



JSA Delhi and Haryana

In Solidarity with Farmers' Agitation:
Findings from Rapid Assessment of
Basic Amenities at Protest Sites

Report prepared by
JSA Delhi and Haryana



Introduction

The three new Farm Laws passed by the Central Government in June 2020 have led to a major unrest in the country. Farmers have been protesting against them in several states demanding that the laws be repealed in toto. A large number of farmers marched towards Delhi from the surrounding states to pressurise the Central Government to open talks with them and revoke the anti-farmer, anti-people laws. However they were not allowed to enter the capital and were stopped at the borders of Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. Farmers coming from Rajasthan were not allowed by the Haryana Government to even enter the state and were camped at highways in Palwal and Shahjahanpur, nearly 50-60 km away from Delhi.



Photo: At one of the Medical Camps organised by JSA Delhi and Haryana

It has been more than a month since the farmers have been on the protest sites. In the absence of any resolution in foresight, it seems that the farmers will continue to camp at their present locations for quite some time. It is important that they have access to basic facilities crucial for daily living such as food, toilets and clean drinking water.



Photo: People united in their fight, overcoming challenges at Singhu Border

In this context, the Delhi and Haryana chapters of Jan Swasthya Abhiyan¹ conducted a rapid assessment of basic amenities at the protest sites. The objective of the rapid assessment is to highlight concerns of the protesters and put forward their demands to the central government, various state governments, local bodies and other concerned authorities to ensure adequate and good quality sanitation, water supply, solid waste management and health facilities at all the protest sites. This report is the synthesis of a survey of participants in various protest sites and field observations of JSA volunteers.

The rapid assessment survey was conducted between 19.12.20 to 22.12.20 at five protest sites, namely Singhu, Tikri, Shahjahanpur, Gazipur and Palwal. In total 201 respondents have been covered from these sites: Singhu (92); Tikri (70); Shahjahanpur (23); Gazipur (12) and Palwal (4).

¹ JSA is the national level movement on health and health care across the country. It consists of 21 national networks and more than 150 organisations and state level JSA platforms.

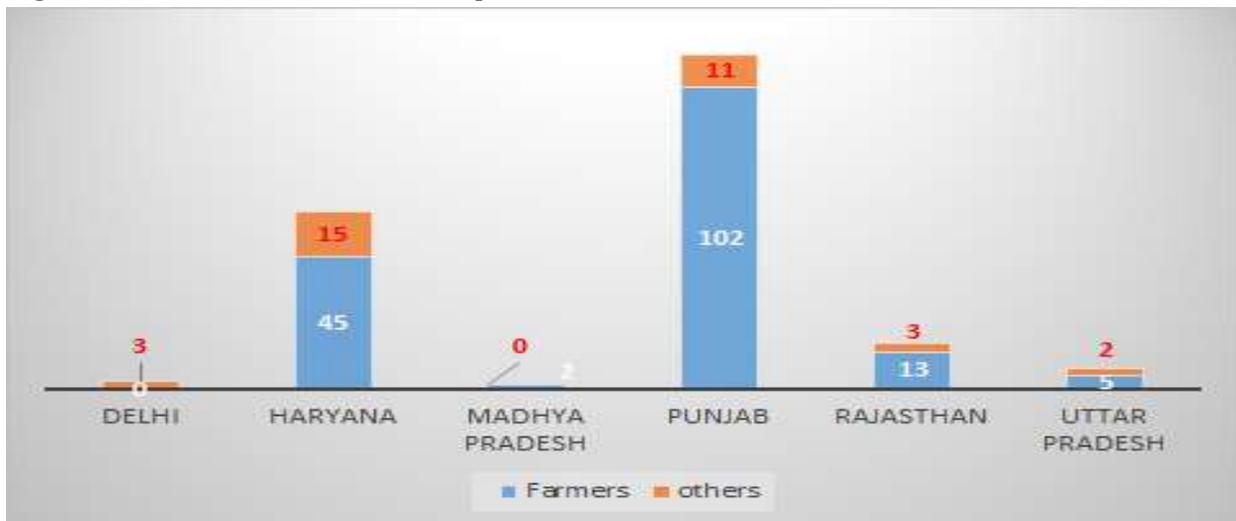


General observations related to respondents

Among the protesters surveyed, Punjab (56%) and Haryana (30%) had the most number of respondents. However, there were respondents from forty districts of the country and also from states like Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh, depicting the diversity of protesters.

Around 11% of respondents in the survey were women, although the participation of women in different protest sites is considerably higher than this. Though more than five out of every six respondents were farmers, people pursuing various other professions also joined the farmers in the protest, few retired government servants, wage labourers, doctors, teachers, students as well as home makers participated in the survey.

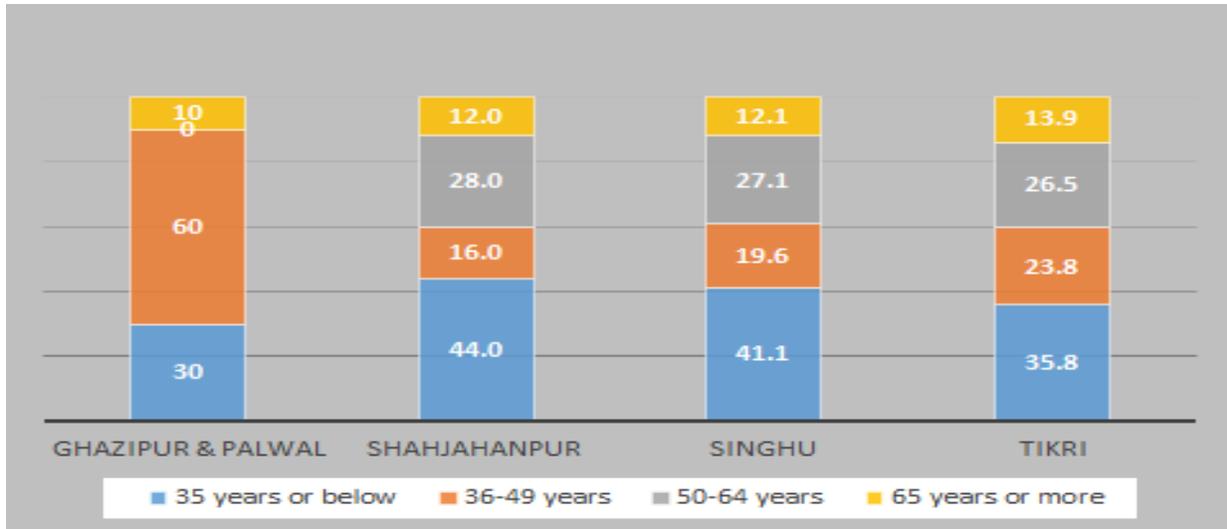
Figure 1: Farmers are not alone in protest



