

India's response to covid-19 and migration challenges

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Abstract

With the unexpected onset of COVID-19 while the world was trying to safeguard and address the socio-economic impact of the pandemic, India was struggling with another unfortunate issue of reverse migration. In Indian, ninety per cent of the workers are employed in the unorganised sector. The outbreak of COVID-19 forced migrant workers to shift from urban areas to their native places. With the declaration of the lockdown, millions of these workers were left unemployed and with no savings. This article is an attempt to analyse the reverse migration issue that occurred because of COVID crisis and its impact on migrant labourers that also led to the loss of livelihood of these migrants. The article also emphasizes India's response to COVID-19, how did India respond to the situation prior to lockdown, and how did Central and State Government respond to challenges faced by the migrant labourers.

Keywords: migration, COVID-19, migrant workers, reverse migration, lockdown, livelihood

Introduction

The WHO proclaimed the COVID-19 disease a public health emergency of global outrage, just after a week declaring that the COVID-19 outbreak is still not a critical situation of global public concern, and that the "lack of evidence" indicates no spread of virus among humans outside of China (DW News, 2020) ^[13]. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the global economy was ravaged and, primarily, poor and developing countries were among the worst impacted. Due to COVID crisis, the scenario has been precarious among developing nations, especially in India. In India, every year a considerable number of people migrate to big cities in various states to seek employment opportunities with an eye towards earning bread and butter for their families. However, the most regretful event that occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown was that this crisis triggered unfortunate reverse migration in India. During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, migrant workers had to suffer from several issues and hardship. Due to non-functioning of economic activities, because of announcement of lockdown on March, 24th 2020, by Prime Minister himself, led around 40 million worker going jobless (Mukhra, Krishan, & Kanchan, 2020) ^[23]. Majority of these workers belongs to Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, and Orissa. These migrant workers had to suffer from difficulties like, food, transport, shelter, and societal stigma. Majority of these migrant workers are involved in construction work and MSME sector, and are daily wage earners. Workers involved in these sectors are not provided with appropriate shelter, fooding and healthcare services. Most of these workers depends on the daily wages earned through these activities and have no savings left for future use. Thus, these workers are left with no choice, but to suffer from the hardship.

India's initial response to COVID-19 before the lockdown

Before the COVID-19 crisis took extremely critical form in India, the coronavirus cases spreaded more because of the foreign links rather than the transference with in the country. In India, the very first COVID positive cases were reported on 30th January, 2020, from three students, residents of Kerala state, pursuing their studies from Wuhan, China (Patrikara, Poojary, Basannar, Faujdar, & Kunte, 2020) ^[27]. India conducted its first airlift from China on 31st January (Sharma & Mukherji, 2020) ^[37], and as these citizens returned from China, two more new COVID positive cases were found in Alappuzha and Kasaragod district of Kerala, therefore, Kerala Government, on 3rd February, proclaimed COVID-19 as a 'state calamity' (Press Trust of India, 2020) ^[28-32]. On 4th February, India revoked the existing visas for all people from foreign who made their visit to China in the last two weeks (PTI, 2020) ^[33]. Furthermore, two more cases were registered within just a month, on 3rd March, where one patient had travelled to Italy whilst the other had visited Dubai from Hyderabad. Also, on the same day, a couple of other cases were found in Jaipur (Basu, 2020) ^[5]. And, on the very same day, for the first time PM Modi posted on a social media site regarding COVID-19, stating, "there is no need to panic" as "ministries and states are working together" to screen people (Ojha, 2020) ^[25]. Howbeit, this turned out to be wrong, since the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare reported 28 new COVID cases just the next day, many of them had a history of recently travelling out of the country (Sharma & Pratap, 2020) ^[36]. It was March 12, 2020, when India announced its first death due to COVID-19, when a man of age seventy-six from Kalburgi city of Karnataka became the country's very first victim of the novel coronavirus (AFP, 2020) ^[1].

