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NEWS BULLETIN FROM ALL INDIA BANK EMPLOYEES' ASSOCIATION

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Railways seeks private investment for running passenger trains over 109 pairs of routes

1 Jul 2020 Shreya Nandi ***LIVEMINT***

- **The project would entail private sector investment of about Rs. 30,000 crore, says the national transporter**
- **Private entities once selected for passenger rail operations shall pay fixed haulage charges, energy charges as per actual consumption**

New Delhi: Indian Railways on Wednesday said it has invited proposals to shortlist bidders and allow private companies run 151 modern passenger trains over 109 Origin Destination(OD) pairs of routes. The project would entail private sector investment of about Rs 30,000 crore, an official statement said.

The move to allow private players to operate passengers will not only end the longstanding monopoly of the national transporter in running trains, but will also start a rush of private investment into the Indian Railways.

“The objective of this initiative is to introduce modern technology rolling stock with reduced maintenance, reduced transit time, boost job creation, provide enhanced safety, provide world class travel experience to passengers," it said.

The railway ministry said that the majority of these modern trains will be manufactured in India and the private entity shall be responsible for financing, procuring, operation and maintenance of the trains. The concession period for the project will be 35 years and the private firm will have to pay the fixed haulage charges, energy charges as per actual consumption and a share in gross revenue determined through a transparent bidding process to the national transporter.

“Trains shall be designed for a maximum speed of 160 kmph. There would be a substantial reduction in journey time. The running time taken by a train shall be comparable to or faster than the fastest train of Indian Railways operating in the respective route," it said.

"These trains shall be operated by the driver and guard of Indian Railways. The operation of the trains by the private entity shall conform to the key performance indicators like punctuality, reliability, upkeep of trains etc," it said.

Private train operations may begin by April 2023: Railway official

02 Jul 2020, By J. Jagannath LIVEMINT

- **If any performance indicators are not met by private players in passenger train operations they will be penalised, says Railway Board Chairman**
- **All coaches will be procured under Make in India policy, the official said**

New Delhi: Private participation in passenger train operations will only be 5 per cent of the total operations of Railways, said Chairman of Railway Board on Thursday.

During an online media interaction on the subject of private participation in running passenger trains, Vinod Kumar Yadav said if any performance indicators are not met by private players in passenger train operations they will be penalised,

"Private train operations are likely to begin by April 2023, all coaches will be procured under Make in India policy," said Yadav.

Train sets have to be brought by private operators and maintained by them, he said.

"Fares in private trains will be competitive and prices on other modes of transport like airlines, buses have to be kept in mind while fixing the fares," he further said.

The private trains will operate in 12 clusters, including Bengaluru, Chandigarh, Jaipur, Delhi, Mumbai, Patna, Prayagraj, Secunderabad, Howrah, Chennai.

Yadav expects financial bids for private trains by February or March and expects to finalise financial bids by April 2021.

Yadav said Request For Quotation bids will be finalised by September.

The Railways on Wednesday formally kickstarted its plans to allow private entities to operate passenger trains on its network by inviting request for qualifications (RFQ) for participation on 109 pairs of routes through 151 modern trains, the national transporter said.

The project would entail a private sector investment of about □30,000 crore, it said.

This is the first initiative for private investment for running passenger trains on the Indian Railways network. It began last year with the Indian Railway Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) introducing the Lucknow-Delhi Tejas Express.

Railways employee unions to protest against privatisation policy

"We are running trains professionally. There is no reason to privatise trains," says an employee union president

<u>Nirbhay Kumar</u> | July 2, 2020 | BUSINESSTODAY

- **Railway employees union AIRF calls privatisation a "wishful thinking", vows to launch protest**
- **Railways on Wednesday invited bids from private sector for investment of about Rs 30,000 crore**
- **With Dedicated Freight Corridors expected to become operational in 2021, several trunk routes will be free to run more trains**
- **Indian Railways recovers only 57% of the cost of travel, while ferrying almost 23 million passengers on a daily basis.**

Country's largest railway union All India Railwaymen's Federation (AIRF) has said it will protest against the government decision to privatise part of the railway operations. AIRF says train passengers will be hit the most in case private companies run the trains, and plans to rope them in for the protests.