More than a third (36%) of the respondents were below 36 years of age and around 14% of the respondents were 65 or above, another 26% were more than 49 years old but below 65 years (Fig 2). Singhu (11%) and Tikri (10%) has a higher percentage of elderly population (65+) compared to other places, whereas Shahjahanpur has a relatively higher percentage of youth protesters (45.8%) in the sample (Figure2).

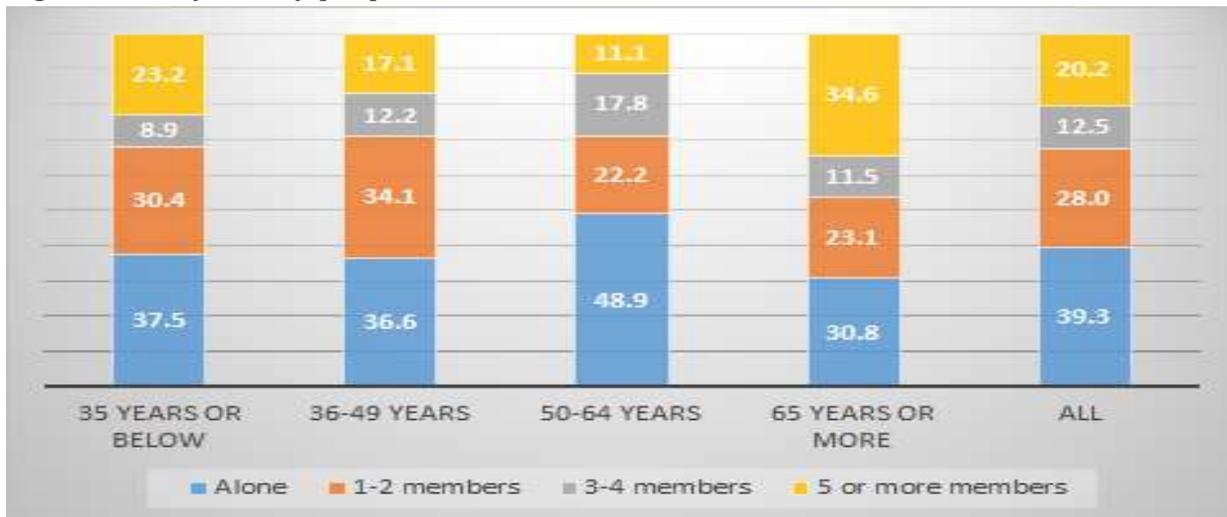


Figure 2: Age profile of respondents in protest sites



Almost four out of ten respondents have come alone, while the majority of the protesters have joined in the protest with their family members, depicting their commitment to the cause (fig 3). As many as 31% of the elderly respondents are on their own and battling the extreme weather and difficult living conditions alone, for the cause.

Figure 3: Many elderly people have come alone

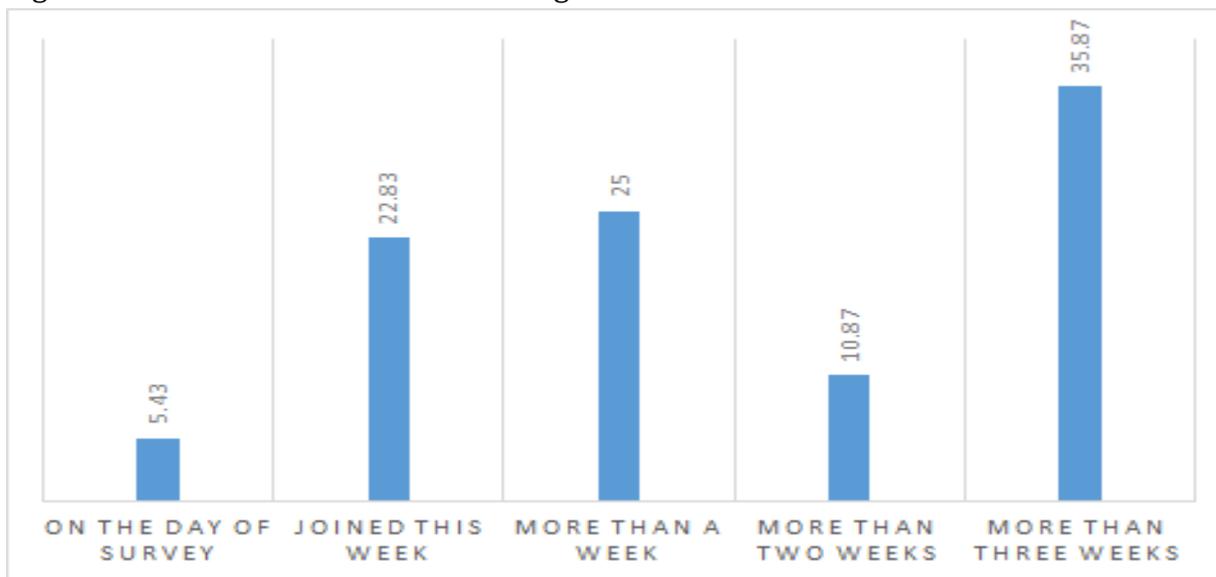


Only 5% of the protesters said they had joined on the day of the survey (fig 4). Three out of every four are there for more than two weeks and around 36% of them are there in the protest site for more than three weeks. Among those who are there for more than three



weeks, more than half of them are 50 years or older. In fact, among the 65 years or older people, half of them are here at the protest site for the entire three weeks.

