



Cutting Onions: food supply at a crossroads

Following an erratic monsoon season that culminated in profound flooding, last year India found itself in the grip of a severe onion shortage. Vandana K looks at what happens when a supply chain that runs through the very heart of Indian cuisine is disrupted. She finds farming and trading systems that are vulnerable to volatile climates, and governments that are unwilling to intervene.

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It's a Sunday afternoon and my fridge is empty. I see a lonely onion sitting in a basket in my kitchen. I slice it up, sauté it, throw in some masala and add boiled lentils. I have a simple, yet delicious dal to eat with some rice for lunch.

India is the second largest producer of onions in the world. Apart from catering to its own domestic market, it also exports onions to Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Middle Eastern countries. A large proportion of these onions are grown in just ten states of India. But in September 2019, India witnessed a steep rise in the price of onions, owing to their short supply.

Nothing explains this onion crisis better than the onion itself. Once you peel diligently through the many layers – government intervention to help regulate pricing, late sowing, a poor harvest, the lack of buffer stock, and people stockpiling – you find, at the heart of the problem, a climate gone haywire.

The climate crisis is warming up the Indian ocean and altering the monsoon, an important wind system that brings rainfall to the entire Indian sub-continent. Like most other crops in India, onions require rain-fed irrigation, which is in turn dependent on the monsoon. The onion harvest in India was poor last year due to a shift in the arrival and departure of these seasonal rains. The monsoon, which usually arrives in June, arrived over a month late.

Initially, the lack of timely rainfall created a drought-like situation, limiting crop growth. Then, when the rains arrived, they wreaked havoc after heavy downpours continued for days, creating excessive moisture in the soil, spoiling the growing bulbs. This is not a new phenomenon: a 2017 study revealed that widespread extreme rain events over central India have increased three-fold between 1950 and 2015.

'There is huge evidence – including data from Indian Meteorological Department – that the monsoon has become more erratic and unpredictable. Its cycle has shifted by three to four weeks across India. Scientists predict more droughts in the future, and excessive rainfall in short periods of time,' explains Dr. Anjal Prakash, Research Director and Associate Professor at the Bharti Institute of Public Policy. Not only does the delayed rainfall spoil bulbs, Dr Prakash warns that 'global warming also lowers crop productivity as certain crops don't do well in warm temperatures. This leaves farmers in a vulnerable condition.'

On top of shifting monsoons, the widespread floods across India in 2019 destroyed the onion crop standing

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in the fields, and onions from the previous harvest that had been kept in storage. 'Small farmers stored onions in sheds which are only covered on the top. Non-stop rainfall for days destroyed all the stock,' says Shailendra Patil, 53, a third-generation farmer from Brahmangaon village in the Nashik district of Maharashtra, a state in western India. Nashik is home to the largest onion market in the country. 'The last year and a half has been very bad for onion farmers. We have incurred losses for the last three consecutive seasons.'

The impact of this twofold destruction was felt soon in bazaars in the cities. In September 2019, when the prices of onions started to climb, Delhi resident Anju Khan, 35, decided to skip them in her cooking. 'We had fights at home because my family complained about how bad the food was. They would criticise the government because of it,' she said.

Anju is one among millions of Indians who suffered from the shortage and subsequent price rise of onions last year. Onion is an essential ingredient in Indian and South Asian cuisines, and an important part of any household's weekly groceries. 66% of people in India live in villages where families spend more than half of their income on food.

In the eyes of Sadaf Hussain, chef and author of the cookbook *Daastan-e-Dastarkhan*, the onion is a 'superfood', not merely in terms of its health benefits, but also in terms of its versatility in Indian cuisine. 'The taste and texture of onion varies at different stages of cooking. In northern India, most gravies are onion-based. In biryani, we use fried crispy onions. Onions and kebabs are a match made in heaven. It is also a poor man's food – people eat raw crunchy onion with almost every meal,' he explained.

Yet despite such respect for the onion, the government continues to neglect the hands that grow our food. Little has been said about the onion farmers who were hit worst by the crisis. Patil's family were not able to buy any new clothes during festivals and his son was forced to drop his plans to study at an engineering college. 'If the climatic conditions keep changing, the individual farmer will be destroyed and corporate farming, which is only concerned with making profits, will take over,' predicts Patil.

Usually, onions are sold at 30p per kilo in India. But last autumn prices skyrocketed. Vegetable vendors, most of whom migrate to cities from villages in search of work, struggled to sell onions for as high as £1.60 per kilo. 'When the price increases, we sell less onions and