

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic on Internal Migrant Labours in India

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic is a universal health crisis that has put the entire world economy at a halt. The pandemic impact on the migrant economy cannot be ignored. India is not exceptional to this and has gone beyond public health to social and economic issues, especially for migrant workers. Since, the union government imposed restrictions on mobility, commercial activities and social interactions under lockdown measures to tackle the spreading Corona virus since March 2020. However, the leader-centric approach keep in mind the lockdown implications on the lives of migrant, underprivileged, or marginalised groups of the country which need to be discussed. Immediate matters of concern are food, shelter, healthcare, loss of job, survival of family, anxiety, and fear etc. In this context, this paper aims to shed light on the vulnerability of India's internal migrants in terms of their mobility, gender, mental health and other issues in a detailed manner. Also looks into the Government initiatives in solving problems of migrants during the lockdown period. In addition, it critically analyses the limitations of public policy in addressing migrants and suggests recommendations for the way ahead.

Keywords

India, migrant workers, gender, internal migration, labour laws

Introduction

Migration is a universal phenomenon, and its origin can be traced to the origin of humankind. As we know that, migration is the act of leaving one place to other place in terms of looking for employment, better livelihoods, etc., the national and international organizations are defined migration as same. Furthermore, the globalization is the primary reason which influencing the movement of people. In the Indian context, its border has been experiencing the political, religious and commercial movement of people. India is one

of the leading workforce exporting countries in the world, with more than twenty-five million Indians are residing abroad and became one of the largest Diasporas next to Chinese.

Migrants are playing a significant role in the economic growth and development of the both regional and national level. In addition, they also benefit individuals as well as communities' development. However, Migration is not in a single form, it is voluntary migration and forced migration. When we talk about the voluntary migration, it includes the labour migration which consists of internal and international labour migrants. These labour migrants are work as housemaids, cooks, drivers, and construction workers. However, most of internal migrants are sessional workers who come in particular time period.

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely impacted millions of migrant workers around the globe in general and India in particular. Borders were sealed, transportation got stopped, factories, shops, restaurants and all types of economic activities were shut, barring only the essential services. This proved to be a nightmare for hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, who lost their livelihoods overnight and became homeless. The immediate challenges faced by these migrant workers were related to food, shelter, loss of wages, fear of getting infected, and anxiety. As a result, thousands of them started fleeing from various cities to their native places. Many migrants lost their lives either due to hardship on the way, hunger, accident, or comorbidity and some even committed suicide (Jan Sahas, 2020).

The majority of the workers were the daily wage earners and at the time of lockdown, 42 percent were left with no ration, one third was stuck at destinations city with no access to food, water, and money, 94 percent do not have identity card as a migrant worker. Sudden lockdown also stranded many migrants in different cities of the country (Yadav, 2020). Those who were traveling were stuck up at stations or state or district borders. Many were forced to walk hundreds of miles on foot to reach their home villages finding no public transport. Those who reached their native villages were seen as potential carriers of the infection and were ill-treated by the police and locals. In one of the instances, a group of returnees was sprayed with chemicals to disinfect them for which the local administration apologized (Srivastava, 2020).

Table 1: Migration Intensity, Share of Inter-Sate Migrants and Covid-19 Cases in Mega Cities, India, 2011

Urban Agglomeration (UA)	Percentage migrants to population	Of % Share of total migrants to total inter-state migrants	Number of COVID cases in the respective districts as on 13 th April 2020 (Total Cases by district 6761)
Delhi	43.1	87.8	898
Greater Mumbai	54.9	46.0	880
Kolkata	40.8	18.2	29
Chennai	51.0	11.8	149
Bruhat Bangalore	52.3	35.1	71
Hyderabad	64.3	7.1	236
Ahmedabad	48.7	24.1	134
Pune	64.8	22.3	190
Urban India	47.0	21.6	Share of Covid-19 cases in these metro cities to total cases is 38 %

Source: Census of India 2011, D3 (Appendix) Migration Table,

<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/DistrictWiseList354.pdf> accessed on 13th April, 2020)

The incidence of COVID-19 shows that these metropolitan areas are the centres from where the disease has been spreading to the near as well as far off places. Migrant workers constitute backbone of Indian economy. Out of 482 million workers in India about 194 millions are permanent and semi-permanent migrant workers (Fig 2). In addition, there are about 15 million short-term migrant workers of temporary and circulatory nature (Keshri and Bhagat, 2012). The COVID 19 has affected the most the latter following the all India lock down. In general, in-migration rates were higher in high-income states such as Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka, whereas low-income states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Odisha reported relatively higher rates of out-migration. There are conspicuous migration corridors within the country – Bihar to Delhi, Bihar to Haryana and Punjab, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Odisha to Gujarat, Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan to Gujarat (Srivastava, 2020).