Figure 4: Protesters are there for the long haul



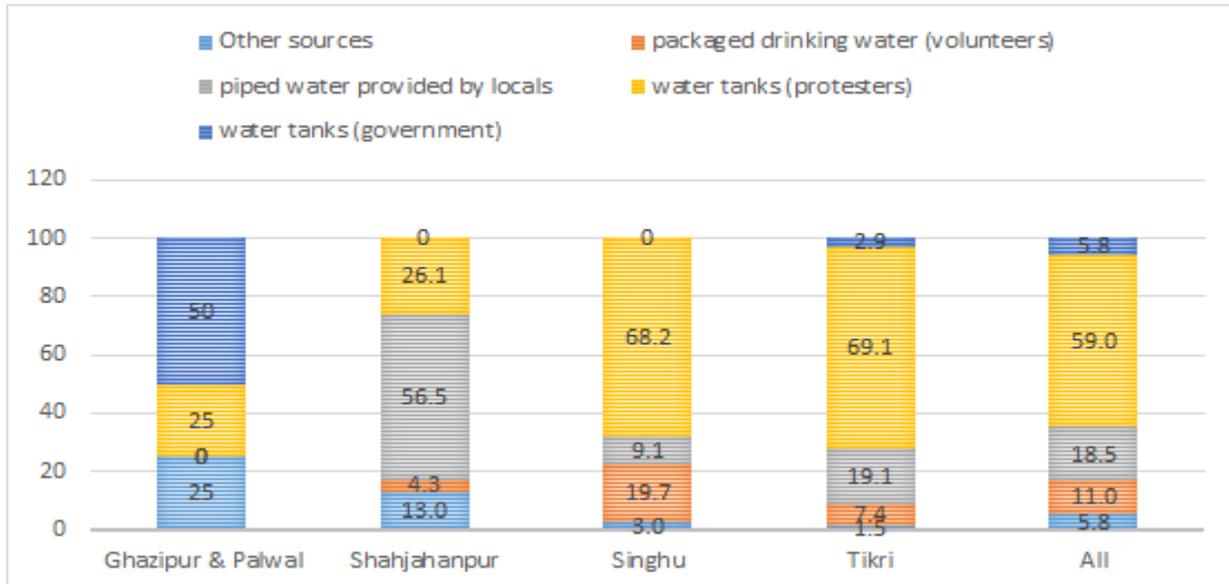
Water Supply

Almost all the participants in our survey were not availing drinking water facility by the respective government at all the site. While the majority were dependent either on packaged drinking water or water tanks arranged by the volunteers, another 5% are buying water bottles to meet their drinking water and cooking requirements. Similarly, water for non-drinking purposes like cleaning, bathing, washing etc. too was also arranged by volunteers (70%) and locals (18.5%), while only 5.8% of them were availing domestic water facility by the government's water tanks (fig 5).

Water tanks organised by the protesters and other organisations, who have joined in solidarity, are more commonly in use in sites like Singhu (68%) and Tikri (69%), At Shahjahanpur, local residents are supporting the protesters in getting access to water for other uses. It is only at Palwal and Gazipur, where water tanks provided by the government are being used by protesters.

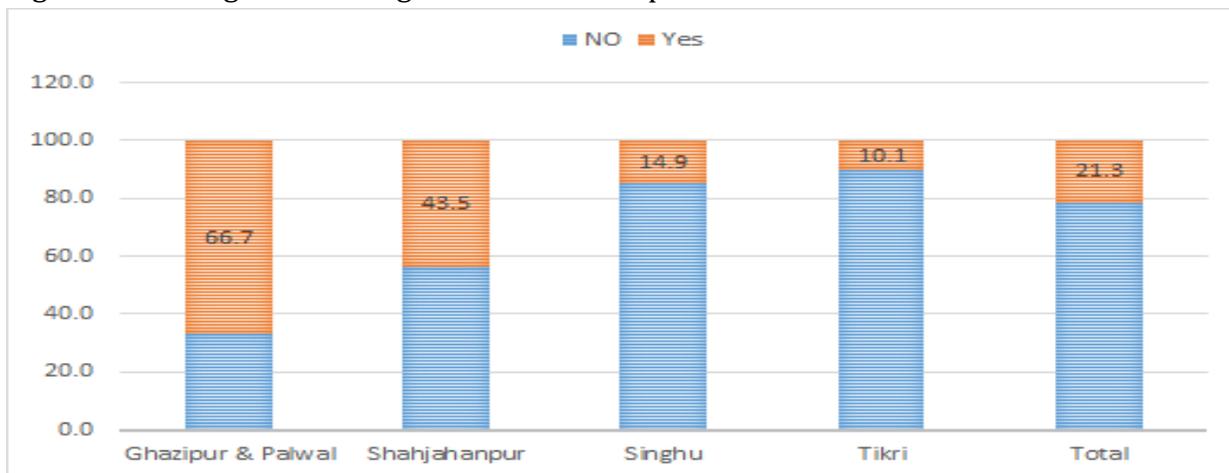


Figure 5: Source of water for other use at various protest sites



Around 21% of respondents said they faced water shortage. Shortage of drinking water was more pronounced in Shahjahanpur, but in other places the shortage is less visible as volunteers are providing water from time to time. But there is a severe shortage of water for other uses. In Ghazipur and Palwal more than two thirds and in Shahjahanpur 43.5% faced water shortage (fig 6). In Singhu (15%) and Tikri (10%) the situation could be better as a lesser percentage of people reported shortage. Majority of these protesters expressed that they used to bathe twice daily at their home prior to joining this protest, lack of water is forcing them to bathe twice in a week.