Furthermore, on this very same day, India restricted foreigners from entering India for one month, and from 13th March to 15th April suspended all visas for travelling to India (Press Trust of India, 2020) ^[28-32]. A fourteen hour lockdown, 'Janata Curfew', was also declared in India, after fifty days when the virus was reported for the first time in India (Press Trust of India, 2020) ^[28-32]. The first phase of twenty-one days' lockdown began in India on 24th March, which was imposed till 14th April, later it was extended till 17th May, in different phases.

COVID-19 and the Reverse Migration

As the lockdown declaration news escalated, panicked migrant workers started to arrive at bus stations, railway stations and at highways in huge numbers, trying to reach their native places somehow. The lockdown as a measure to combat COVID-19, when the world was coming to a standstill, there was almost negligible employment opportunity, imminent fear of unknown financial crisis, and the thousands of underprivileged people, labourers, workers, decided to march back to their homelands, and native places. Though, the purpose of implementing the lockdown was to initiate the 'social distancing' practice in order to avoid the spread of the virus. But these individuals, especially migrant workers and labourers, had no other viable option to fulfil those guidelines with their daily wages and employment. Thousands of workers quit sectors such as retail, manufacturing, textiles, tourism and leather after the lockdown was announced. On 26 March, Surendra Pandey decided to walk 110 kilometres to his home. when the plywood factory was shut down in Lucknow, since there was no transport available (Sengupta & Jha, 2020) ^[35]. Till this time, India had 600 confirmed COVID positive cases and the death toll was 13 (Sharma & Khanna, 2020) ^[38]. The most traumatising incident that occurred during this period was the death of sixteen migrant workers, who were trampled to death by a cargo train near Aurangabad in Maharashtra, when they fell asleep after getting tired by walking for miles besides a railway track (Banerjee & Mahale, 2020) ^[4]. In north central India, a telephonic survey of more than 3000 migrant workers conducted by Jan Sahas (2020) ^[17] shows that many of these workers were daily wage earners and during the time of lockdown 42 percent were left with no ration, one third were trapped in cities without access to food, water and money, also, 94 percent did not have the their identification card (Jan Sahas, 2020) ^[17]. The absence of transport services during the lockdown led migrant workers and their families, including children, pregnant women and the elderly, march thousands of miles barefoot with no access to food and money to depart to their homeland, and many of these workers were left helpless, and had face starvation and misery, and few of the workers even died before they could arrive at their place of destination (Mukhra, Krishan, & Kanchan, 2020) ^[23]. In addition, these migrants were too vulnerable in getting exposed to COVID-19, and could have been the source of spread of the diseases in their destination place, eventually some became also. The degree of this reverse migration was such that the crisis did not balance even the best of the Government of India's efforts.

Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on Migrant Workers

As per the report by World Bank, many as 40 million domestic migrants were impacted by COVID-19 and about

50,000-60,000 people relocated from urban to rural areas in a short span of time (Mukhra, Krishan, & Kanchan, 2020) ^[23]. The incident of COVID-19 led to second largest migration in history of India, after the Partition in 1947, where around 14 million individuals were dislocated and migrated to India and Pakistan respectively (Mukhra, Krishan, & Kanchan, 2020) ^[23]. The acute threats posed for these migrant workers were food, shelter, no income, risk of being infected and anxiety. As a consequence, thousands of the migrant workers started to move from various cities to their native places. Many migrant workers had to lose their lives either because of road suffering, hunger, accidents or comorbidity, and some even committed suicide (Bhagat, R.S., Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020) ^[6]. Because of this indignation of the migrant workers, Public Policy scholars defined the lockdown as 'the choice between virus and starvation' (Chen, 2020) ^[11]. As the lockdown phase continued to extend, migrant workers choose to depart from their places of work to their homes, most to rural areas, since in urban areas, they did not possess the sufficient economic means to sustain and self-isolate themselves. Initially, the Central government to deterred migrant workers from returning to their homes, because it was believed that they might bring the infectious coronavirus to their native places, contributing more to the spread of COVID-19. Thus, these workers were not permitted to leave. However, when enquired by the Supreme Court, Government of India told the Apex Court that one-third of migrant workers could be infected, hence, Supreme Court directed the Union Government to make sure there is provision of food, water and shelter for these migrant workers (Bindra & Sharma, 2020). Under extremely severe circumstances, when few of the migrants somehow managed to walk for hundreds of kilometres, they were held under isolation within their homes or were kept in quarantine centres in horrendous conditions. Dashrath Yadav, a migrant worker who had decided to walk from Ahmedabad to his village Banswara in Rajasthan, had to go through continued suspicion from neighbours, in spite of testing negative for COVID-19 (Ghosh, 2020) ^[14]. Furthermore, the condition of these centres was so dirty and deplorable, with unhygienic rooms and toilets that few people actually ran away from these quarantine centres. In Latehar, a town in Jharkhand, around 100 migrants fled from the quarantine centre to avoid the unhygienic facilities provided (Times of India, 2020) ^[44]. Few migrants, who belonged to under-privileged communities, had to also face the insanitary discrimination. A migrant who returned to his home to a village in Bihar, were not permitted to access their own food stores and have water from the common hand pump and were forced to depend on water used by cattle (Agarwal, 2020) ^[2].

