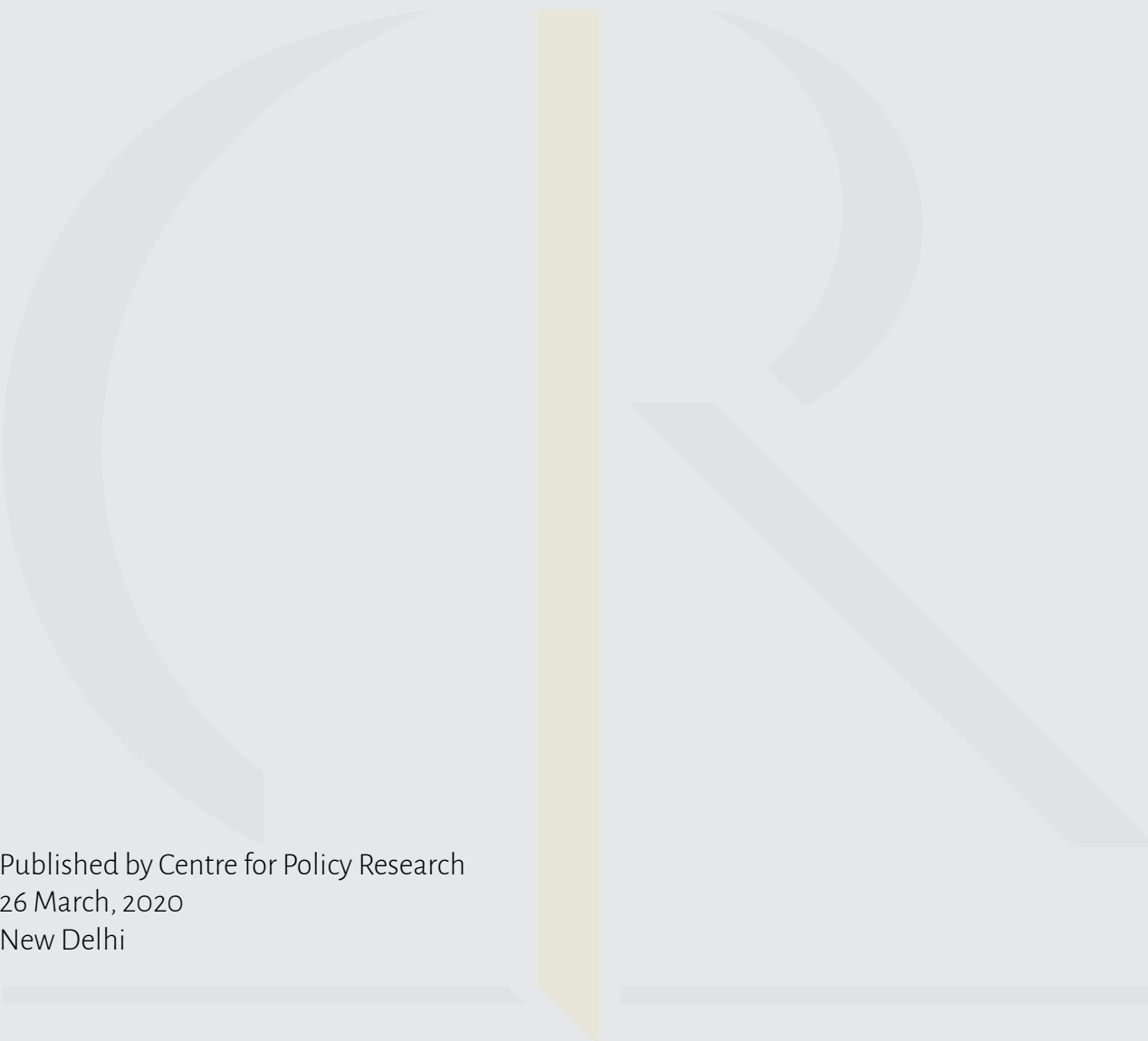


# A Crisis of Hunger

A ground report on the repercussions of COVID-19 related lockdown on Delhi's vulnerable populations

Ashwin Parulkar | Mukta Naik





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For queries, please contact:

**Ashwin Parulkar**

Senior Researcher, CPR  
ashwin@cprindia.org

**Mukta Naik**

Fellow, CPR  
mukta@cprindia.org

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and **Arkaja Singh**, Fellow, CPR for their insights and support.



Image Credit: Rajesh Kumar

## Homeless shelters as food distribution facilities

The lock-down in response to COVID-19 has created an unprecedented food crisis in Delhi. While monthly-wage earning households may have a few days food supply on hand, daily wage labourers - now without work - have no income and, therefore, no ability to buy food. Even those with means to buy food face local access barriers because vendors and street markets are no longer operational.