Figure 6: Shortage of drinking water at various protest sites

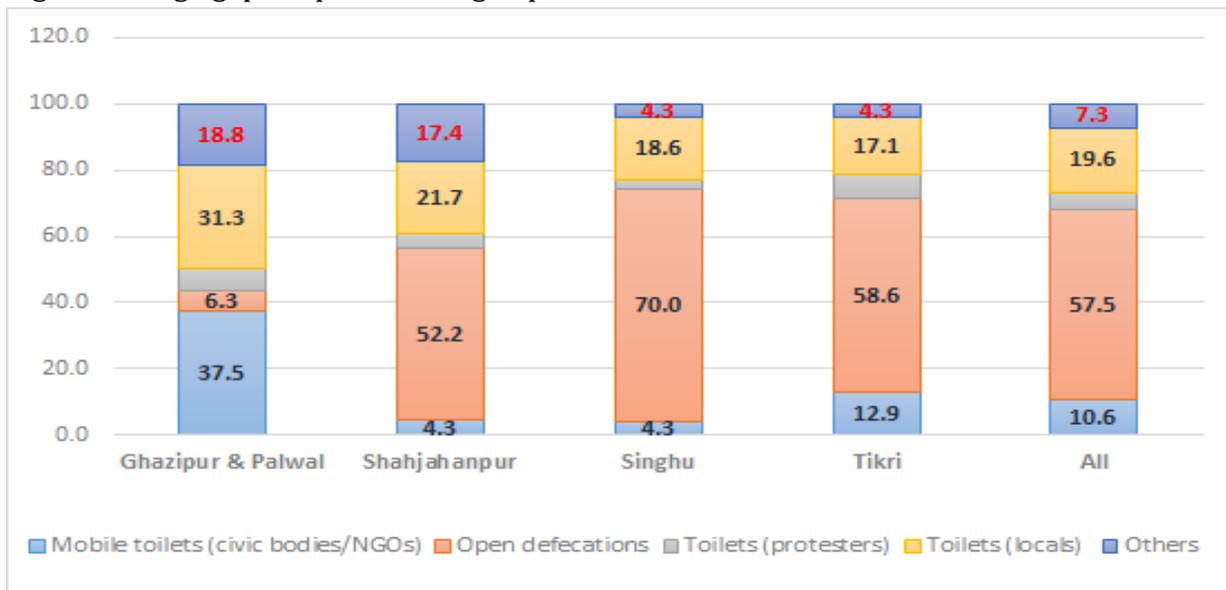




Sanitation

Lack of proper sanitation is one of the major concerns in protest sites. As a result protesters are compelled to resort to open defecation- 57.5%, almost three in every five respondents have to rely on open sites for defecation (fig 7). In Singhu, where the highest number of protesters have gathered, open defecation is also high due to unmet needs of sanitation facilities- seven in every ten respondents. Only one in ten of every respondents are able to use mobile toilets arranged by various local and state governments. Among the various protest sites, it is only in Gazipur that mobile toilets could be used better (41.7%).

Figure 7: Huge gaps in provisioning of public toilet

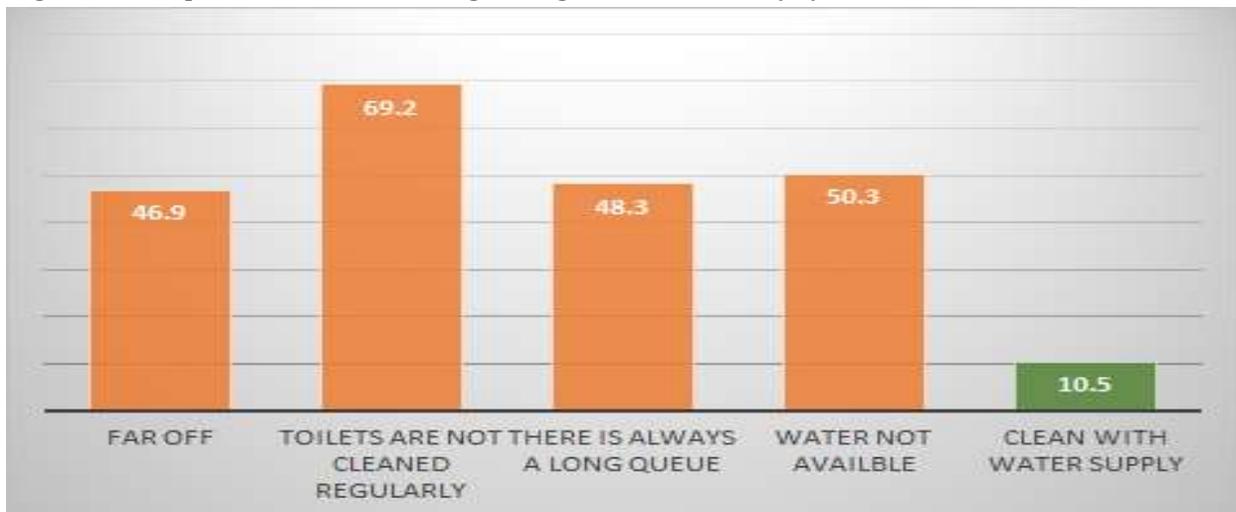


Inadequate provision of mobile toilets and improper maintenance of these by the local authorities have pushed a considerable number of protesters to resort to open defecation. When asked about their observations regarding mobile toilets, only 10.5% responded that these toilets are clean with proper water supply (figure 8). Almost seven out of every ten (69.2%) respondents observed that the mobile toilets are not cleaned regularly. Half of them observed that water was not available, 48% said that there is always a long queue in those toilets and 47% said they are located in far-off places, creating difficulties in accessing those. Their responses clearly point out that there is scarcity of these toilets and the available ones are not being maintained properly. Around 23% reported that they do not have access to soaps, which would further aggravate hygiene problems faced by the protesters and open the Pandora box of the water borne diseases.



