



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON INTERNAL MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

¹ Pritha Biswas, ² Madhurita Dey

¹ Assistant Professor, ² Assistant Professor

¹ Commerce and Management,

¹ St. Xavier's University, Kolkata, India

Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic has been a major shock to the Indian economy and has disrupted the growth of almost all the sectors. The imposition of lockdown has brought economic activities to a standstill and created widespread unemployment especially in the informal sectors. One of the worst hit in this scenario are the migrant workers. Migrant workers are the backbone of the economy of this country. They provide their labour to several sectors of industries in the urban areas and keep them running. Most of them work in informal sector. The plight of the migrant workers and the inhuman conditions they were facing, was clearly visible when the lockdown forced lakhs of them to walk miles after miles towards their homes on foot. The reverse exodus of migrant workers proves that they are not considered at par with other citizens and are valued only for their labour power. Therefore with loss of work, the cities had nothing to offer to the migrant workers. They were left with no work, no food, no housing and even no transportation for coming back to their hometown. In this situation they prefer to die from the virus in their own village rather than starving for an indefinite period in their workplace.

Index Terms - Covid-19, Lockdown, Migrant workers, Unemployment

I. INTRODUCTION

- **Migrant workers:**

A migrant worker is a person who either migrates within their home country or outside it to work for earning income. They do not have the intention to stay permanently in the country or region in which they work. They are mainly daily wage workers working in the manufacturing and construction industries. Most of them work in informal sector. A large portion of them are coming from rural areas. They usually do not get proper healthcare, nutrition, housing and sanitation. Their earnings are very low and usually do not have savings at all. According to World Economic Forum, there are an estimated 139 million migrants in India. Mumbai and Delhi attracts the highest number of migrants. A large number of these migrant workers are coming from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Odisha and Jharkhand.

"Migration is the geographic movement of people across a specified boundary for the purpose of establishing a new permanent or semi-permanent residence" (Das & Saha, n.d.). Migration in developing countries like India takes place mostly due to poverty, unemployment, natural disasters and underdevelopment at their native place and is considered as a survival strategy, rather than pull forces of the place of destination which is mostly prevalent in developed countries. Whereas improvement in living conditions is the main reason for both international and internal migration, unequal development and regional disparities is the main cause of inter-state migration in developing countries. Unavailability of resources, widespread poverty, stagnant rural economy and lower wages motivate rural people to migrate to urban areas. Migration is closely related to the development of a country and has several implications on the economic policies and framework.

- **Covid-19:**

On 31st December, 2019, the World Health Organisation (WHO) got information about cases of pneumonia of unknown cause found in Wuhan city of China. On 7th January 2020, Chinese authorities identified a new strain of Corona virus as the causative agent for the disease. The virus has been renamed by WHO as SARS- Cov-2 and the disease caused by it as Covid-19. Though the disease was first detected in China has now spread all over the world and has been declared as a pandemic by WHO on 11th March, 2020. Almost 8.8 million confirmed cases and death of 4,65,000 people all over the world has been reported till 21st June, 2020. In India there are positive cases of 4,10,461 and death of 13,254 people.

II. CONDITION OF INTERNAL MIGRANTS DURING THE LOCKDOWN

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a turmoil throughout the world and every country has fallen a prey to it. Countries worldwide are faced with an unprecedented crisis in health, food, unemployment and the economy as a whole has suffered a setback. As a measure to combat this fast spreading disease a country wide lockdown was announced in India on 24th of March for an initial period of 21 days with restrictions on shops, cinemas, markets, factories, transports and all forms of economic activities, except essential services. Workers in the vulnerable section of the economy, contractual workers, workers without any form of contract, especially in industries that are going to suffer a long term effect due to this outbreak of Corona virus like transport, tourism, restaurants, shopping malls, etc have been badly affected. Shutdown of industries and massive fall in demand has led to termination of employees and the job market is in a worst position in India. Certain studies have estimated a job loss of around 40 million people, mainly in the unorganised sector¹. The sudden decision of lockdown to avoid the outbreak of the pandemic in our country in turn started another crisis for the thousands of migrant workers who lost their jobs, were left with no money for survival and could not go back to their native places due to the restrictions imposed on transport. In the absence of transport, several migrant workers embarked on the path of walking hundreds of miles on foot to get back to their hometowns, in the fear of contracting the disease combined with the need for shelter, food and money.

