



A man carries a gas cylinder away from a distribution truck in Mumbai, India, last month. A standard cylinder that once cost less than 1,000 rupees now goes for as much as 4,000 to 5,000 rupees. RAFIQ MAQBOOL/AP

In Mumbai, a shortage of cooking gas leaves families hungry and skipping meals

SAMAAN LATEEF MUMBAI, INDIA

For 25 days, Jasmine Khan has not been able to cook a proper meal for her family. In the one-room home she shares with her husband and three children in Mumbai's Bandra East, the cooking gas cylinder has run empty.

Without access to subsidized liquefied petroleum gas, or LPG, and unable to secure a refill on the black market, her family eats at the homes of their relatives on some days. On others, they buy meals from small eateries, where prices have doubled.

"I give the children whatever I can find. We cannot cook," Ms. Khan, 32, said. "There have been days when we don't eat at all."

The Persian Gulf states supply almost 90 per cent of India's LPG, typically shipped through the Strait of Hormuz. Disruptions because of the war in Iran have pushed up gas prices.

A standard cylinder that once cost less than 1,000 rupees now goes for as much as 4,000 rupees to 5,000 rupees in informal markets, while smaller cylinders have doubled or tripled in price. Families living hand-to-mouth are unable to afford such increases.

With rent fixed at 7,500 rupees, nearly half his monthly income, Ms. Khan's husband Abdul Jaffar Molla said the family has little room to absorb rising costs.

"If I spend on gas, I cannot spend on food," he said. "So we reduce both."

The 37-year-old works as a tailor, bringing home 16,000 rupees a month. He said cylinders are not only expensive now but also unavailable.

"I tried everywhere, even through people I know, but there is nothing left when I arrive," Mr. Molla said.

The strain is particularly press-

ing on their children: two daughters, both in secondary school, and a two-year-old son. The three now eat less food, and less regularly.

Across Mumbai's working-class neighbourhoods, families describe similar adjustments, fewer meals, smaller portions and cheaper staples.

"Living here as five people will be difficult now," Mr. Molla said. He plans to return to his village in West Bengal as soon as he can secure train tickets – which have also grown expensive.

Thousands of people are leaving Indian cities to return to their native villages, where they might be able to access a source of energy to cook food. In villages, their families are typically registered for subsidized LPG gas cylinders, unlike in cities, where lack of documentation shuts migrant workers out of the system. Households can also use firewood or dried cow dung to cook, an option that is neither practical nor permitted in cramped urban housing.

Over the past decade, the government of India has pushed millions of households, especially poor and rural families, to shift from firewood and coal to LPG cylinders as a cleaner, safer alternative. That transition created a new dependency.

Unlike in Western countries where piped gas is common, most Indian households rely on portable cylinders that must be refilled regularly. For the poor, smaller cylinders are the only option, often bought through informal channels. When supply tightens or prices rise, cooking simply stops.

For migrant workers, the situation is even worse.

India has approximately 54 million inter-state migrant workers, according to the 2011 census. These are migrant workers who

leave their home states for different cities in India, to work in the informal economy without contracts, legal protections or access to welfare. They form the backbone of urban economies but remain among the most vulnerable residents.

Mumbai alone is home to an estimated six million to eight million migrant workers, drawn largely from poorer states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and Jharkhand. They work as construction workers, drivers, tailors, domestic workers or factory workers, keeping India's financial capital's infrastructure and services running.

Without access to subsidized LPG, often tied to permanent addresses and documentation, these workers depend on irregular supply chains, which have been hard hit. At two Mumbai railway stations, people who spoke with The Globe said they are choosing to leave.

The exodus of migrant labourers echoes the scenes after the sudden lockdown announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2020 during the pandemic. Now, long queues of men and women, luggage in hand, hurriedly walk to stations across India. Everyone has the same story, that they are not getting the cooking gas to cook food.

Electrician Manoj Yadav was boarding a train to Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh. He said he returned to Mumbai after the pandemic and "started again."

"Now again there is a problem. Gas is too expensive, food is too expensive. How long can we manage? I haven't eaten any meal for the past four days and there are dozens others I know who are living without food and want to leave for home," he said.

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