Photo: Condition of mobile toilets at Shahjahanpur

Figure 8: Peoples' observations regarding mobile toilets (%)



Menstrual hygiene

Majority of the women who needed sanitary pads, had to arrange themselves as these were rarely provided in the protest sites. Very few responded that they got pads at medical camps. Women found it challenging to dispose of pads. As many as 31% had to dispose of the used pads by the side of the roads, in absence of proper disposal facilities by the local authorities.



Water stagnation

Around 40% respondents observed that there is water stagnation around the protest sites. It was most severe at Gazipur where more than nine out of every ten found water stagnation, the situation was also poor in Singhu- as 62.7% respondents reported stagnation.



Photo: A regular site at Singhu border

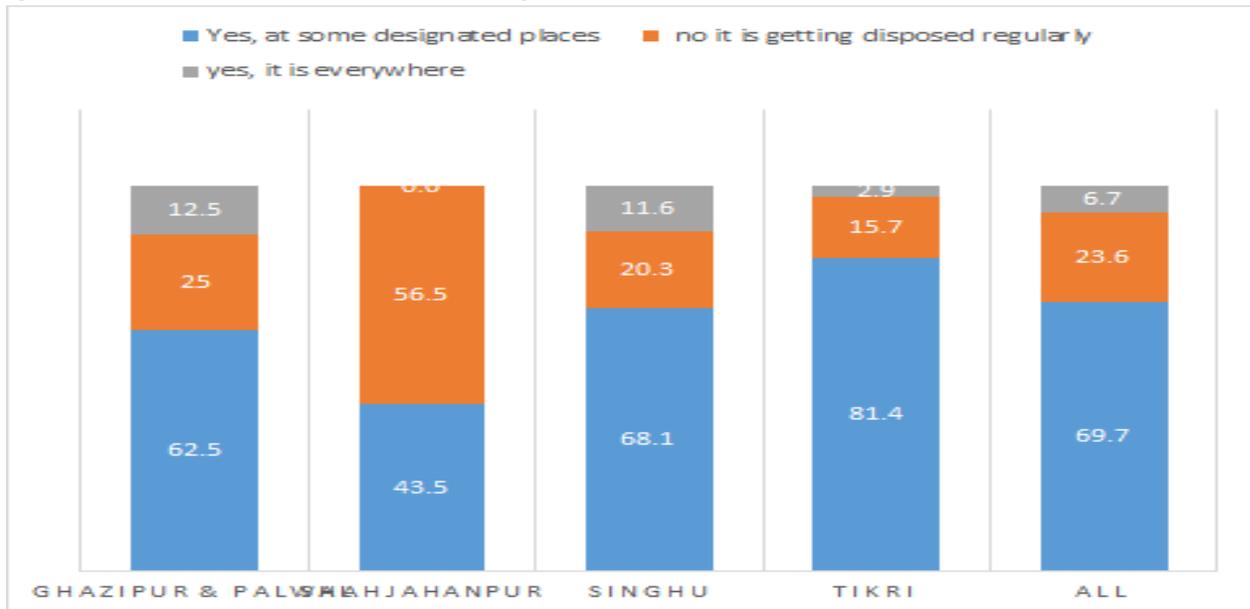
A majority (57.8%) of the respondents said that lack of drainage facilities is the main reason for water stagnation. Around 36% sighted that lack of sanitation workers is the reason for water stagnation. An overwhelming majority of the respondents felt that it was the effort of volunteers which prevented the situation from getting worse. But they also felt that they are too few and far off as a result, their efforts are not adequate. Water stagnation, especially close to the kitchens and langal locations are a major concern, especially with highly visible presence of flies etc..



Solid Waste Disposal

Solid waste is being disposed of on the roads at protest sites, though there are volunteers trying their best to arrange dustbins or collect and dispose of waste. Lack of government effort in disposing of solid waste is clearly visible. When asked if respondents found solid waste getting accumulated, only 23.6% said it is getting disposed of regularly (fig 9). In Shahjahanpur, the situation seems to be better as 56.5% respondents said they have found waste getting disposed of regularly. In Singhu and Tikri, the two biggest protest sites, littering is a common sight, so are heaps of accumulated waste. This is reflected in the responses, as only 15.7% of respondents found waste getting disposed of regularly.

Figure 9: Situation of Solid waste management



The issue of food waste getting decomposed near the protest sites to be mentioned, in absence of regular disposal of these needs immediate attention. Multi layer barricading by police is creating difficulties for vehicles to reach these places, also creating difficulties for waste disposal, amongst others.

