

# Ration

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“It was so hard to get a curfew pass,” Nitu Joseph states as her biggest challenge in Chintan’s COVID-19 food distribution campaign in Delhi. “Everyone sent us to someone else.” Nitu is leading the operations to ensure that some of the poorest wastepickers don’t starve, as India is locked down to fight COVID-19. Wastepickers pick through trash, segregate it, and sell it every few days. That’s when they buy a few days’ groceries. Not working means not eating.

The task seems straightforward enough: to deliver ration kits—one per family—to six thousand families. A kit includes twenty kilos of rice, ten kilos of wheat flour, five kilos of pulses, cooking oil, salt, spices, and sanitary napkins. Ration—as a verb—alludes to shortages; an apt name in these harsh times, when everything but the virus is in short supply. As a noun: a generic nomenclature for subsidized, everyday food. As a policy: the decision to enable millions of poor to afford food.

“We’ve boiled the tea leaves so much, they’re not even coloring the water,” a woman who works on a landfill, says in despair. We must reach such folks rapidly. But food relief is not the sum of its obvious parts: raising funds, buying and distributing food. No, no, no. As Nitu and her colleagues discovered, it’s a life lesson in disentangling urban unruliness from its hidden systems.

Chintan is an Indian nonprofit that addresses environmental and gender justice through our work on climate change, the circular economy, waste, and air pollution. Whatever we do—advocacy, research, or on-the-ground implementation—gender and jobs are at the core of our work. For all our on-the-ground work, nobody had a clue about crisis food distribution. When the lockdown was announced by the Indian government on March 24, Ira Sahai, who heads up building strategic alliances at Chintan, began calling our partners. Two days later, she had reached out to over twenty entities. An online petition was launched. Everyone in the organization started WhatsApping the appeal. One of the key needs of contemporary foraging is

to be digitally connected. In the days ahead, Saranjeet from our capacity-building team would put her family to co-work with her. They would identify from whom we could buy foodstuffs. It was initially almost impossible. The shop-owners treated her as a black marketeer. Once the essential curfew passes arrived, four vehicles, along with six workers, would pick up sackfuls of food from stores. They would bring it to the Chintan office, where a team of young men—Wasim, Ramesh, Shahid, Puran, Ashraf, Shivam, Tajuddin, Deepak, Azhar, Sonu—would create individual kits. On an ordinary day, this team’s only encounter with rice and pulses would be in cooked form, as their dinner. On an ordinary day, they would also be supervising Chintan’s widespread zero-waste programs.

Who should eat?

Balmukund, coordinator of the wastepickers’ association, Safai Sena, was making lists of families in twelve regions of Delhi. He worked with the team that ran the No Child in Trash program, whose priority is to transform children who pick trash into children who attend school. The soft-spoken duo of Rajneesh and Karan, leading the seventy-five-person-strong team fighting child labor, worked with extraordinary women community leaders to roll out plans.

Food ought to bring comfort, but COVID-19 reduced distribution to a distant ritual. Community leaders organized folks in socially distanced rows, each lugging off a month’s supplies in heavy sacks. The team of supervisors, and field officer Gaurav, oversaw this task, getting signatures and taking photos. Where some of the poorest would once warmly hold our hands, they were now forced into a distant smile and a Namaste. Wasteworkers who we’ve organized started calling us for from faraway locations. A group of twenty-two widows called back to say they loved the “deluxe ration pack.” Another wasteworker, with a broken wrist from a road accident, called us from far-away Palwal. We paid using the local PayTM system to get him some food. The Coca-Cola Foundation provided Chintan with support to buy several hundred ration kits. As the heat shot up, they sent thousands of sodas too. The Chintan-hired truck carrying these was

stopped by police. “It’s become so hot now—we’re on our feet the whole day,” a constable told the driver. He neither asked nor didn’t ask. For his part, the Chintan supervisor in the truck, his heart melting, presented the seven policemen on duty a bottle of soda each. Meanwhile, the foundation of a food delivery app, Zomato Feeding India, sent a thousand premade ration kits. The folks next to our office were livid. “Your love for the poor will give us all COVID,” they fumed. Another partner, Garbage Free India, bought bagfuls of wheat flour. The office began to look like a giant foodstore. Hundreds of individuals sent in contributions. Just when we felt we were running out, the Aziz Premji Philanthropic Initiatives sanctioned more kits.

Working from her South Delhi home, Chitra Mukherjee, the head of policy and advocacy at Chintan, set up a newsroom. She would pick out the photographs from ground zero, working with her team to talk to media outlets about the many forms of hunger we were seeing. A young girl showed us her first meal in twenty-four hours—a few spoonfuls of cooked greens. “We are hungry,” she told the camera, untutored. Pooja Moitra, once running Chintan’s social media work, returned to lend a hand because a pattern was emerging. The more stories we put out, the more people would send us food, or feed people around them.

Overnight, feeding the famished became a form of citizenship. We pushed for food kitchens, which the Delhi government promised. One evening, after two nonstarters, a local politician’s supporters decided to arrange a treat for landfill workers. They dipped into their own pockets and bought two hundred vegetarian burgers. The workers were befuddled—a burger was a whole new thing. Someone complained it was too little for the entire family. “It’s got two, not one,” a worker shouted out, about the buns. A few kept this trophy food for the next day. It became spoiled. They called up Chintan to complain of being cheated. In response to the overwhelming number of individuals calling to ask what they could do for their waste collectors, our colleague Srijan Mathur made an e-poster: Give them food. Later, we asked them to pay them their due too.

Ingesting nutrition is not the only point of eating, even in times of crisis. A video a colleague made on April 12 shows a woman stirring a pot. She’s smiling. “It’s great to be able to cook something myself for my children.” Eventually about 30,000 persons received a month’s supply of food. As the lockdown is extended for the fourth time, shutting India for 60 days, new challenges emerge: the food will last because we’ve given out rations a second time, but cooking fuel is running out. We’ll have to forage again. 🍷