



Impact of Reverse Migration on Labours in India during Covid-19

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The pandemic Covid-19 today has affected the whole world. India did not stand an exception to it by standing in the world-Covid list of the top three most affected nations. Covid-19 has brought governments and their policies under severe scrutiny and criticism around the whole world. The Indian government is also trying to deal with this pandemic but given the huge population size, uneven resource management by different states and bad condition of the health system and economy has certainly deepened the crisis. The issues of social safety, reverse migration, and other such factors have further grimed the situation. Indian migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. With factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown imposed in the country, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages, and uncertainty about their future. During the lockdown period, thousands of migrants started walking back home, with no means of transport. In response, the Central and State Governments took various measures to help them and later arranged transportation. After five months of Covid-19 in India, the Indian government is still struggling hard to cope with health and the economy. This paper is an attempt to understand the impact of the reverse migrant crisis during Covid-19 in India. The current flow of reverse migration in India, which is from urban to rural, however, falls into none of the above categories describing the usual patterns in the movements from rural to urban centers.

Keywords: Government, Covid-19, reverse migration, factories, health, economy.

The spread of the Covid-19 virus from the virology laboratory of Wuhan in China to the rest of the world is attributed to migration and mobility of people. On the other hand, medical professionals largely believe that the control of this infectious disease is possible through immobility and confinement like lockdown and social

distancing. In a globalized world, the lockdown is likely to bring an unprecedented breakdown of the economic and social system. Migrants are most vulnerable to urban disasters and epidemics.¹ The first case of Covid-19 in India, was reported on 30 January 2020. India currently has the largest number of confirmed cases in Asia and has the third highest number of confirmed cases in the world after the United States and Brazil. Infection increased rapidly since March 2020, with significant growth in testing as well. India locked down 1.3 billion people on March 25, 2020, in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.² To stop or slow down the spread of Covid-19, healthcare systems have put tremendous efforts into treating the infected individuals and also testing the public for the coronavirus. Governments are doing their best to mitigate the infection and also to meet the requirements of the healthcare system. Unfortunately, even after six months or more, there is neither a medicine for the cure nor a vaccine for the prevention of this virus. The Indian government, like the rest of the governments worldwide, has been trying various treatment methods and usage of different suitable medicines (without proper confirmation). Some preventive measures defined by the WHO, like washing hands frequently with soap and water or with an alcohol-based hand rub, practicing respiratory hygiene, etc. are being widely spread as essential information. Masks are also playing a role in safeguarding people from infection. Apart from it, the effective way to stop the infection from spreading is staying at home and avoiding social gatherings, following social distancing, and isolating ourselves from infected people or people subjected to quarantine. Hence, stopping the spread of the virus requires a combined effort from the government and society at large. The emphasis of the Indian government on the use of technology has been consistently developing as the government believes that during an unexpected circumstance like of Covid-19 pandemic, it can play a bigger role to support humanity. The contribution of these new technologies in fighting against the Covid-19 virus may be either directly or indirectly impacting lives. The people during the pandemic need to have clarity on government decisions, policies, travel bans, quarantine periods, and other such important updates, etc... The communication focuses on the awareness among the public of such infection. The information must be updated as soon as verified by the authorities and at the same time, the risk perception of the public should also be considered depending on the information. The challenge can be overcome by carefully addressing the information to the masses in such a way that the information does not increase panic among the people. It happened during the migration of labor in several cities when fake news about plying of buses and railways forced them to come to bus stands and railway stations. India has two broad groups of migrant laborers - one that migrates for temporary work overseas, and another that migrates domestically on a seasonal and work-available basis. These workers range from full-time to part-time workers, temporary or permanent workers. They are typically employed for remuneration in cash or kind, through any agency or directly, to do any job offered at various levels from factories to construction sites or inside homes. Some of these works include exclusively a single employer, while others may include more than one employer. Some are permanent workers, while some are seasonal. The employment of these migrant workers is typically at the will of the employer and in case of job loss the worker, and compensation vary. Indian migrant workers during the Covid-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships with factories and workplaces shut down due to