The Delhi government recently announced relief measures for such vulnerable people. but we find these have serious lacuna that must be identified and addressed to respond to the unfolding crisis of hunger at hand. This report draws on conversations with civil society organisations with deep networks on ground to highlight key issues and possible solutions.

We discuss three key Delhi government announcements: the deployment of homeless shelters for provision of food, the use of the construction workers cess for direct benefit transfers, and the increase in PDS allocations. Additionally, we draw attention to measures under the ICDS and on the specific and acute distress among residents of violence affected north-east Delhi. Last, we discuss the plight of migrants trapped inside Delhi who want to return home.

On 19 March 2020, the Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board (DUSIB) announced emergency measures for homeless shelters in response to the Covid-19 pandemic to begin on Sunday, 22 March. They included the following measures:

- 1 Food would be provided in all shelters; shelter managing agencies (SMAs) (all of Delhi's 234 shelters are managed by NGOs) would be provided funds on a reimbursement basis;
- 2 Shelters would undergo voluntary lockdown; that is, residents would be asked to reside in the campus or shelter space and be provided food and toiletries;
- 3 Residents would be provided sanitizers and soap;
- 4 Quarantine facilities would be set up at select locations (Dandi Park, in North Delhi's Yamuna Pushta area; Sarai Kale Khan in South Delhi); and
- 5 Tents would be set up to reduce overcrowding.

However, it is quite evident that 200-odd shelters in Delhi do not have the capacity to cater to the current – and constantly rising – demand for food and are unable to cope. Shelters across the city have reported higher numbers than they usually deal with, resulting in

shortages and fights over food but also conditions of crowding that are antithetical to the desired outcome of the lockdown. We present some insights into what SMAs are facing at this time.

## Additional load

On 22 March, the day the new orders came into effect, SPYM procured food and hygienic supplies for nearly 3000 homeless people across their 60 shelters in numerous parts of Old and South Delhi. But this was not enough. Dr. Rajesh Kumar, SPYM's executive director, noted: 'We are prepared to feed homeless people in and around our areas. The problem is that other daily wage earners, particularly from Old Delhi Railway Station, come to our areas, creating a challenge. How to cope with this new wave of people?'

The city-wide lockdown's main impact on daily wage construction, dhaba, shaadi party workers and rickshaw pullers is unemployment. These workers not only lack the means to comply with the government curfew – i.e. they simply do not have adequate housing inside which they can stay in a lockdown – but they also lose their lone survival asset (work) and, correspondingly, informal safety nets, such as (i) religious institutions and (ii) street food donation drives, also often linked to temples and gurudwaras, which are currently shuttered. The loss of these crucial food access points for daily wage migrants is why, as Armaan Alkazi of Aman Biradari points out, "this [crisis] is unlike demonetization – since religious institutions did exist then."

The closing of shops and businesses have also reduced makeshift forms of shelter upon which many laborers depend. "Many may have previously managed, sleeping at some shop at Chandni Chowk," Rajesh says, explaining the influx of laborers to SPYM's Jama Masjid shelters. "The challenge is: we cannot deny them food. Large crowds, then, also increase [overall] susceptibility to diseases, not just Corona."

Across the city's highly populated geographies of working homeless and migrant laborers – Jama Masjid, Yamuna Pushta, Sari Kalai Khan, Pahar Ganj, Company Bagh labour chowk and Okhla – we have been told about this common pattern: the loss of livelihood has led to the search for food, which is increasingly in short supply, while cohering government directives on quarantine facilities, disease control and prevention are not underway. Likewise, information on protocols

or coordination with the Delhi Health Department have not been provided to either shelter managing NGOs or shelter residents. And while food services are being provided in shelters, outreach services such as mobile street medicine clinics have been shut down.

## Mass movement and disease risk

Aman Biradari believes the cascading pattern of the loss of employment, shut down of street services and religious institutions, and known availability of food at shelters has also caused the recent and noticeable mass movement of homeless laborers into already heavily populated areas. Yamuna Pushta is one of the city's densest homeless enclaves. Based on their recent area-wide tuberculosis screening, Aman Biradari estimates between 8 to 10 thousand largely single homeless men live there. In their 25 March inspection report, they claim that homeless people from "adjacent areas such as Old Delhi, Chandni Chowk and Company Bagh" have moved to the Pushta, possibly increasing risks under such unsheltered conditions for other diseases as Dr. Kumar noted, such as tuberculosis. Aman Biradari recently identified 69 TB cases out of 1200 tested along the 1.8km stretch of Yamuna Pushta itself. Shelters in Banglasahib, their fieldworkers note, are failing to feed between 300 to 400 people despite having fed up to 600 daily.