"All this is wishful thinking. Railways has not been able to profitably run even three Tejas trains. The break-even occupancy for these trains is 70% but it has not been more than 40-50% on an average. So, why would a private company put their money in a loss-making business," AIRF General Secretary Shiva Gopal Mishra told BusinessToday.In.

The Railways has billed Tejas Express trains as corporate passenger trains. It charges higher fare for the journey and does not admit any concessional pass. Vowing to protest against the privatisation drive, Mishra says the government had tried to privatise train operations earlier but failed to do so after protests by the Railways staff.

"We are running trains professionally. We are providing good quality service at an affordable fare. There is no reason to privatise trains. We are creating a platform where the general public would also be involved and a massive protest would be launched at grass-root level," AIRF General Secretary said.

Seeking private investment of about Rs 30,000 crore, the Railways on Wednesday invited bids from private companies for running passenger trains on 109 pairs (origin-destination) of routes. The concession period for the project shall be 35 years and the private firms will be responsible for financing, procuring, operation and maintenance of trains.

"By going in for privatisation, the government will destroy the Railways and make travelling costly. We outrightly condemn the government move. After discussing the issue with our central members we would launch protest against it," said National Federation of Indian Railwaymen (NFIR) President Guman Singh.

Making a strong case for privatisation, the Railways has said that the objective of this initiative is to introduce modern technology, rolling stock with reduced maintenance, reduce transit time, create more jobs and provide enhanced safety.

With Dedicated Freight Corridors expected to become operational in 2021, the Railways expects that it will free up several trunk routes of congestion, thus giving scope for running more trains on these routes. These additional passenger trains could be run by private companies. With Railways incurring losses in running passenger trains it wants to speed up privatisation. On an average, Indian Railways recovers only 57% of cost of travel while ferrying almost 23 million passengers on a daily basis.

Central Trade Unions Congratulate Coal Workers for success of three day strike

The Joint Platform of Central Trade Unions, independent sectoral federations and associations congratulate the coal workers who have successfully held the strike for three days, on 2nd-3rd-4th July 2020 bringing the coal mines and establishments under Coal India and SCCL to grinding halt with no production and no dispatch of coal. Strike was called to oppose and resist the Government decision to completely privatise the coal sector through unregulated commercial mining of coal and trading by private sector including foreign entities much to the detriment of national interests and self-reliance. The impact was to the tune of 9 million tons of coal production and dispatch could not take place.

The coal workers and their unions have put up a heroic and united battle to defend the energy security of the country and self reliance and against handing over the vital natural and mineral resources of the country for loot and plunder by private corporates of Indian & Foreign brands meant solely for their profit motive.

The Government should desist and withdraw its policy of commercial mining and any attempt to delink of CMPDI from CIL, as well as it should implement the agreements reached with the unions as listed in their charter of demands.

The CTUs also congratulate the working class of the country for successful show of their strength and resolve to fight back anti-worker, anti-people, anti-national policies of the Government by organising protest actions observing 3rd July 2020, as nationwide Protest Day. We also note that joint front of Kisan organisations had also extended their solidarity support to 3rd July programme.

The Government continues with its arrogant attitude of going ahead with privatisation and sale of PSUs, and dangerously liberalizing foreign entry in vital sector of the economy like defence production from 49 to 74% along with corporatization of 41 ordnance factories for privatization; it is also going ahead with its project of privatizing Indian Railways in phases, the latest being its destructive decision of privatizing 151 train services in highly remunerative routes to facilitate private players to make huge profit using infrastructure and manpower of Indian Railways On the top of it the continuous price-rise in petrol & diesel made effective on 22 occasions in the last two months is another big blow to the people.

The CTUs will meet shortly to decide next course of action to continue its resolve to defy and non-co-operate with the anti-national policies of the Government.