COVID-19, Migration and the loss of Livelihood

Migration is a practice of livelihood pursued by millions of individuals in India. Most of the employment and work migration is geared towards urban centres. Around half of the urban populace consists of migrants and among them one-quarter belongs to inter-state migrants (Bhagat, R.S., Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020) ^[6]. As per the indications from 2011 Census, Migrants coming from rural areas are mainly situated in around fifty-three million urban agglomerations (Bhagat, R.S., Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020) ^[6]. Migrant workers are the key element, which constitute the

foundation of Indian economy. Reverse migration happens when there are no livelihood and work choices for workers and there are hopes of economic progress in the place of origin. In certain situations, they work and remain in urban areas for a longer duration of time, whereas in other situations, the livelihood strategy adopted by the rural poor is temporary migration. The sudden increased occurrence of COVID-19 caused a deprivation of livelihood for all those workers who worked on temporary contracts, or with no contracts. A similar condition was also seen in other industries, like, manufacturing and non-manufacturing, mainly because of declining demand. This led to the decline of the labor market and also generated obstacles for employment. Moreover, this also made an impact on wages, and late increments. In urban areas, a male casual labour earns between Rs. 314 to Rs. 335 and around Rs. 186 to Rs. 201 for females, by engaging themselves in other works apart from public works (Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, 2019) [22]. A significant number of migrants and informal sector workers lived only on minimal wages. Also, it has significantly impacted their food and dietary consumption, access to health care, and their children's education. As per the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy report, India's sudden declaration of the lockdown steered a hike of unemployment rate of 26 per cent from 21 per cent during April, and continuous fall in labour participation (The Economic Times, 2020). Trade union report indicates, approximately 60,000—70,000 individuals, primarily pursuing domestic service and construction work, moved from Gujarat to their home state, Rajasthan, following the days after the lockdown was announced (Sharma & Khanna, 2020) [38]. Decline in the rate of employment forced several migrant workers to starvation, which also sparked protests in various states. In Gujarat, around 2,500 workers came to the streets of Surat city to demand wages, food and seeking permission to go back to their home states (Langa, 2020) [21]. In addition, a shelter home in Delhi was allegedly set on fire by the migrant workers after having a fight with the staff over food (Sengar, 2020) [34]. These migrant workers were severely affected by the Coronavirus pandemic and ensuing lockdown, which led to their further destitution primarily because of the loss of livelihood.

Response of the Central and State Governments

The dissemination of COVID-19 and the following nationwide lockdown to manage and prevent its further proliferation caused chaos in the lives of millions of people who were mainly active in the informal sector. On 26 March 2020, the Government of India announced a Rs. 1.70-lakh-crore package under the Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, in order to reduce the impact of the lockdown on vulnerable groups (Bhagat, R.S., Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020) [6]. The scheme covered various vulnerable groups, like, economically weaker sections of health workers, MGNREGA workers, farmers, especially senior citizens, women, and unorganised sector workers, Ujjwala beneficiaries and Jan Dhan account holders. For the duration of next three months, the programme included the provision of an auxiliary 5 kilograms of rice or wheat and 1 kilogram of chosen pulses per month for the eighty-crore beneficiaries. The Central Government also directed State governments to utilise the Rs.52000 crores Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund through Direct Benefit