The lockdown and other stringent measures undertaken by central and state governments in India to contain the spread of the corona virus and save lives have resulted a heavy shadow on the economy. Through large scale disruptions in supply chains and collapsing demand, has been pushed into a recessionary spiral. In India, micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) which is the backbone of the economic activity, have pushed out of business, leaving millions migrant workers out of jobs and no alternate means of livelihood. Majority of the migrant workers in India lacks social protection and safety cushions given the informal nature of their work. Henceforth, livelihoods of migrants have been severely compromised, putting them at high risk of falling into extreme poverty. The pandemic has highlighted existing inequalities while new forms of exclusion. Tourism, global trade and remittances which are important sources of foreign exchange have also been affected significantly. It is very considerable loss of income for migrant workers and will have severe social consequences for the livelihoods and wellbeing of migrants (ESCAP, 2020).

MSMEs play a pivotal role in the economic performance in terms of export earnings, employment generation and GDP contribution to Indian economy and which have been hit hardest which due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Labour shortages, supply chain disruptions and liquidity crunch could make it difficult for the MSMEs to survive the pandemic imposed shocks and re-activate their business.

Corona virus outbreak can lead to a loss of livelihood for those who either work on short-term contracts or those who are without any job contracts. This includes several jobs in different industries. For example, in tourism industry, guide, employees of parking contractors, cleaners, waiters in restaurants, suppliers of vegetables and flowers to the hotels and so on. A similar scenario would likely to prevail in other industries (like manufacturing and non-manufacturing) mainly because of the falling demand. Manufacturing industries such as cement, plastics, rubber, food products and textiles would reduce substantial jobs. Transportation sector is also badly affected. This will lead to the cut down of job market (especially those who are employed) and also make hardship for job creation. Besides, this will also have an effect on pay-cuts and late increments. India is likely to face the job crisis because of the COVID 19. Migrant workers and workers in informal sector are likely to be badly hit (ILO, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has been severely affected the garment, footwear, construction and agriculture sectors. The inter-state migrant workforce represents the lowest paying and most insecure jobs, in key sectors such as construction, hospitality, textiles, manufacturing, transportation, services and domestic work (BBC 2020).

Implications of the Crisis

The lockdown in India has had a huge negative impact on poor and unorganised sector workers outside agriculture both in rural and urban areas. Among the informal workers, the migrant workers have been impacted most adversely. The Prime Minister's relief package was poorly targeted at them, and subsequent measures announced by states also did not reach a large proportion and were not adequate to support them and their families (Srivastava, 2020).

Government Initiatives

As India has started to relax the lockdown restrictions, some of the migrant population has started going back to the places they work. In the last few days, more than 8000 labourers have returned to Pune after the post-COVID lockdown has been eased (6). Proper monitoring over the migration status is needed. Going forward, the government should keep a few points in mind while tackling migrant or vulnerable populations while facing such pandemic. The first thing to consider is not to have the bureaucratic approach but to use the humanitarian approach which is based on the view that all human beings deserve respect and dignity and should be treated as such. The government failed miserably in implementing this when the news of disinfectant spraying on migrant workers was making headlines across the media channels. It was an inhumane act that compromised the notion of equality in the social realm. Secondly, state and central authorities should ensure that returnees do not face the stigma and discrimination because of their migration status and prevent labelling them as 'carriers' of the disease. This should be considered as an important step to avoid the feeling of 'not belonging'.

This pandemic has unearthed mistakes which should not be repeated in the future. Building a fair and effective labour governance system for the workers is an urgent need of the hour. The government should also provide them with proper communication and counselling for their job search in their respective areas and skill set after their return to home or workplace. Not to forget continuous health care facilities with affordable cost and quality of care to be provided to the migrant workers and their families.

To bring back the economy on track using Atma Nirbhar Bharat Approach of Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi, it is also mandatory to take measures to address the inequality issue and to ensure the dignity of migrant workers. This can be achieved with a set of changes in the policy reforms and legal frameworks that can be drawn from the global standards.

The twisting and churning of Indian migrant economy by COVID-19 pandemic due to lockdown measures has exposed the major gaps in the economy and development of the country. Hence, I think strategic and planned policy changes in the healthcare system, labour law, and upholding the social factors amidst this pandemic can help us win this COVID-19 battle on all fronts.