NPA crisis: When it comes to loan losses, PSBs are far ahead of private banks – Check numbers

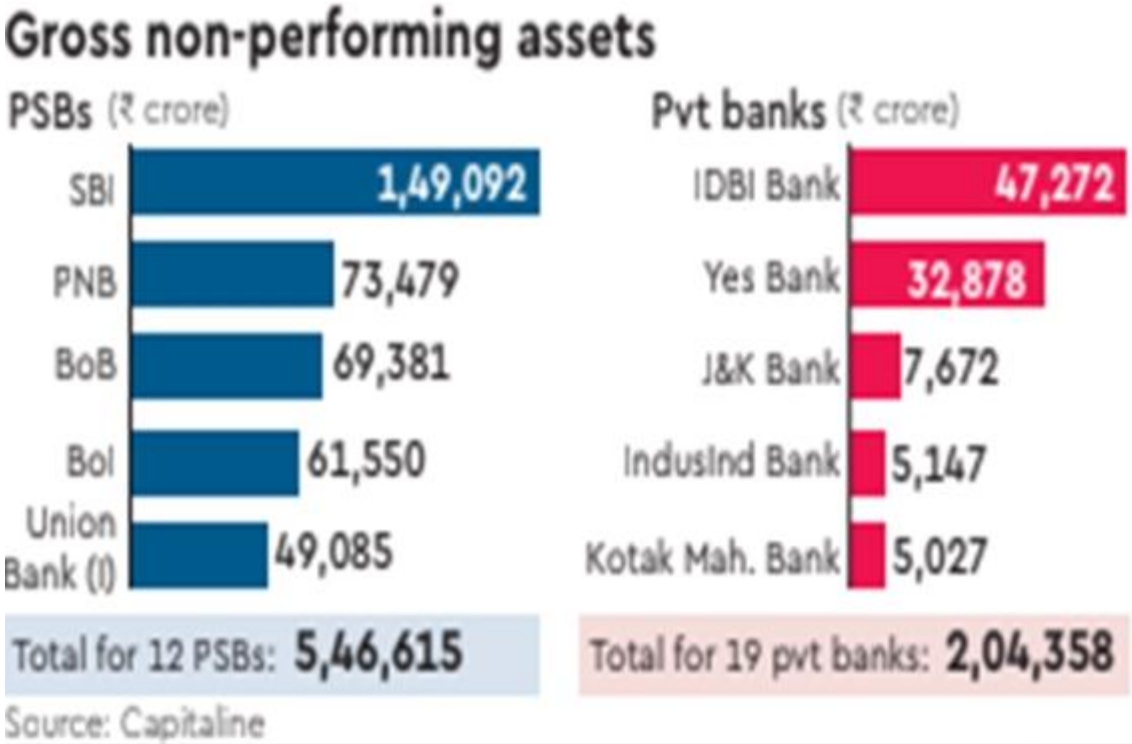
Shritama Bose | July 4, 2020
THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

The 12 PSBs together saw a 5% sequential decline in their gross NPAs, while the private pack's NPA pile fell 6% from the end of the December quarter

Almost all PSBs saw a decline in absolute GNPA numbers, with the exception of Indian Bank and Canara Bank

The March quarter was good for some public sector banks (PSBs), as many turned profitable after posting losses for several quarters in a row. Non-performing assets (NPAs), too, declined for most of them. Even so, the twelve public-sector banks (PSBs) recorded gross NPAs worth Rs 5.47 lakh crore, more than twice the size of the bad-loan pile of 19 private banks, which stood at Rs 2.04 lakh crore, showed data from Capitaline. The actual value of bad assets in PSBs is likely to be much higher as Q4 results for six PSBs, which were merged with other banks during the quarter, have not been made public. Almost all PSBs saw a decline in absolute GNPA numbers, with the exception of Indian Bank and Canara Bank.

The sharpest slide in NPA numbers was seen in the case of Bank of Maharashtra (BoM), Indian Overseas Bank (IOB) and Uco Bank, where NPAs fell 23%, 16% and 13% respectively. State Bank of India's (SBI) gross NPAs fell 6.6% and Bank of Baroda's (BoB) fell 5%. At the same time, BoB's bad-loan portfolio shot up 44% on a year-on-year basis, reflecting the bank's merger with Dena Bank and Vijaya Bank, and possibly foreshadowing asset quality problems in the other four banks which have been amalgamated with six others, effective April 1, 2020.