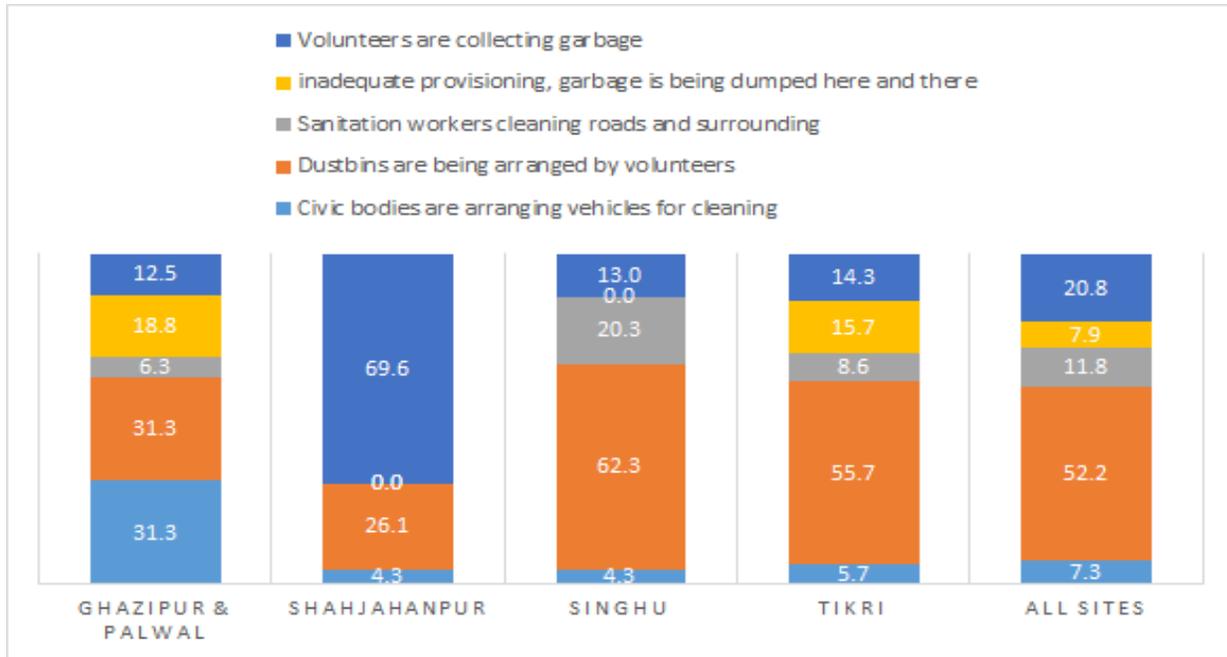


Photo: Lack of Government efforts in solid waste collection is quite apparent in protest sites: a glimpse from Singhu Border

Efforts from civil bodies in arranging sanitation workers for cleaning garbage collection has been minimal in most of the sites. It is largely the efforts from volunteers in garbage collection systems (52.2%) or physically collecting garbage (20.8%) which is visible. It is crucial to have active participation by civic bodies in waste collection and management in large public gatherings, but their cooperation has been minimal - only 11.8% of respondents observed that sanitation workers are cleaning roads and protest sites and only 7.3% observed that civic bodies are arranging vehicles to dispose of waste(fig 10).



Figure 10: Method of collection and disposal of solid waste: lack of cooperation from state

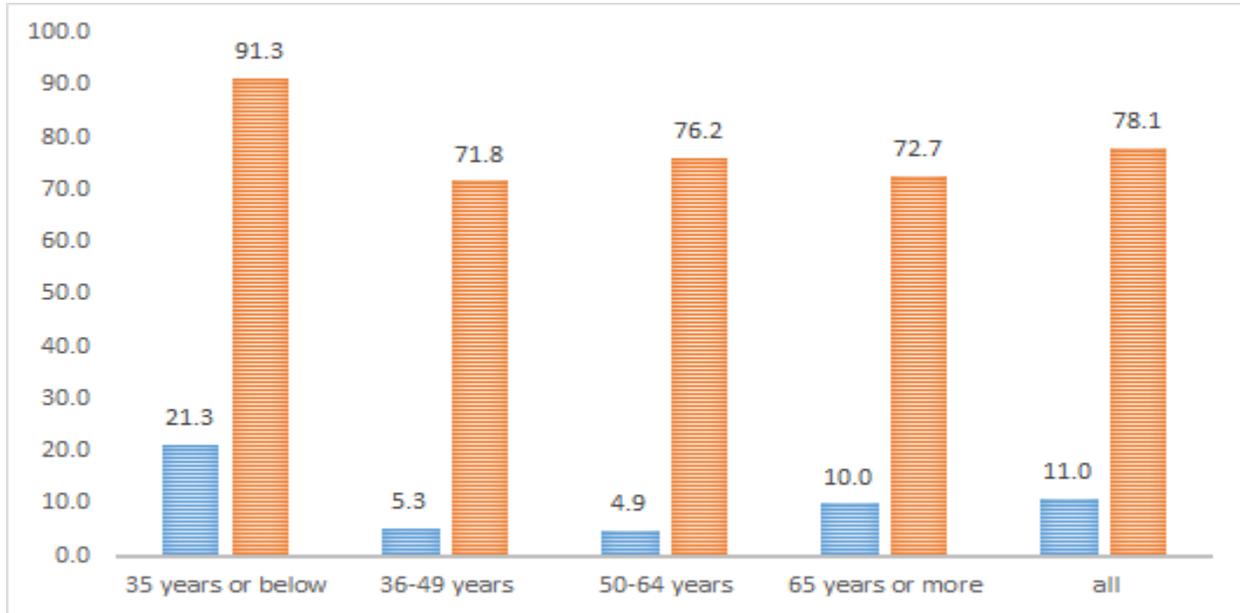


Food, Shelter and Clothing:

As langers and community kitchens are being arranged by protesters and volunteers in the sites, availability of food has been adequate. Barring two respondents, no one faced any situation when they had to sleep empty stomach. However, around 11% of respondents said that they had to sleep in the open at night (Figure 11). Among those aged 65 or above, a one in every ten respondent said they slept in the open at night during protest, though younger people experienced the same more frequently. As there are much higher numbers of protesters in Singhu and Tikri, our survey found more people responding that they had to resort to sleeping in the open at night.



Figure 11: Protesters sleeping in the open at night and facing inadequate clothes and blankets to beat the cold (%)



An overwhelming majority of the protesters (78%) -- almost four out of every five -- have felt that they do not have adequate clothes and blankets to beat the cold (figure 11). Though younger protesters reported it more frequently, around 73% of those aged 65 or above and around 76% of those between 50 to 64 years have experienced that they do not have adequate protection against cold. This on one handWhile this depicts the solidarity and determination among protesters to continue their fight, impact on their health due to poor conditions of living is a cause of concern and worry.

Approximately one in every four respondents (24%) said they have faced the problem of mosquitoes in the protest sites. The problem is more pronounced in Gazipur (All but one respondent complained of flies, not mosquitoes. Apoorva and I filed it wrong.) and Palwal as 62.5% of respondents there reported mosquito problem. A bigger menace, however, is the problem of flies which may spread infections through food.