## Hampered distribution

Even in shelters where food supply is sufficient, distribution is hampered. Police prohibit vehicles transporting supplies to make rounds. Balgovind coordinates operations for about one-quarter of Safe Approach's 40 shelters. He states that "[We] are providing food across our [approximately] 40 shelters, including the 10 to 12 shelters I manage. But there were problems in Motia Khan [shelter], feeding 300 to 400 people, many families. So we packed from other locations to feed them. But that was a problem [because] police harass social workers despite efforts to explain that they are feeding the homeless. Traffic cops demand I-cards from staff and don't let them through. We had to stop food services for one day, then send others out to try to convince the police again to let them through ('These people are trying to feed the homeless, etc!'). The police don't often listen."

Addressing such problems requires coordination with DUSIB. When the police stopped SYPMs delivery vehicles and demanded bribes to pass through, Kumar was able to successfully lobby DUSIB to intervene.

## Governance and Capacity

DUSIBs orders on food provisioning, quarantine facilities, shelter conditions and basic supplies had not been followed by corresponding support. The implementation of these measures relies on the capacities of sub-contracted SMAs to stock food, masks, soaps and sanitizers themselves. The continuance of this system, particularly in such a dire time, depends on the ability of NGOs to receive reimbursement funds. Alongside the risk that shelter residents and other mobile homeless people face to hunger at this time, many are concomitantly vulnerable to health risks due to the lack of adequate facilities. “We have procured enough sanitizers and soaps for the next week,” Dr. Kumar says, “but will be challenged in the next week. Right now we have to buy them ourselves. Stocks are not enough. 2 liters of hand sanitizer [per shelter] a day is not enough.”

The NGOs are therefore facing a dual, supply and demand side crunch. Procuring supplies without promise of speedy reimbursement limits their capacities to meet growing demands of poor recently unemployed workers forced to move to locations where refuge (shelter) and necessities can be found (food). Additionally, the action of the police - the lone state agency in these locales –in limiting the mobility of service providers (NGOs) and poor people is undermining the efficacy of the government's own orders.

## Inadequate spatial coverage of shelters

In spatial terms, shelters cover a limited part of the city and are inaccessible to the majority. For example, areas like Bawana where many migrant workers live, are not covered by homeless shelters. Similarly, the nearest shelters to the high density cluster of informal settlement in Govindpuri are at Amar colony and Nehru Place. Reaching shelters in a lockdown situation is a significant risk for those seeking their daily meal. This situation will worsen and demand for food will grow exponentially as households run out of money, cooking fuel and rations over the days to come.

## Providing for ‘trapped’ houseless migrants

In the past few days, as lockdown conditions escalated, migrant workers were unable to go home to their villages. While there are reports of state govts stepping in to rescue some migrants, these efforts have come to

a standstill after the latest 21-day nationwide lockdown. Many workers who left construction sites, factory premises and rental accommodations in the hope that they would get home are stranded near borders and at various points in the city. These extra persons are also a potential burden to the shelter system.

## Recommendations

- 1 The government should open community kitchens in highly dense homeless and working migrant enclaves near shelters and labour chowks. They should enlist SMAs to assist with this work but not impose the full remit of food provisioning on them, and particularly under the reimbursement model currently underway.
- 2 The government should assess overcrowded and underserved shelters throughout the city to decide where vulnerable homeless people in overcrowded spaces can stay. This task would also reduce burdens on caretakers in overcrowded facilities whose capacities to deliver services are limited.
- 3 Provide passes to food supply vehicles associated with NGOs under the current model of food delivery to prevent police prohibition of movement.
- 4 Preventative measures and direct disease control measures should as directed by DUSIB in their March 19 meeting begin immediately. This would include notifying specific quarantine facilities, as recommended, and coordinating with the Delhi Health Department on protocols, human resources and providing information on Covid-19 risks to homeless people and SMA staff workers.
- 5 The government would need to go beyond the shelter network in its efforts to distribute cooked meals to needy populations at this time. Meal distribution points must be identified and selected at convenient locations in the North-west delhi, North-east, South-west, West districts in the city, which have significant migrant populations. Religious organisations and private sector facilities with kitchens can be enlisted for this task as per requirements, and with necessary precautions and support.
- 6 One suggestion from housing rights NGOs is that the government set up temporary housing with food facilities to house migrant workers who are now ‘trapped’ inside the city with limited means.



Image Credit: Rajesh Kumar

## Direct transfers to registered construction worker

The Delhi government has announced a sum of Rs 5,000 to be distributed to those registered under the construction workers cess fund, via direct benefit transfer. While it is commendable that a cess fund, that has been widely critiqued for lack of expenditure, is being drawn upon during a time of need, major lacunae in the implementation and impact of this measure exist.