The 12 PSBs together saw a 5% sequential decline in their gross NPAs, while the private pack's NPA pile fell 6% from the end of the December quarter. This trend may not continue through FY21 as the spread of Covid and the associated lockdowns are expected to exacerbate the stress on banks' books. Analysts said that the pandemic could have the effect of launching a fresh cycle of bad loans in the Indian banking system. In a recent report, India Ratings & Research said the new cycle of stress could this time come from both corporate and non-corporate segments. "As per India Ratings' analysis, COVID-19 may drive total slippages of up to Rs 5.5 lakh crore (5.7%) in FY21. The credit costs for the system could increase up to Rs 2.7 lakh crore, of which around 70% could be attributed to the PSBs," analysts at India Ratings said, adding that if the accelerated provisioning regime is reinstated, then there could be additional credit costs of up to 0.6% for the PSBs.

Two PSBs — Indian Bank and Canara Bank — saw a sequential spike in NPAs. Indian Bank's gross NPAs rose 2% to Rs 14,176 crore in Q4FY20. Days after the bank declared its results, S&P Global Ratings put Indian

Bank on credit watch, citing deteriorating operating conditions which could lead to a higher rate of NPA formation and increase in credit costs for the bank over the next few quarters. "Moreover, we believe the merger with Allahabad Bank will be an overhang on Indian Bank's credit profile because of the former's sizable stock of stressed assets and weak capital levels," analysts at the rating agency wrote, adding that the bank will continue to benefit from a very high likelihood of government support.

Canara Bank's gross NPAs increased a little over 1% to Rs 37,041 crore. LV Prabhakar, MD and CEO, Canara Bank, told FE that the lender's slippages in FY21 are likely to range between Rs 9,000-9,500 crore and recoveries could be in the range of Rs 9,000-10,000 crore. At the same time, the recovery expectation factors in the resolution of the Bhushan Power & Steel account, which has come under a cloud lately. The quality of Syndicate Bank's loan book, which has been absorbed by Canara Bank, is also uncertain at present.

Some private banks, too, had a tough quarter in terms of bad-loan accretion. Mid-sized lenders City Union Bank, CSB Bank and DCB Bank saw their gross NPAs increasing between 14-20% between December 2019 and March 2020. IndusInd Bank's gross NPA figure rose 12.4% between Q3 and Q4. The bank's management expects a worsening in asset-quality metrics in view of the Covid-19 outbreak. Based on specific assumptions around the opening up of the lockdown, IndusInd Bank could see its gross NPA ratio rise by up to 80 basis points (bps) and credit costs increase 50 bps as a result of the spread of Covid-19, MD and CEO Sumant Kathpalia had said in a post-results interaction.

India has ability to spend more money to revive the plummeting economy, but it lacks intent

Sunil Jain | July 4, 2020

THE FINANCIAL EXPRESS

Govt has no shortage of money, but its ability to execute is poor; till that is fixed, India can't grow at a steady pace

But take the higher figure and apply that to FCI's June 1 stock of 100 million tonnes and that's an additional cost of Rs 80,000 crore incurred for no reason

The never-ending debate over whether India has the ability to spend more money to revive the plummeting economy is an important one, but it misses the point. The government doesn't have a shortage of money, if there is a shortage, it is of intent, or the ability to execute. Unfortunately, this inability to think outside the box for solutions then gets camouflaged and served up as a severe shortage of funds.

A good example of this is provided by Icrier professor Ashok Gulati who, in his last column (bit.ly/31CcjtU), argued that the government could raise at least Rs 150,000 crore if only it sold off the extra 50 million tonnes of foodgrains that it has beyond the buffer stock requirements. In addition, if the issue prices of rice and wheat are raised to at least 50% of the cost—right now, the subsidy is around 90%—and cash transfers are made instead of physical rations, another Rs 50,000 crore can be saved every year.

Pushed to spend more, a smart government wouldn't say it had no money, it would finance the increased spending from such moves/reforms. While the government is not thinking in such terms, it is not even able to deliver on what it needs to. In the case of the migrants returning home, it is true that feeding them is the responsibility of the states and not the Centre, but the two worst-performing states are ruled by the BJP, even if by way of a coalition in one.

