



# MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA DURING PANDEMIC

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## Abstract

*The lockdown which was implemented due to this COVID-19 pandemic has affected many sections of the people and one of the severely affected groups are the migrant workers who usually moves into the another states for their jobs. They were in a vulnerable condition as they were unable to return home initially as the lockdown was announced suddenly and in the working area also they cannot live for a long period as there were no proper food and shelter and even no work. It was observed that at the beginning period of lockdown many workers having children with them have decided to return back by foot as the were no alternative way and some of them had died in the street for walking a long distance without proper food and water. In this backdrop this paper attempts to overview the poor condition of these workers and has mentioned some steps taken by the government for their relief.*

## INTRODUCTION

The stringent lock-down in India in response to the Corona pandemic was announced at a notice of about four hours. No public evidence has emerged so far revealing the nature of consultations which preceded it within government, or between the Central government and state governments and experts, either on the public health containment strategies or the impact on the economy and the workers. As soon as the lock-down was imposed, its major impact was felt by urban informal workers who are working without any written job contract and don't even receive any kind of social security benefits. The most significant impact was felt by migrant labour from rural areas working in urban and peri-urban areas. One of the most severely affected sections of the population due to the extended lockdown has been migrant workers, especially those in urban areas across the country. The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted in 2017 by the National Sample Survey Office of the Ministry of Statistics

and Programme Implementation, had estimated that there were around 1,49,53,750 urban workers who had vulnerable jobs. These workers included helpers in a household enterprise and who did not receive a regular salary and casual labourers who received daily wages. Migrant workers numbered more than 81 lakh people among this segment. These workers started moving back from urban centres in large numbers even before the start of formal lock-down. After a few days of the lockdown, they came out on the roads in large numbers, in hunger and dire desperation. The Central government issued new and harsh guidelines on closure of state and district borders, and push-back of migrants to shelters, quarantines, and ordered the prosecution of migrants for violation of the Disaster Management Act, if they still insisted on moving. It is abundantly clear from the empirical evidences that the Central government failed to understand the scale and nature of the problem faced by migrants although two commissions/committees had flagged issues and the road ahead (NCEUS, 2007; GOI, 2017). It further chose to interpret and deal with the urgent issues as a law and order problem arising due to what it considered were planned spread of misinformation, as well as conspiracies.

### OVERVIEW OF MIGRATION:-

Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence, across either internal (within the country) or international (across countries) borders. As per the latest Government Data Census 2011, India had 45.6 crore migrants in 2011 (38% of the population) compared to 31.5 crore migrants in 2001 (31% of the population). Between 2001 and 2011, while the population grew by 18%, the number of migrants increased by 45%.

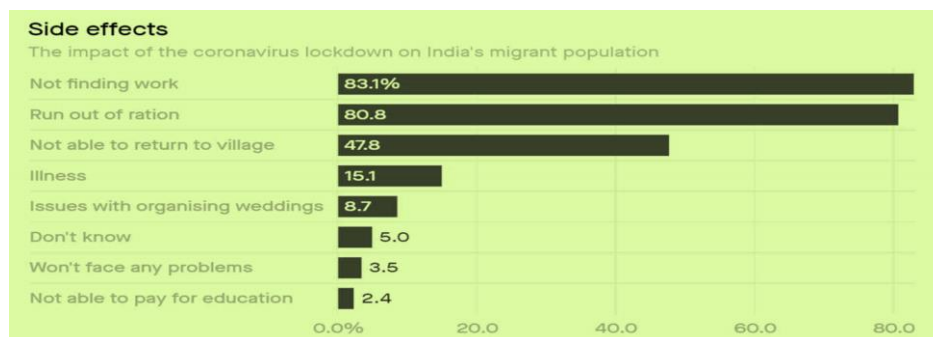
Internal migrant flows can be classified based on origin and destination. One kind of classification is: i) rural-rural, ii) rural-urban, iii) urban-rural and iv) urban-urban. As per the 2011 census, there were 21 crore rural-rural migrants which formed 54% of classifiable internal migration. Rural-urban and urban-urban movement accounted for around 8 crore migrants each. There were around three crore urban-rural migrants (7% of classifiable internal migration). Another way to classify migration is: (i) intra-state and (ii) inter-state. In 2011, intra-state movement accounted for almost 88% of all internal migration (39.6 crore persons). There is variation across states in terms of inter-state migration flows. According to the 2011 Census, there were 5.4 crore inter-state migrants. As of 2011, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were the largest sources of inter-state migrants while Maharashtra and Delhi were the largest receiver states. The state government of Maharashtra imposed a lockdown on 20 March in Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and Nagpur, leaving the migrant workers with no work. Thousands then gathered at the train termini and bus stations, seeking transport to their hometowns. With the nationwide lockdown, all transport facilities were closed. It is estimated that around 83 lakh residents of Uttar Pradesh and 63 lakh residents of Bihar had moved either temporarily or permanently to other states. While most men migrate for work, women migrate due to marriage. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicted that due to the pandemic and the lockdown, about 400 million workers would be poverty-stricken.

