

# THALINOMICS: THE FORMULA BEHIND ONE SQUARE MEAL

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

For the average worker in India's organised manufacturing sector, the affordability of a plate of vegetarian food — comprising rice or roti, dal and sabzi — has improved 29% since 2006-07, according to Thalonomics, a take on the economics of food by the Economic Survey. For non-vegetarians, affordability has risen 18%.

However, accelerating food inflation over the last few months has broken that trend, with workers now forced to use an increasing share of their wages on food, the data compiled in the survey shows.

The thali prices include the costs of raw cereals, vegetables, and protein, as well as the spices, condiments, cooking oil and fuel needed to prepare the meal.

While Chief Economic Adviser Krishnamurthy Subramanian pitched Thalonomics as “economics for the common man”, the fine print shows that the affordability factor was calculated using daily wages derived from the Annual Survey of Industries. This deals with workers engaged in the organised manufacturing sector, who form only 28% of the total manufacturing workforce. It excludes workers from the unorganised sector, as well as rural and agricultural workers.

“While it is true that there was a decline in food prices during most of the period since 2015-16, this is also a period of stagnant or declining rural wages and highest unemployment,” said Dipa Sinha, a member of the economics faculty at Ambedkar University and food security expert. “So where are the incomes for people to buy food? Low inflation is meaningless when real wages falling in rural areas means that the poor are not able to consume more.”

The Survey found that a worker who would have spent 70% of their daily wage on two vegetarian thalis a day for a household of five in 2006-07 would only have to spend 50% of their income for the meals in 2019-20. This year, the most affordable meal was in Jharkhand, where two vegetarian thalis for a household of five required about 25% of a worker's daily wage.

The Survey said there was a “shift in the dynamics of thali prices” from 2015-16.

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