While 639,000 tonnes of foodgrain were lifted by the states against the 800,000 tonnes sanctioned to them by the Centre to feed the migrants, just 107,000 tonnes were distributed in the first two months; for states that had the largest allocations, like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, the performance was amongst the worst. UP picked up most of its 142,000 tonne quota but distributed just 3,324 tonnes in two months. Bihar picked up all its 86,000 tonnes, but distributed just 1,842 tonnes in the first month and nothing in the second. This cannot, by any stretch, be attributed to lack of cash, it is nothing but lack of intent or the ability to deliver.

The picture gets even messier when you add in FCI's inefficiency. While the market price of the wheat and rice that is sold for Rs 2-3 per kg in the ration shop is around Rs 25 or so, it costs FCI around Rs 33 per kg! So, that's a Rs 8 per kg extra expenditure being incurred by using FCI as compared to a non-FCI situation where the grain was supplied by private traders; indeed, since much of the food is to be given in rural areas, the price could be even as low as `15-20 per kg. But take the higher figure and apply that to FCI's June 1 stock of 100 million tonnes and that's an additional cost of Rs 80,000 crore incurred for no reason. Had cash transfers been done instead of the physical rations, not only would migrants have got the benefit—Bihar distributed just 2% of what it was supposed to—the government could have saved money. Once again, it is intent and execution that is the problem, not the lack of money. While talking about the lack of money with the government, the normal tendency is to look at the budget, to see how much money comes in from taxes, etc. That's a bit like a drunk who has lost his keys in the gutter, but is searching for them under a lamppost since that is where the light is. The place where the government has got money is in its assets, and its ability to create wealth by the stroke of a pen; so, that's where you need to look.

To look at just one asset class of PSUs, their shares held by the central government are worth around Rs 9-10 lakh crore today; as the markets recover, the value will rise too. So, if the government was to borrow Rs 10 lakh crore today—let's say to fund a bad bank—and this was to be funded by selling the PSU assets over 10 years, no rating agency would even worry since there is a clear asset-backed debt-reduction plan.

And this, as it happens, does not include the value of LIC which is to be listed and could well be worth Rs 10-12 lakh crore. There are then the huge landholdings of the government and its PSUs. Similarly, lakhs of crore can be earned by simple changes in policy like auctioning of 5G airwaves, increasing the FSI in certain areas and large projects can be financed by offering development rights—the Delhi airport was funded like this.

Indeed, though a lot more needs to be done to achieve success (bit.ly/38o23a1), the Railways decision to allow private players to run private trains is an innovative way to create fresh capacity while also fetching the government money. The flip side of this is the way bad policy killed a flourishing telecom industry, as a result of which, the government's revenues have been falling over the years instead of rising; the tens of thousands of crore rupees the government earned each year from telecom was, literally, creating money out of thin air.

So, the next time any bureaucrat or minister in his government says something can't be done because of lack of resources, prime minister Narendra Modi needs to sack them because, in all probability, they have not even looked at what can be done to get the money.

Similarly, when his team tells him that India has, once again, jumped up in theWorld Bank's Ease of Doing Business rankings, he needs to ask why, if this were true, investment-to-GDP levels were falling even before the pandemic. Indeed, a new study by Teamlease, India's largest temping agency, details just how much red tape remains; there are 463 Acts in the case of labour that need to be followed, 17,966 compliances and 1,262 filings that need to be made. At a time when India needs to really step up its game, especially if it wants to teach China a lesson—high military expenditure requires higher GDP—the government cannot be seen to be lacking in intent and the ability to execute. Yet, that is where we find ourselves.

RBI may have its task cut out in overseeing urban co-operative banks added to its fold

Editorial | July 03, 2020

THE HINDU BusinessLine

The RBI already has its hands full in monitoring regulatory compliance by the 86 scheduled commercial banks, 10 small finance banks, 53 regional rural banks and thousands of NBFCs under its watch

In a move to give the Reserve Bank of India more muscle to regulate urban co-operative banks and multi-State co-operative societies, the Centre passed an ordinance last week amending the Banking Regulation Act giving it powers to supersede boards, restructure managements and formulate resolution plans for such banks. The change will subject 1,544 co-operative banks to greater RBI supervision and partly address the problem of dual regulation by registrars of co-operative societies, frequently cited as the reason for the string of co-operative bank failures. While the Centre has expressed the hope that this decision would reassure the 8.6 crore depositors in these banks about the safety of their money, this may be a bit of wishful thinking. The RBI already has its hands full in monitoring regulatory compliance by the 86 scheduled commercial banks, 10 small finance banks, 53 regional rural banks and thousands of NBFCs under its watch (housing finance companies have recently been added). The addition of over 1,500 new constituents is unlikely to make its task easier.