the lockdown. Millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages, and uncertainty about their future.³ The current predicaments faced by India's migrant labor losing livelihood and shelter in urban areas as started with the four-hour notice for a complete shutdown in response to the Pandemic will remain one of the worst humanitarian crises the country has ever faced since independence.⁴ It led to reverse migration for the first time in Indian history when laborers, workers, and people started migrating back to their native places in the backdrop of the non-availability of livelihood and job opportunities. During the Covid-19 lockdown, almost all industries and different economic activities came to a halt deteriorating the conditions of daily wage earners, most of which are migrants. With no availability of livelihood and worsening conditions, reverse migration started. These migrants over 450 million, whose movement can be directly or indirectly linked to the search for employment.⁵

Problems of Indian Migrants

The Indian government had to face the huge problem of migrant workers. Those who worked in factories and various other workplaces started going back in huge numbers back to their states due to shut down which was an outcome of the lockdown imposed in the country. Millions of migrant workers had to face uncertainty about their future overnight. The first lockdown the Indian government imposed nationwide put a complete stop on public transportation; thousands of migrant workers were seen walking or bicycling hundreds and thousands of kilometers to go back to their native villages, mostly with their families. Social distancing was not possible for these migrants since they traveled together in large groups. Many were arrested for violating the lockdown, after being caught at inter-state borders, forests between states, and even on boats to cross rivers. Some of the migrants died of exhaustion. During the lockdown, to curb the spread of the pandemic, factories and businesses were shut down, supply chains got disrupted, company revenues went down and unemployment soared high. There is a real possibility that millions of people may be pushed back into poverty. The state governments were not ready to deal with food, shelter, and health problems. But later on during Covid-19 the Central and State Governments took various measures to help them, and later arranged transportation through rails and buses for them. During the lockdown period, more than 300 migrant workers died. The problem of starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road, and rail accidents, police brutality, and denial of timely medical care started appearing in large numbers. Indian Government decided to take the call of self-dependent India (Aatam-Nirbhar Bharat) to generate employment at the smaller places of industrial interests.⁶

Government guidelines for Migrant workers (Covid-19)

- Migrant workers who are still in the cities of local residence, if they are found to be forming any congregation in bus station/railway stations or any other place of the city, recording of details of such people and following them up for 14 days and risk screening by district health authorities.

- For migrant workers who are on their way and are yet to reach their destination city/village, for them the quarantine center was to be set up with proper amenities and basic requirements. The thermal screening will be carried out with appropriate actions for suspected or confirmed cases. They will be encouraged to be in contact with their families.
- Migrant workers who have reached their destination will be identified by the district administration.

The government of India also talked about the mental health of these migrant workers and issued guidelines. The government emphasized that immediate concerns faced by such migrant workers are primarily related to food, shelter, healthcare, fear of getting infected or spreading the infection, loss of wages, concerns about the family, anxiety, fear, and mental health. As an immediate response, measures are to be taken to address these concerns and the need for social distancing, adherence to protocols for the management of Covid-19, putting up mechanisms to enable the migrant workers to reach family members through telephone, video calls, etc., and ensuring their physical safety. Though the lack of proper guidelines to implement the strategies posed several challenges in front of state governments in form of a lack of preparedness, however in line with orders given by the central government, the majority of states have devised their strategies and taken substantial measures to protect the lives and rights of migrants during this time. Many municipal corporations have taken initiative to assist migrants and stranded people by starting community kitchens, and health care for migrants, providing awareness to them, and collecting funds to support the needy migrants.⁷

Food shortage

According to government reports, there was enough food grain stocked up in the FCI godowns to feed the poor for at least a year and a half. While government schemes ensured that the poor would get additional rations due to the lockdown, the distribution system failed to be effective as the ration cards are area-specific and fair price shops were largely inaccessible. Additionally, the 'One Nation, One Ration Card' system has been implemented in very few states, as of mid-April. While the scheme allowed migrant workers to retrieve food grains for free anywhere across the country, very few were aware of the scheme. As such, many were left without food and money due to the lockdown.

