governor, and it has been used to issue almost all the high-level decisions of the state relating to food relief.

Delhi also collaborated extensively with non-state actors, but in a very different style from Kerala. We saw in previous sections how these collaborations built on both individual and institutional connections between the people involved and provided the space for collaborations between

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[19] The Supreme Court mandated this (PUCL vs Union of India case). https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/SC-directs-Delhi-Govt-to-provide-shelter-to-homeless/article16838460.ece
Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board's website reports that 224 night shelters with a total capacity of 7,492 were functioning as of 20 July 2020. http://delhishelterboard.in/occupancy-report/

people and organisations who would in other situations have had strongly adversarial interactions. Collaborations in Delhi included high-level NGO and civil society leaders, who brought considerable expertise and credibility to relief efforts, and provided quick and direct feedback loops that helped improve policy and iron out implementation snags. Some of these collaborations were formal and were reflected in government orders, whereas others were based on informal links. The Delhi government also filled gaps in its subordinate and frontline layers by deploying government school teachers, school committees and 'Fellows' of the Delhi Assembly Research Centre and the Chief Minister's Urban Leadership Fellowship.[20] On the other hand, there were few references to the state's municipal corporations, suggesting that there may have been no active role for them in food relief.

CONCLUSION

A pandemic of this scale is, hopefully, a one-off event. It has, however, made visible some glaring insufficiencies in the policy design and organisation of the Indian state. First of all, being poor and vulnerable is a far more fluid state than official state responses to food security care to acknowledge. Large numbers of people who are not officially identified as poor could also be so close to the brink of hunger even in normal times that a brief disruption (such as a few weeks) in their ability to earn labour wages is enough to wipe out any cash and food reserves that they have. We know that these disruptions need not always be linked to spectacular global events like this pandemic—they could be personal, for example, illness, or localised, such as natural or man-made disruptions in business and employment in an area.

India's food security framework—capable and substantially improved in its present institutional form—has no room at all for administrative discretion and response to either individualised or widespread emergencies. The NFSA in fact has no provision for anything that falls outside its precise formulations. There is also no functioning institutional mechanism that can pick up on even the most glaring cases of exclusion in a timely and responsive manner. Moreover, neither the food security law nor the disaster management law provide for institutional mechanisms for early warning and reporting of hunger crises. This issue is left, implicitly and by omission, to state governments. And few state governments have the institutional or administrative capability to provide a structured and universally accessible response system.

There is a national policy for PDS portability under implementation—One Nation One Ration Card— that will allow for migrants to access their PDS entitlements in other states, but this also misses the point as it does not envisage the need for timeliness and responsiveness. In its present form, it assumes that entire families will migrate together, which does not account for individual or sub-family migrations. It also does not address the administrative challenge of digitising, accounting and reconciling between states, which can substantially dilute its perceived advantages.[21] Most importantly, however, it is not a crisis response mechanism but an extension of the present institutional framework, and it should be seen only as such.

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[20] The Delhi government Fellows are contractual appointments of government, meant to assist the government in research and management tasks. https://ddc.delhi.gov.in/chief-ministers-urban-leaders-fellowship/
[21] For a full analysis of these issues, see Khera (2020).

This study provides some indication of what a crisis response system could encompass. Such a system would require states to be able to make localised assessments of the situation and design interventions that best address these requirements. This could, no doubt, be substantially improved through better transparency, accountability and clear lines of funding. The legitimacy and success of measures that provide greater administrative discretion is, however, dependent on there being a clear and well-defined scope for discretion. Not all states were able to establish the scope for this discretion, and some (such as Delhi) made up for their inability to provide any real discretion to officials by leaning on their non-state collaborators.

This brings us to the critical question of competence, credibility and trust within state bureaucracies. These are constituent elements of 'state capacity', and they need to be present in an everyday sense in order to be deployed for emergencies. There is ultimately no alternative but for states to be able to develop this in-house. States needed capacity amongst their top executive, in their district administration and in local government. Discretionary power can neither be granted nor exercised without this competence. Kerala, Haryana and Madhya Pradesh managed to delegate some special discretionary powers to their districts and local administrations, but only Kerala was able to give them wide-ranging powers to make case-specific assessments and to do all that was necessary. This it did by first limiting the scope of that discretion to very specific categories of the population, and it could do this because it was reasonably certain that it was already providing for everyone else through institutionalised means. On the other hand, the discretion in Haryana and Madhya Pradesh was limited to identifying and assessing who needed food, which was then dispatched to higher levels of government for administrative approval.

The need for non-state actors in dealing with a situation such as this is also non-negotiable. The structure and depth of collaborations between state and non-state actors varied, and depended quite a lot on pre-existing conditions within the state and in its relationship to society. In Delhi, non-state actors had a seat at the policy table, and they influenced the design of Delhi's interventions in both formal and informal ways. They also provided a significant boost to the state's implementation capacity, by actually carrying out tasks that the state would not have been able to do on its own. The ruling political party's networks no doubt helped convene these collaborations, but it is in the nature of state–society relations in Delhi that the most credible civil society voices are not camp followers of a political party. The state had to straddle dissonance within its collaborations, which strengthened its feedback loops, but is very much in line with the culture of government in Delhi. On the other hand, in Kerala, non-state collaborators had a far more tightly structured role—they were only let into arenas in which the state permitted entry, and in these roles, they helped boost frontline capacity and brought resources (in the form of donations and volunteer time) to local governments. Even the feedback loops in Kerala were planned and deliberate. This too is in line with state–society relations in Kerala and the organisation of the state's ruling coalition.

In closing this discussion, we would like to point out that we do not know nearly enough about the role of political and administrative leadership. Chief ministers, other key politicians and bureaucrats at various levels of the state administration took risky decisions every time they made

departures from conventional practice. These decisions would, very largely, have been legally valid but the reason why conventional practice is so appealing to the bureaucracy is that it is driven by precedent and has very few risks for the decision makers. To depart from convention requires ability—to be able to formulate and deliberate on the policy and its justifications, and to be able to convince others that the new policy is acceptable. It also requires something extra, a sense of responsibility that greater injustice would be happen if something is not done.

Author's Note

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