While UCBs were originally conceptualised to further financial inclusion, it is a moot point if they are faithfully fulfilling this mandate. A study undertaken by the R Gandhi committee constituted in 2014 found that while smaller, unscheduled UCBs were indeed focussed on sub-Rs.10-lakh loans, the larger scheduled UCBs, which make up for the bulk of the deposit and asset base of the co-operative banking sector, had strayed quite far from their original mandates and were actively vying with commercial banks in extending non-priority sector loans to commercial borrowers, while availing themselves of numerous regulatory concessions. While UCBs do cater to smaller depositors ignored by commercial banks, the failure of players such as PMC Bank shows that their lax lending practices can put depositors’ money at risk. With banking correspondents, Mudra loans and Jan Dhan accounts, apart from microfinance NBFCs and small finance banks, entering the landscape, UCBs seem less relevant. There are better alternatives to balance macro financial inclusion objectives with depositor interests.

It is perhaps for this reason that the RBI has refrained from granting new UCB licences in recent years and instead tried to implement the committee's recommendation that UCBs be actively encouraged to convert into small finance banks, so that the regulatory arbitrage can be bridged. Since the PMC Bank failure, the RBI has ushered in several new rules to tighten governance structures at UCBs, seeking more disclosures of loan books and constituting new boards of management. Given the entrenched issues at many UCBs, though, it is doubtful if they will be able to manage the transition.

Reset rural job policies, recognise women's work

Madhura Swaminathan JULY 04, 2020

THE HINDU

As India emerges from the lockdown, labour market policy has to reverse the pandemic's gender-differentiated impact

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on women's work, but as official statistics do not capture women's work adequately and accurately, little attention has been paid to the consequences of the pandemic for women workers and to the design of specific policies and programmes to assist them.

A survey by the Azim Premji University, of 5,000 workers across 12 States — of whom 52% were women workers — found that women workers were worse off than men during the lockdown. Among rural casual workers, for example, 71% of women lost their jobs after the lockdown; the figure was 59% for men. Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) also suggest that job losses in April 2020, as compared to April 2019, were larger for rural women than men.

The pre-COVID-19 situation

To comprehend the effects of COVID-19 on women workers, we need to begin with the situation before the pandemic. I draw here on the experience of the last 10 years with village studies conducted in collaboration with the Foundation for Agrarian Studies (FAS).

According to national labour force surveys, a quarter of adult rural women were in the labour force (or counted as "workers" in official data) in 2017-18. If we examine data from time-use surveys, that is, surveys that collect information on all activities undertaken during a fixed time period (usually 24 hours), the picture changes radically. There are no official time-use survey data: the National Statistical Office did conduct a time-use survey in 2019 but the results are not available (a previous pilot survey was conducted 20 years ago). I use detailed, village-level time-use surveys from Karnataka, with data for 24 hours a day for seven days consecutively over two agricultural seasons in 2017-18, to illustrate the ground-level situation. Taking time spent in economic activity (or what falls within the production boundary in the System of National Accounts or SNA) and using the standard definition of a worker as one who spent "major time" during the reference week in economic activity, time-use data show that, although there were seasonal variations in work participation, almost all women came within the definition of "worker" in the harvest season.

Crisis of regular employment

These data suggest — and this finding is echoed in observations by women activists — that rural women face a crisis of regular employment. In other words, when women are not reported as workers, it is because of the lack of employment opportunities rather than it being on account of any "withdrawal" from the labour force. This crisis of regular employment will have intensified during the pandemic and the lockdown.