Relief camps

During Covid-19 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. Over 500 hunger relief centers were set up by the Delhi government. By 5 April 75 lakh, people were being provided food across the country in food camps run by the government and NGOs. As of 12 April, 37,978 relief camps and 26,225 food camps had been set up.

Response of the Central and State Governments

The spread of the Coronavirus disease, and subsequent nationwide lockdown to control its further outbreak brought turmoil in the lives of millions who are primarily involved in the informal sector. To mitigate the effect of the lockdown on vulnerable groups, the Government of India announces Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana. It has within its ambit health workers, farmers, MGNREGA workers, economically vulnerable categories, especially women, elderly and unorganized-sector workers, Jan Dhan account holders, and Ujjwala beneficiaries. The scheme entails an additional 5 kg of wheat or rice and one kg of preferred pulses every month to 80 crore beneficiaries for the next three months. Central Government also gave an order to the state governments to use the Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund of Rs.52000 crores to provide relief to Construction Workers through direct benefit transfer (DBT). The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) also asked the landlords not to charge rent during this crisis and employers to make the payment of wages of their workers without deduction for the period of closure

Government Announced a Relief Package

The government taking the problems of the people, first announced a relief package of 1.7 lakh crore for the marginalized section of the society, followed by another announcement made a month and a half later, with a cumulative 20 lakh crore stimulus package. Also, the Narendra Modi government announced on 25 March 2020, the world's largest food security scheme for 800 million people across the country.⁸ The Government of India announced a variety of measures to tackle the situation, from food security and extra funds for healthcare and the states to industrial sector-related incentives and tax deadline extensions for employees. Still, migrant workers started moving in large numbers facing multiple hardships during this pandemic due to the loss of jobs and food overnight.

Providing Transportation for Migrants

On 16 May, the Supreme Court rejected a PIL to direct the District magistrates to identify and provide free relief and transport to the migrant workers, stating that it was the responsibility of the state governments. After that central government stated that inter-state transport had already been provided to the migrants and requested them to wait their turn instead of choosing to walk. As almost 91 lakh migrants had traveled back home in government-arranged transport buses and Shramik Special trains facilities. Indian government meanwhile, started Vande Bharat Mission during Covid-19 to rescue NRI Indians and took flights to various countries to bring its people back home. They also faced almost similar problems in their respective countries. 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. Further, the general lack of information from the government to the migrants resulted in them

paying large sums of money to register themselves. Further, migrants faced many hardships while traveling by these trains. Many reported having no food and water arranged for them while they traveled. A train from Goa to Manipur reported a 58-hour delay, no proper food or sanitation facilities on the train, and stone pelting. Others who received food packets and water reported that the provisions were simply dumped at the entrances, leaving workers fighting with each other for their share. Some migrants also died during the train journeys, but the Railways stated that most of them had existing illnesses.⁹

Emphasis on MGNREGA Scheme

The reverse migration also increases the demand for work under MGNREGA which would create pressure on the scheme. However, the government increased assistance to migrants through the MGNREGA scheme but it is not enough. Though reverse migration creates chaos, it also provides an opportunity to revive the rural economy. The expansion of MNREGA, and the enactment of an Urban Employment Guarantee Act, for unemployment allowance for the millions of self-employed and unorganized sector women who have lost their jobs and livelihood, are some of the demands. Registration of domestic workers and home-based workers and a special drive to register women in the construction industry is essential. In addition, the recognition of scheme workers as government employees is the logical step the government must take considering the crucial role that scheme workers are called upon to play in a crisis such as this.⁹ There is a need for investing and developing labor-intensive sectors such as livestock, fisheries, and the food processing sector so that they can absorb the excessive labor supply and productively contribute to the economy. The rural economy often deals with poor infrastructure, we can use migrants to improve the infrastructure in both farm and non-farm activities. We need to create more diverse opportunities in rural areas otherwise this mass reverse migration could lead to more poverty and inequality.¹⁰

Instant Challenges Related to Migrants (Covid-19)

There is huge uncertainty about how long this crisis will last and what damage it would do to the economy, livelihood of people, and availability of basic healthcare services.