First, the number of live registrations themselves have dropped drastically from an earlier figure of 400,000 to a mere 55,000 at this time. This is related to the second, more serious problem of the defunct nature of the Construction Workers Welfare Board in the city. Because the Board is not functional, no renewals have taken place in recent times. It can now provide relief to barely a fourth of the estimated number of construction workers in the city, estimated at about 200,000. The majority of construction workers in the city, including pensioners, will remain outside the net of this relief measure.

Finally, this fund does not cover non-construction unorganised workers like e-riksha, domestic workers and workers employed in small factories and shops, etc. There is no existing mechanism to reach them.

### *Recommendations*

- 1 In order to ensure wider reach of these funds, the Chairman of the Board, the Labour Minister of Delhi, will have to expedite the constitution of the board, call an emergency meeting and either waiver or significantly lower registration requirements. If required, Supreme Court and/or Parliamentary intervention must be sought to make the required amendments.
- 2 The government must additionally set up a CM relief fund to channelise individual and CSR donations to feeding the hungry in the city.

## Enhanced PDS, doorstep ICDS benefits

The Delhi government has announced an increase of 1.5 times of PDS rations to 72 lakh beneficiaries who are priority cardholders. It appears that PDS shops are closed in many locations in the city and there seems to be no alternate mechanism for distributing PDS, so it is unclear how beneficiaries will access the rations due to them. Additionally, PDS does not cover migrant workers. Hence opting for PDS transfers does not address the mounting problems of hunger faced by vulnerable migrant populations in the city.

Early into the crisis, the Ministry of Women and Child Development requested states to organise door-to-door distribution of midday meals. However, in Delhi this does not appear to have been implemented and mid-day meals have not been delivered since schools shut on 15th March. This has deprived poor households of a key source of nutrition for children. Additionally, special foods and supplements for pregnant and lactating mothers and children under 6 have also stopped since 6th March. A govt order facilitating high calorie foods like panjiri and poshtik laddo, which are packaged and easier to distribute, has also seen patchy implementation on ground.

### Recommendations

- 1 At this time, on-demand PDS is strongly recommended. PDS rations must be given to anyone who walks in. Simple systems like using use voter ink to mark those who take rations can minimise double dipping.
- 2 Mechanisms for doorstep delivery of midday meals must be evolved.
- 2 Bureaucracy involved in doorstep delivery of services must be given necessary protective gear as well as incentives to work under the current risky conditions.

## Special note: Violence affected areas in north-east Delhi

The violence affected areas of north-east Delhi are extremely vulnerable at this time. An estimated 800 people have returned to makeshift and damaged homes after the Idgah relief camp was evacuated. Many others are struggling to find rental accommodation as Covid-related fears wreak fear among landlords. These people have limited cash resources in hand.

Local residents we spoke to report that very few ration shops are open and vegetables are not available. Those who venture out to seek food are being stopped by the police. People have not been working for over a month and are very low on financial resources. While some people have panicked and stored rations, others have nothing. There is no government support accessible to vulnerable families in this area.

Our informants tell us that the highly unequal situation is created tensions in the area and any ration distribution efforts are likely to be chaotic and confrontational. "If I tell you the truth, any effort in these neighbourhoods are going to be difficult. People will attack the supply if rations are going to be provided," says Shaan who lives in Mustafabad and has been a point person for relief efforts in the aftermath of the violence in the area. Some highly damaged households in Shiv Nagar have no cooking facilities and might need to be supplied with cooked food to survive.

## Conclusions

The Delhi government is making bold announcements toward relief for vulnerable groups in the city but departments are failing to set up clear and speedy mechanisms required to make these measures actually work on ground. DUSIB must strengthen shelters with adequate upfront funding, supplies and staff. It must also set up new community kitchens in parts of the city where shelters do not exist but the demand for food from daily wage workers does. Doorstep delivery of rations and midday meals will reduce the burden on shelters and community kitchens. Lastly, urgent steps to increase registrations for the construction workers welfare board are necessary to ensure that this section of the unorganised workforce is offered monetary relief.

## Informants

- . **Amrita Johri**, Delhi Right to Food Campaign
- . **Animesh Das**, International Federation of Trade Unions
- . **Armaan Alkazi**, Aman Biradari
- . **Balgovind**, Safe Approaches
- . **Mrigank**, International Federation of Trade Unions
- . Two residents of Mustafabad in north-east Delhi (names withheld)
- . **Rajesh Kumar**, Executive Director, SPYM
- . **Richard Sundaram**, National Campaign Committee for Central Legislation on Construction Labour