Around 14% of the respondents said that they have observed regular fumigation in their protest site, however an overwhelming majority of them were located at the Singhu border. In other places fumigation is happening occasionally, as observed by respondents. Overall, 55% of respondents said they did not see any fumigation taking place in their site.



Health Issues:

Health problems faced by the protesters are similar to the general population. As the majority of them were middle to old age, a major portion of them coming to medical camp had a complain of non communicable diseases. Some were also reporting seasonal flu symptoms while a good proportion had skin disease and injuries. Although none of the protesters expressed that they have mental health issues, many doctors who provided care at the JSA medical camp observed high prevalence of stress and mental disorders. Doctors reported about fungal infections, sore throat and stomach aches. Prior existing conditions of blood pressure and sugar are getting aggravated due to stress and restlessness.

Some of the respondents (8%) had already had health issues, which was quite likely given the age composition of the protesters. One in every ten respondents faced health issues after coming to the protest site, which is likely to be more frequent as protests continue. Though the majority of those falling ill got treatment in medical camps, there were instances where the respondents did not get treatment as it was not available at the protest sites. Our observations based on running periodic medical camps and interactions with many doctors and volunteers engaged with the camps suggest that immediate interventions are needed to provide better quality of life at the protest sites.



Photo: JSA Haryana and Delhi Health Camp at Singhu

The doctors and public health experts who visited these sites were of the view that the health situation could become out of control if immediate public health interventions are not done.



There is a grave need of doctors and paramedics catering to the needs of patients suffering from communicable and non-communicable diseases. Special emphasis has to be placed on providing care to the geriatric age group which consists of a major proportion of the protesters. While Punjab and Haryana, the two states which account for the major portion of protesters, are the states having toilets in every household even before the launch of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan in 2014, lack of access to toilets at these sites are forcing the protesters to revert back to practice of open defecation they discarded a decade ago. What we have observed is that this problem will further increase as more protesters are joining in. Lack of regular water, long queue at the mobile toilet facility along with lack of access to soaps will further complicate the issue of personal hygiene. In the past, epidemics of gastrointestinal tract infections like cholera and typhoid have been observed in large gatherings. The conditions in which protesters are living may lead to similar dismal situations.



Photo: JSA Health Camp at Singhu Border

The doctors and public health teams are also concerned about climatic conditions protesters are facing. This is the winter season and temperatures in and around Delhi are dipping. There is meteorological forecasting of extreme cold waves in this region in the coming weeks leading to high morbidity and mortality due to the inhumane weather conditions faced by the protesters. As the majority of protesters are either sleeping inside the tents or below trucks/tractors, they are vulnerable for freezing climate and cold bites. Many deaths have



already been reported due to this. This is one of the major human right violations and the government should pay immediate attention to this.

Water stagnation, coupled with lack of fumigation activity and improper solid waste management could create favourable conditions for breeding of mosquitoes and flies which can lead to serious diseases. This needs to be addressed on an urgent basis.

The health care needs of the people protesting at the borders are in alignment with the current climatic conditions and socio-demographics of the protesters. As the majority of protesters are middle age and elderly farmers, their health care needs have been observed to be the same as of the geriatric population in the organized health camps. The pre-existing undiagnosed and/ or uncontrolled non-communicable diseases including hypertension and diabetes, is highly prevalent among the protesters. Many are diagnosed with raised blood pressure (at rest) and blood glucose levels. Those who are previously diagnosed are not able to continue their medications due to lack availability of prescribed drugs (to control blood pressure and blood sugar), inaccessible pharmacies and lack of affordability to travel and purchase the drugs. A significant number of skin infections (both fungal and bacterial) are observed in the health camps; probably due to insufficient hygiene due to irregular supply of water for sanitation and hygiene. There is also a high prevalence of musculoskeletal problems among the protesters. Most of the elderly population is facing issues like generalized body pains, increased joint pain and swelling leading to restriction of their movement. The individuals are also prone to local injuries due to rocky terrain, harsh living conditions and improper footwear (lack of proper shoes). These injuries could be really hazardous, particularly to elderly individuals with uncontrolled diabetes and may lead to wound infections. A lot of protesters are also diagnosed to be in high stress and anxiety due to uncertainty of their future. This is expected to pronounce multiple folds in upcoming weeks.

A significant number of protesters are facing a range of gastro-intestinal issues including gastric discomfort, stomach pain, indigestion, heartburn, constipation and irregular bowel movements. The doctors also suspect high prevalence of gastro-intestinal infections including diarrhoea and dysentery. The current issues of sanitation and hygiene and lack of drinking water and water for hand washing are primarily responsible for these gastric manifestations. There is a dire need to provide adequate safe drinking water as well water for cooking, washing, sanitation and hygiene.

The protesters are also forced to practice open defecation due to the extremely low number of quality and functional mobile toilets. There have been issues reported with the availability of water, regular cleaning of the latrines, long waiting times in the available public toilets.



This may also lead to increase in disease vectors (eg. flies) and further deteriorate the sanitation ultimately leading to increased incidents of water and food borne gastro-intestinal infections including diarrhoeal diseases.

Approximately one in every four respondents in the survey (24%) reported that they have faced the problem of mosquitoes at the protest sites. The problem is more pronounced in Gazipur and Palwal protest sites as 62.5% of respondents reported mosquito menace. Around 14% of the respondents have observed regular fumigation of the protest sites. In other places fumigation is happening occasionally, as observed by the respondents. Overall, 55% of respondents said they did not see any fumigation taking place in their sites. Furthermore, persistent water lodging and improper disposal of solid wastes due to lack of proper sewage system and inadequate availability of sanitary staff is suspected to deteriorate the health conditions of protesters. This water lodging and accumulated dumps are becoming breeding grounds for mosquitoes and flies. In the absence of fumigation and proper sewage system and waste disposal mechanism, the condition will deteriorate due to various infectious diseases.

