

Business Standard

Centre eases norms; allows harvesting, collection of minor forest produce

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The relaxation comes close on the heels of reports that the government is expected to increase the minimum support price (MSP) of minor forest produce by 16-30 per cent. Photo: Wikimedia Commons

In another set of relaxations for the rural sector from Covid-19 guidelines, the Ministry of Home Affairs Friday allowed collection, harvesting and processing of minor forest produce that includes non-timber items such as tendu, sal, etc, that is expected to benefit scheduled tribes and other forest dwellers in tribal areas.

The relaxation comes close on the heels of reports that the government is expected to increase the minimum support price (MSP) of these minor forest produce by 16-30 per cent. The MSP and procurement of minor forest produce are done by the tribal affairs ministry. The report said not only will be the MSP of existing minor forest produce increased but new products that include cardamom, turmeric, ginger, van tulsi, van jeera, and raw bamboo might be added to the basket so that cash reaches the vulnerable tribal communities during the COVID-19 [lockdown](#).

That apart, the MHA guidelines have also allowed other major rural activities such as bamboo, cocoa, arecanut, cocoa and spices plantation all of which have come to a halt largely in southern India.

It has allowed harvesting, processing, packaging, sale and marketing of these products. That apart, the cooperative credit societies that provide vital finance to the farmers ahead of the kharif sowing season in June to purchase seeds, fertilizers and other vital inputs have also been allowed to function with bare minimum staff.

The Reserve Bank of India (RBI) in a press conference today decided to provide special financial facility of Rs 25,000 crore to NABARD for refinancing Regional Rural Banks that includes agriculture cooperatives and primary agriculture credit societies.

The MHA in continuation of its order issued a few days back has also allowed activities in rural areas such as water supply and sanitation, laying and erection of power transmission lines and laying of telecom optical fibre and cable. These at least in case of sanitation will help in restarting the Central schemes such as Swachh Bharat Mission etc.

On Wednesday, the Central government granted a series of relaxations in the second phase of nationwide [lockdown](#) for farm and non-farm sectors including allowing all sorts of farming activities.

In the case of MGNREGA, which is one of the big sources of rural employment for landless labour employing on an average 5-6 crore households in rural India, the Central government has allowed all sorts of works with strict social distancing norms but priority should be given to water conservation and irrigation activities.

This assumes significance in view of the forthcoming monsoon season.

That apart, it has also allowed dovetailing of existing central and state government schemes on irrigation and water conservation with MGNREGA to create more employment opportunities in the rural areas which is seeing a massive influx of migrants from urban India in the last few weeks.

According to some estimates, around 500,000-600,000 urban migrants have shifted to rural areas after the COVID-19 pandemic [lockdown](#) a large number of them on foot.

That apart, the MHA guidelines have also allowed industrial activity in rural areas that is those which fall outside the municipal limits along with construction activities and working of brick kilns.

Construction of rural roads, buildings and other activities have also been permitted under the revised set of relaxations along with other work in MSMEs.

However, experts said much of this will depend on how states respond to this because in case of schemes like MGNREGA, it is the states which have to show a lot of initiatives.

The non-farm sector in rural India contributed bulk of the income in agriculture households as per the NABARD financial inclusion survey of 2016-17.

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