- How to provide food and basic amenities at camps/shelters by maintaining better hygiene and sanitation for all of them (soap/ water/ toilet/ waste management)?
- How to provide basic health care and preventive kits (like masks, sanitizers, gloves, etc.)?
- How to quickly appraise their conditions and screen the possibly infected persons and quarantine them separately?
- How to maintain social distancing for the migrants to check the spread of infection?
- How to provide counseling and psychological support to migrants in distress?

During and post-lockdown period, how to provide basic income support to migrants and their left-behind families who are not registered to the social schemes and depend on daily wages for survival²¹

Some of the Long Term Strategies

- Food grain and pulses need to be supplied on weekly basis to meet the food and nutritional needs of migrant workers and their families. Government should use the Public Distribution System (PDS) infrastructure and distribute the food grain lying as a buffer stock to the tune of 60 million metric tonnes with the Food Corporation of India.
- It should also mobilize local bodies to ensure the supply of daily needs arising from the Coronavirus disruption. There is a need to remember that lockdown in the West is affordable while people in India cannot bear the lockdown empty stomach for a long time.
- Migrants cannot be neglected as a stakeholder in development for a long time. Integration of migrants with development is the need of the hour.
- The public health system particularly primary and secondary care needs to be strengthened, investment should be increased and drug supply and equipment need to be made available at a massive scale, and most importantly human resources of the public health system need to be augmented at a spectacular level.
- Apart from decentralization, the convergence of various services related to food and nutritional programs, water and sanitation programs, and employment and livelihood programmes must be made effective.
- It is high time to establish synergy and coordination between the central and state government. Other agencies need to be mobilized to fight Covid-19 by taking the help of Village Panchayats and Self Help Groups, stakeholders of society, NGOs, and Corporate.
- Starting of health insurance scheme for migrants may be helpful for the state government as well as migrants at the destination, especially during any epidemic or pandemic.

There is a need to strengthen the database on migration and migrant households through Census, National Sample Survey (NSS), and NFHS and Migration Surveys.¹² As migration and migrants have affected households in almost all dimensions in both rural and urban areas, an effective inclusion of migrants in our official statistics and access will help formulate robust and inclusive policies and programs in the country.

Conclusion

The outbreak of Covid-19 has widely affected people all over the world and radically changed the routine functions of humanity. The Indian government had to face the huge problem of migrant workers. In the scenario of a nationwide lockdown, the lack of social security or fear of losing the source of livelihood and shelter has compelled the migrants to return to their homes. Those who worked in factories and various other workplaces started going back in huge numbers back to their states due to shut down which was an outcome of the lockdown imposed in the country. Millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages, and uncertainty about their future overnight. During the first lockdown restrictions putting a stop on public transport, thousands of migrant workers were seen walking or bicycling hundreds and thousands of kilometers to go back to their native villages, mostly with their families. Social distancing was not possible for these migrants since they traveled together in large groups. The Central and State Governments took various measures to help them and later arranged transportation through rails and buses for them. The government of India is also taking all necessary steps to ensure that its migrants are prepared well to face the challenges and threats posed by the growing pandemic which is still not over. The fact that every citizen-irrespective of class, caste, geography, gender, age, and religion is affected, admittedly to varying degrees, makes Covid-19 the most significant event in recent history. The Covid-19 pandemic unquestionably presents an era-defining migrant to public health and the global economy and of course, India will not remain unaffected by its consequences for a long time as today we do not know exactly where we stand amidst this pandemic, till the drug comes out to cure humanity.

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