Transfer (DBT) for the provision of aid to construction workers (DHNS, 2020) [18]. Later, the RBI also entered with a dramatic interest rate cut along with a series of unconventional initiatives to grant to besieged firms (Bloomberg Quint, 2020) [8]. It has, however, been argued that all these disbursements were part of regular welfare contributions to eligible groups by central and state governments and therefore do not resolve new catastrophic losses, such as jobs, leading to ongoing survival crises faced by helpless and out-of-work informal migrant workers (Sengupta & Jha, 2020) [35]. These transfers were less than 0.8 percent of GDP and just 5.6 percent of the expected financial expenditure of the central government for 2020-21 (Sengupta & Jha, 2020) [35]. Cash transfers to Jan-Dhan accounts amount to less than `17 (USD 0.22) per household and `4 (USD 0.05) per person per day (Bajaj, et al., 2020). In addition to the different welfare policies initiated during the lockdown, the government also introduced an employment and rural public works scheme named Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan (GKRA) for returning migrants (Inamdar & Thusoo, 2020) [16]. This emphasized on 125 days' drive distributed across 116 districts in six states managed to use fifty-six per cent of the total amount allotted. The government's failure to invest the set amount allocated to boost rural India's livelihood opportunities and building a sustainable infrastructure is certainly a matter of concern, particularly with hardly more than a month left for the program to finish.

Observing the seriousness of the circumstances, various states, such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Delhi, Rajasthan, and Karnataka, also made arrangement of special buses to send the migrants and their families back to their respective places (Bohra, 2020; NDTV, 2020) [9]. This huge migration resulted in a crisis state bus stops, train stations, and on national highways, causing misunderstandings between different States. States were approved to use fund in the State Disaster Relief Fund (SDRF) to grant vulnerable people with food, shelter and healthcare treatment, along with migrant workers, stuck because of lockdown and lodged in relief camps and other areas (Joy & DHNS, 2020) [18]; Press Trust of India, 2020). However, the lack of appropriate guideline to implement the governments' plans proffered various obstacles for State governments, like, the insufficient time to get prepared for the implementation of those guidelines, therefore various states came up with their own strategies, and took necessary measures to safeguard these workers. Various states like Kerala, Delhi, Odisha, Telangana, Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka made provision of free foodstuff or ration bags including the distribution of food grain kits (Bhagat, R.S., Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020) [6]. Some states also involved various NGOs and Jail mates to support this attempt. NGOs assisted in crowdfunding in order to help feed people in need and availed them meal and hygienic kits. In Kerala, Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development introduced a mobile testing unit named "Bandhu" to serve the purpose of screening the migrant labourers and to provide them essential medical services (Kuruvilla, 2020) [20].

Recommendations

The lockdown decisions in India had a significant impact on informal workers, causing several of them to migrate back to rural areas. With the unexpected lockdown and suspension of economic activities, the vital relation of

migrants to their 'labor' was unexpectedly delinked, and their sole ownership of any 'exchange-entitlement' in the form of 'physical labor' collapsed. This takes us to the insecurity of the lives and conditions of migrant workers.

Noticing the size and transmission of the disease, it is suggested that in such situations immediate steps that should be taken, first, migrant should be availed food and other basic amenities at camps by ensuring the provision of better sanitation and hygiene to each one of them. Secondly, provision of basic and preventive health kits, like, mask, sanitizers, and gloves. Third, ensuring the practice of social distancing among migrants in order to prevent the transmission of the infection. Lastly, migrants who were suffering from anxiety, stress and depression should be provided counselling and psychological support.

Emergency relief and compensation should be granted to migrants for the challenges they faced, on the basis of the estimation of minimum floor level wages, as a direct cash transfer for the duration of at least 3-6 months. In-kind transfer under the Public Distribution System (PDS) should be universalized in order to deal with food insecurity. Doorstep delivery could accelerate the provision of kind and cash transfers such as old-age pensions and maternity benefits where employees and dependents do not have access to bank accounts.