A second feature of rural women's work, brought to light by gender-disaggregated data at the household level in villages across India surveyed by FAS, is that women from all sections of the peasantry, with some regional exceptions, participate in paid work outside the home. In thinking of the potential workforce, thus, we need to include women from almost all sections of rural households and not just women from rural labour or manual worker households.

A third feature of our village-level findings is that younger and more educated women are often not seeking work because they aspire to skilled non-agricultural work, whereas older women are more willing to engage in manual labour.

A fourth feature of rural India is that women's wages are rarely equal to men's wages, with a few exceptions. The gap between female and male wages is highest for non-agricultural tasks — the new and growing source of employment.

Finally, an important feature of rural India pertains to the woman's work day. Counting all forms of work — economic activity and care work or work in cooking, cleaning, child care, elderly care — a woman's work day is exceedingly long and full of drudgery. In the FAS time-use survey, the total hours worked by women (in economic activity and care) ranged from 61 hours to 88 hours in the lean season, with a maximum of 91 hours (or 13 hours a day) in the peak season. No woman puts in less than a 60-hour work-week.

Lockdown and jobs

How did the lockdown affect employment for rural women? A rapid rural survey conducted by FAS showed that in large parts of the country where rain-fed agriculture is prevalent, there was no agricultural activity during the lean months of March to May. In areas of irrigated agriculture, there were harvest operations (such as for *rabi* wheat in northern India) but these were largely mechanised. In other harvest operations, such as for vegetables, there was a growing tendency to use more family labour and less hired labour on account of fears of infection. Put together, while agricultural activity continued, employment available to women during the lockdown was limited.

Employment and income in activities allied to agriculture, such as animal rearing, fisheries and floriculture were also adversely affected by the lockdown. Our village studies show that when households own animals, be it milch cattle or chickens or goats, women are inevitably part of the labour process. During the lockdown, the demand for milk fell by at least 25% (as hotels and restaurants closed), and this was reflected in either lower quantities sold or in lower prices or both. For women across the country, incomes from the sale of milk to dairy cooperatives shrank. Among fishers, men could not go to sea, and women could not process or sell fish and fish products.

Non-agricultural jobs came to a sudden halt as construction sites, brick kilns, petty stores and eateries, local factories and other enterprises shut down completely. In recent years, women have accounted for more than one-half of workers in public works, but no employment was available through the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) till late in April. The first month of lockdown thus saw a total collapse of non-agricultural employment for women. In May, there was a big increase in demand for NREGS employment.

One of the new sources of women's employment in the last few decades has been government schemes, especially in the health and education sectors, where, for example, women work as Anganwadi workers or mid-day meal cooks. During the pandemic, Accredited Social Health Activists or ASHAs, 90% of whom are women, have become frontline health workers , although they are not recognised as "workers" or paid a regular wage.

Effect on health and nutrition

While the lockdown reduced employment in agriculture and allied activities and brought almost all non-agricultural employment to a standstill, the burden of care work mounted. With all members of the family at home, and children out of school, the tasks of cooking, cleaning, child care and elderly care became more onerous. There is no doubt that managing household tasks and provisioning in a situation of reduced incomes and tightening budgets will have long-term effects on women's physical and mental health. The already high levels of malnutrition among rural women is likely to be exacerbated as households cope with reduced food intake.

A new road map

As we emerge from the lockdown, it is very important to begin, first, by redrawing our picture of the rural labour market by including the contribution of women. While the immediate or short-run provision of employment of women can be through an imaginative expansion of the NREGS, a medium and longer term plan needs to generate women-specific employment in skilled occupations and in businesses and new enterprises. In the proposed expansion of health infrastructure in the country, women, who already play a significant role in health care at the grass-root level, must be recognised as workers and paid a fair wage. In the expansion of rural infrastructure announced by the Finance Minister, specific attention must be paid to safe and easy transport for women from their homes to workplaces.

As the lockdown is lifted, economic activity is growing but the young and old still remain at home. Further, as the COVID-19 infection spreads, given a higher likelihood of cases among men than women, the burden on women as earners and carers is likely to rise. We need immediate measures to reduce the drudgery of care work. To illustrate, healthy meals for schoolchildren as well as the elderly and the sick can reduce the tasks of home cooking.

It is time for women to be seen as equal partners in the task of transforming the rural economy.