There is an urgent need to understand the socio-demographics of the protesters and prevailing climatic conditions to provide immediate relief to the protesters. There is an immediate requirement to provide dedicated medical services including services for non-communicable diseases for elderly and middle age people along with deployment of ambulance services at the protest sites. There should be proper provision of adequate, functional mobile toilets with proper management of sewers and waste disposal at the protest sites. The government should provide safe drinking water and water for daily usage at the protest sites.

One more very important observation is about the growing mental health problems in several protesters. Some suicides have already happened and there are several reported suicide attempts too. Deep depression, anxiety and suicidal tendencies are already established as the dangerous mental health outcomes on farmers, of the problematic farming policies in our country, and the three new farming acts of 2020 seem to have added a more dangerous layer to this. There is an urgent need to address adverse mental health situation of farmers in the protest sites.



Concluding Observations

Observations by the JSA team corroborate responses by the participants of the survey. Overall, we observe that there is complete abdication of responsibility by the state, making the lives and struggles of the people all the more difficult. None of the bordering State governments are making much effort in providing basic services at these protest sites, though the Delhi government has put in place some mobile toilets on the Delhi side of the Singhu border. On the other hand, at the behest of the Central Government and Haryana Government, there is substantial investment in putting up huge barricades, barbed wires and state-of-the-art equipment such as water cannons and ‘anti-riot gear’ to come down heavily and brutally on protestors, if need be.

At most of the border protest sites, the police deployment and the barricading has been done in a very haphazard and ill-planned manner. While it is a massive participation of people, overcrowding is caused mainly because of the multiple level barricading by both Haryana and Delhi Police. Dealing with any emergency is going to be next to impossible here, whether health or otherwise. In fact, on a number of occasions witnessed by the JSA team, it was the protestors who rushed to clear the way for passage of ambulances by collectively pulling away the barbed wires and the heavy iron barricades; police personnel were hardly observed in making any such effort.

We further observe a complete failure of the state machinery in ensuring proper arrangements for sanitation and clean drinking water. While for drinking purposes, protestors have been able to arrange for packaged water, they are forced to use the hard, saline water for bathing and other purposes.

The mobile toilets that have been placed by the governments at some borders are too few in number and are in a bad shape, full of filth and not in usable condition.

No arrangement has been made for these toilets to be cleaned regularly. At Singhu border, the mobile toilets have been connected to partly closed drains on the road which is creating unhygienic conditions. Many of these toilets are located at far off distance which makes it difficult for the people, especially the elderly, to be able to reach them. Because of this, people at the borders are being forced to defecate in the open, though they are following the proper guidelines – creating a pit and then covering it up after use.

Further, there is no proper lighting system. It makes using any type of toilet facility difficult after dark, especially for the women who have come from far flung areas and are putting up



at the protest sites. There is no covered and safe place for bathing for them. Consequently, these women let go of bathing for days, which compromises their hygiene. They are also avoiding eating food and drinking water in sufficient quantities to delay the use of washrooms, though some of them have made a makeshift toilet for themselves. Most women have brought sanitary napkins with them from home but are encountering problems in disposing them off as there is no proper means available for disposal of sanitary napkins.

The struggle is being sustained by voluntary support of a large number of individuals and organisations. There is ample amount of food and bottled water for drinking which has been contributed by common people of India. Farmers back home and from other states have also contributed by sending food items and other forms of support. A huge number of doctors from various states are going to protest sites regularly. Some have come from far off places and are staying with the protesters to ensure medical help in the times of need. The movement is led by the common people which is overwhelming.

However, the state cannot abdicate its responsibility of providing basic facilities to its citizens whether they are at the protest site or elsewhere.

The state machinery has hardly made any arrangements for collection of garbage. It is the protestors themselves who are trying to keep the place clean and making best efforts to ensure that garbage is collected and disposed of at a proper dumping site. Protestors have themselves arranged for vehicles which take rounds to collect the garbage asking people to throw the collected solid waste in the designated vehicles. At most protest sites, the protestors have taken upon themselves to clean the roads and the road-side drains at regular intervals. However, in the absence of support by government municipal machinery it is not possible to manage cleanliness in such large areas.

Water stagnation is also emerging as a big issue at different places, largely due to lack of proper drainage system in place. At many places the JSA team observed that even the pathways to the few mobile toilets in place were completely submerged under water, making it impossible to reach and use these toilets. Moreover, these puddles are generally breeding ground for mosquitoes and unless fumigation or cleaning up is done this might result in health issues. Fumigation and cleaning up at such a large scale cannot be undertaken by the volunteers or protestors themselves and the government will have to play its role.



Demands

It is very important for the government to accept all the demands of the agitating farmers, in order to put an end to the unprecedented situation in the border locations of Delhi. While the protest is ongoing, it is crucial to also ensure proper health and living conditions for farmers in all the protest sites. Based on the findings and observations listed in this report, the Jan Swasthya Abhiyan Delhi and Delhi and Haryana state chapters demand remedial measures for all those key problems identified and listed. Some of these are highlighted below:

1. Provide proper sanitation facilities in the form of adequate number of mobile toilets and arrange for regular cleaning of these toilets
2. Make arrangements for clean drinking water
3. Arrange for regular solid waste collection and disposal from all the protest sites
4. Ensure that nearby public medical facilities (PHCs, CHCs, DH) are geared to provide medical facilities and medicines to the people in need at these sites, which are linked with outreach activities at all protest sites, with sufficient number of doctors and health professionals, added with referral arrangements and adequate ambulance services. Special focus on NCDs and geriatric care will be required here too.
5. Deploy active mental health care and counselling teams in all protest sites and actively motivate people to seek support from these facilities whenever needed.
6. Set up tents at various sites to improve protection from climate related health issues.
7. Regular efforts to contain mosquitoes and flies.



Photo: Protesters share a meal with JSA volunteers

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