## CONDITION OF THE STATES AFTER THE MIGRANTS WORKERS HAVE RETURNED

According to a report of Hindustan Times dated June 10, 2020 six states — Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Odisha and Assam — that send a large number of migrant workers have shown a sharper rise in cases than the rest of the country, particularly over the last two weeks. While the total cases of the coronavirus disease (Covid-19) in these states have grown 8.2 times since May 1, cases in the rest of the country have grown only 7 times, according to the analysis by HT. It was observed that the number of daily cases in these six states has seen a huge spike, particularly over the past few weeks when migrants started returning to their home states. The weekly average new cases in four of these states – Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Assam and Jharkhand – are currently at an all-time high. Only Bihar and Odisha are currently not at the peak of their outbreak, however they have not reported any significant downturn in new cases as well. It was reported that while these states were contributing 10.5% of total cases in the country on May 1, this number has since increased to almost 12% by June 8. In fact, only 8% of new cases reported across the country in the week between May 1 and May 7 came from these six states. This number has since doubled to 16% in the week between June 2 and June 8. Assam, meanwhile, paints an alarming picture. Only 22 days since reporting its 100th case, the north eastern state has reported close to 3,000 cases. Only Uttar Pradesh (1,337 cases by Day 22) reported more than 800 cases in the same time period. Jharkhand has been relatively safe. It is the only state among the six considered that has seen a very gradual increase in cases. Forty-three days since it reported its 100th case, Jharkhand reported 1,290 cases. In the same time period, the remaining states had at least two to three times the total number of cases.

## IMPACT OF LOCKDOWN ON INDIAN MIGRANT WORKERS

Lockdown is only the beginning of misery for India's migrant labourers and the beginning 21-day lockdown has shone a spotlight on the hard life of its seasonal migrants. According to a rapid assessment survey by Jan Sahas, a civil society organisation that focuses on human rights of socially excluded communities around 92.5% of labourers have already lost one to three weeks of work of the starting of the lockdown. Nearly as many also worry that they will not be able to find work once the lockdown ends, found Jan Sahas, which surveyed 3,196 migrant workers across northern and central India between March 27 and 29. The following chart wants to mention some of the side effects which the migrant worker face due to this lockdown situation.



Source: Jan Sahas

## Government Responses

The Government of India along with the respective state governments have taken several measures for the migrants who have started returning into their own states between this lockdown scenario and some of them are mentioned below:-

- **Relief camps**- Soon after the central government directive in late March, state governments set up thousands of camps to house lakhs of migrants and stop the exodus. Delhi government provided free food to 4 lakh people every day, as of late March. As of 12 April, 37,978 relief camps and 26,225 food camps had been set up.
- **Transport arrangements**- As of 28 May 91 lakh migrants had travelled back home in government-arranged transport facilities. However, according to the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), migrants were confused about the exact procedures to register themselves for travel. Additionally, many state registration portals were either in English or the local language of the states they lived in, which very few migrants could understand.
- **Shramik Special trains**- On 1 May, the central government permitted the Indian Railways to launch "Shramik Special" trains for the migrant workers and others stranded. 50% of the coaches converted into COVID-19 care centres were used for these trains. As per a report given by the Indian Railways on 23 May, migrant labourers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh comprised 80% of the train travellers. Shramik Special trains had transported about 60 lakh people, as of 12 June.
- **Quarantine measures**- Many states reported high numbers of positive cases of COVID-19 among the migrants returning home as lockdown restrictions eased. State governments opened thousands of quarantine centres to house them, with some states imposing mandatory institutional quarantine.

## CONCLUSION

Finally it can be said that the condition of migrant workers became really pathetic due to this pandemic as they had not only lost their jobs but also many of them have lost their lives. According to data compiled by the Save LIFE Foundation, a road safety NGO, one hundred and ninety eight migrant workers lost their lives in road accidents during the lockdown period. According to the Hindustan Times report dated June 2,2020 migrant workers, killed during their efforts to go back home, comprise 26.4% of the overall deaths during the lockdown whereas essential workers comprise 5.3% of the total deaths. It is regarded that migrant workers should have been given time and the opportunity to reach their homes at the beginning of the crisis but this did not happen. They faced a much greater risk of exposure to infection in the destination areas, and have had to overcome huge odds to reunite with their families. None of this has deterred them from trying to make their way back to their homes. Although trains have transported back almost half a million, the stream of workers and their families returning to villages across the country in source districts and states is likely to continue unabated for some more time, although at a reduced rate.

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