Conclusion

When migrants flee from the city they not only lose their livelihood but they may carry the infections to their native places (BBC, 2020). In the period of epidemic of HIV/AIDs which broke during 1980s in various parts of the world, migrants were greatly stigmatized as a carrier of the disease and considered to be a population at risk. This has obliterated the great contribution of migrants in economic growth, innovation, skill development and entrepreneurship in building cities and the nation. On the other hand, policies and programmes of urban development and planning in India hardly launched any specific programmes for the migrants as they were not considered as a part of the urban community. Failure to recognize migrants as a stake holder in urban development is one of the biggest mistakes in achieving urban sustainability and realizing the goals of sustainable development in India. It is to be realized that migrants are not a victimizer, nor a victim, but they are vulnerable. They are engaged in many 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous and demeaning) which the so-called urban natives hate to do. Access to social security programmes, access to health care and other entitlements are grossly denied to many migrant workers due to lack of their inclusion in urban society.

The inter-state migrant workforce represents the lowest paying and most insecure jobs, in key sectors such as construction, hospitality, textiles, manufacturing, transportation, services and domestic work. This has created issues including starvation, separation from family and no alternative forms of employment. India's nationwide lockdown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has critically dislocated its migrants. Lacking jobs and money, and with public transportation shut down, hundreds of thousands of migrants were forced to walk hundreds of miles back to their home villages – with some dying during the journey. As lockdowns around the world increase unemployment, many vulnerable workers will be pushed into more precarious situations and lack protection. Migrants (including domestic migrants) may not be able to get home and may not have access to local healthcare or the same legal rights as local workers. Those without a right to work may be particularly vulnerable at this time. Many migrants live in crowded accommodation or dormitories where social distancing is challenging to implement. They have limited access to personal protective equipment, such as masks or sanitizer.

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted millions of migrant workers around the globe, many of whom have experienced job loss or non-payment of wages, been forced by employers to take unpaid leave or reduced wages, or been confined in poor living conditions. As the crisis continues to unfold, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers have returned with nothing but a few belongings and the prospects of falling further in debt and poverty. Without a proper mechanism, some employers are taking advantage of mass repatriation programs to terminate and return workers who have not been paid their due compensation, wages and benefits. The economic growth fall down -3.2%, expecting GDP growth rate -23%, many workers cannot return to work; business is closed, drop in demand for luxury goods.

There is a fall in remittances expected in 2020, return migration with value ERODED human capital, sacked and evacuated without payment of wages, eight million job lose in turisim, MSME, construction where migration from rural to urban take place, transport, informal sector, retail, agricultural sector, etc. Student worried about ban on F.1 visa for online, discrimination in tuition fee denied for international students. Since the start of the pandemic, millions of migrant workers lost their jobs and have been

repatriated to India alone from different parts of the world. This number is expected to continue to rise exponentially over the next few months. Without a proper mechanism, some employers are taking advantage of mass repatriation programs to terminate and return workers who have not been paid their due compensation, wages and benefits.

A large number of workers from India are facing the wrath of the corona virus pandemic. They have been forced to live under unhygienic circumstances, without any source of income and could not return home due to travel restrictions. The Gulf countries have also imposed a lockdown due to which the livelihood of the workers has been severely impacted. Some companies in Qatar have even stopped paying salaries to foreign workers, according to the report. Despite the lockdown and strict guidelines to the workers by the Gulf governments to stay at home, many companies, especially in the oil and gas sectors are continuously carrying out their production, exposing migrant workers to the deadly virus. While these countries have announced a package to save their economies, least has been done for the foreign workers due to corrupt systems driven with the motive of discrimination. The COVID-19 pandemic will produce unprecedented effects on the migrant economy. Many workers are living under unhygienic conditions and they are not able to return home due to travel restrictions imposed by the Gulf countries.

As mentioned by the lead economist of the World Bank, millions of Indian migrant workers in Gulf countries are facing a crisis due to COVID-19 and the fall of oil price. Amnesty International along with some other organisations have raised a concern about the public health risk of migrant workers by mentioning very common issues such as overcrowded accommodation that compromises social distancing norms. Not only this, considering most of the businesses are shut down because of social distancing and countrywide lockdowns, most of the migrant workers are jobless or looking for a job or stranded in places. They lack income to support food and basic amenities. Some companies have even stopped paying salaries to the foreign workers raising concerns over their basic survival in a foreign land.

Most of the companies working in the oil and gas sector have defied the strict government guidelines of staying at home and following the quarantine protocols by running the production at the normal pace which has put many migrant workers' lives at risk amidst this pandemic(2). While these countries have announced a financial package to protect their economies, the activists have brought the fact in limelight that least has been done for migrant workers in terms of financial help. This can be due to the corrupt system which is driven by the discrimination against foreign workers. Considering the above facts, it is very evident that the future of abroad migrant workers is very uncertain. Also, due to the financial constraint caused by the situation, the Indian government has limited ability to provide support to these workers.

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