Most of quarantine centres in different states were found to be filthy and unhygienic. However, the government claimed that it is complying with WHO rules, but that was not the case in many of the quarantine centres. For instance, it was found in some quarantine centres that there was no soap, filthy sink, common bucket to bath, dirty sheets and crammed beds (Ghoshal & Pal, 2020^[15]; Pathak & Frayer, 2020; The Quint, 2020). In addition, there was several cases of people fleeing from these quarantine centres because of the unhygienic centres and improper behaviour of the staff. Also, because of these issues many people did not go for testing and were resistant to go to quarantine centres. Therefore, in order to keep the people not to get scared of the quarantine centres and to voluntarily come, it is important to maintain the cleanliness and hygiene of these centres, should be routinely sanitized, and guide the staff to coordinate with people appropriately and once it is achieved, there is a need to remove the stigma about these centres among people.

An initiative of health insurance program for the migrant workers at the destination, in particular during any disease or pandemic, could be beneficial for both the state government and the migrants.

In Kerala, for example, a health insurance program called the 'Awaz Health Insurance Scheme', aims to benefit the migrant workers and also to offer migrants with valid documentation, was helpful.

It also allows the government to Maintains records of migrants and migrant workers also receives the benefits of the health insurance.

Lack of identity proof is yet another constraint among lower class section that leads them to denial of various social security schemes by the government. And this also happened during lockdown, various migrants did not have identity cards, and therefore many of these workers did not the benefit of schemes provided by the government. Therefore, it is suggested government should ensure there is provision of identity cards for all, especially, for the lower class and the marginalised sections of the society.

In addition, the present data on migration is very old and sometimes not available on time either. Therefore, there is also an urgent need to reinforce the database on migration, through Census, National Sample Survey (NSS) and NFHS and Migration Surveys. The efficacious inclusion of migrants in the official statistics and access would help to formulate comprehensive and inclusive policies and programmes in the country, since migration has affected households in almost every aspect of both rural and urban areas.

It is important to understand that it is not possible to neglect the migrant labourers, as an important stakeholder in development, for a long time. At this point of time, it is extremely important to integrate migrant workers with development. The government should take a serious look at the UNESCO-UNICEF guidelines and also on the Working Group on Migration to adopt them as soon as possible.

As Amitabh Kundu, from the Research and Information System for Developing Countries, suggests, in India, there are approximately sixty-five million inter-state migrant workers (Inamdar & Thusoo, 2020)^[16]. In order to protect the rights of these migrant labourers, a robust legal framework is required, while offering them with the choice to migrate for a livelihood opportunity that guarantees a modest living. Nevertheless, individuals should not be compelled to relocate from rural areas to seek employment that are often vulnerable and insecure, when staying in inhospitable environments. One such solution is developing rural infrastructure and thus livelihoods, by long-term planning instead of vague planning.

Conclusion

Because of the unexpected lockdown, migrants experienced starvation, lack of income and uncertainty of employment. In the past, floods, famines, epidemics, droughts, and regional tension have led to exoduses from rural areas. Basically, at present what is changed now is the rise of this novel phenomenon of the exodus of migrants from their place of work. Migrant workers struggle from the double burden, of being poor and being a migrant. Due to the lack of identification and residential proof, most services planned for the poor do not reach them. The failure of fulfilling migrants' social, economic, and political rights is indeed a significant concern, however, they are qualified citizens but their substantive rights to citizenship are not met. Relevant policies and schemes for migrants have hardly been initiated by urban development and planning in India, since they have not been considered part of the urban population. In India, one of the biggest fault in addressing urban sustainability and pursuing the aims of sustainable development, is the failure to address migrant workers as a stakeholder in urban growth. For the first time, the COVID-19 crisis has taken 'invisible' migrants and the migration phenomenon to the centre stage of social security policy concerns. The aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, the catastrophe of migrant workers intensified the need to consolidate the social policy measures of the past decades.

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