Better opportunities of work and employment, improved livelihood and economic well-being serve as few of the major reasons of migration to urban areas. Most of the migrant workers are poor and belong to the socially deprived category with minimum access to education, land and resources. 3 out of 4 workers in Indian workforce falls under the category of vulnerable employment, majority of whom around 15.2 million to 55 million are seasonal migrants. (Jan Sahas, 2020). According to Census 2011, 50 percent of urban population are migrants, one-fifth of whom are inter-state migrants. Delhi, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka are few of the high income states which has high rates of in-migration. The study by (Bhagat, Reshmi, Sahoo, Roy, & Govil, 2020) points out certain migration corridors in the country like Bihar to Delhi, Punjab and Haryana, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Rajasthan to Gujarat and finally Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat. Even though India has more than 200 million migrant workers, there is no official estimate of the migrant workers who are stranded in different locations during this lockdown. With only 35 percent of migrant workers being in the salaried category, the rest are prone to the vulnerabilities of the labour market especially in the informal sector. Migrant workers lack the basic rights to protect their dignity and life and this catastrophic event have taken a huge toll on their lives.

(Dahdah, Guérin, Ferry, & Venkatasubramanian, 2020) emphasises on the existence of informal employment in India which is also largely characterised by internal migration and circulation to fulfil the demand of the capitalist economy's cheap and disciplined labour. Migration in search of jobs comes with added expenses of food, electricity, water and gas bills, rent, school charges, health, unforeseen expenditures and may more. Debt becomes an integral part of survival for these migrant workers who keep no stones unturned to continue their livelihood in big cities and towns. The lockdown have had a terrible impact on these informal sectors of the economy that will further deepen the already existent socio-economic inequalities prevalent in the country. Migrants who are left to fend for themselves are fleeing cities for escaping starvation exposes the pathetic condition of this under privileged and vulnerable section of the society.

One of the highest employers of migrant workers in the country is the construction sector with around 55 million daily wage workers and contribution of 9 percent to the GDP. Search of work and money brings around 9 million workers from rural to urban areas in these construction sites and factories. 42.3 percent of the surveyed workers had ration left for only one day, 13 percent had an alternative livelihood option and 48 percent were totally unsure of their future. With restrictions on movement most of them could not go to their employers to collect their pending wages and with the savings being exhausted and no ability to pay rent they were forced to walk back to their homes, clearly making a choice between safety and hunger. Labourers at construction sites were forced to consume water used for construction in order to survive depicting the deplorable condition of migrant workers (Jan Sahas, 2020).

The link between migrant labour, laws and work security was exposed when migrants started walking back to their homes on the highways and expressways of the new India. It raises several questions on the imbalance and inequality in the society. Even though they embarked on the journey of "walking back home", unfortunately it did not happen for many who lost their lives on the way due to accidents, starvation, fatigue and exhaustion. Since the imposition of lockdown, at least 196 migrants have been killed due to road accidents².

On 8th of May, 2020, 16 migrant workers returning by foot to Madhya Pradesh from Maharashtra where they worked in a steel factory were crushed to death by a goods train when they fell asleep on a railway track. On 9th of May, 2020 five migrant workers who were returning to their homes died when the truck carrying them overturned³. Several migrants were found living under a bridge along the river Yamuna in an unhealthy condition and many without food. A 12 year old died after walking 150 kilometres in 3 days from Telangana⁴. On May 14th a truck carrying migrant workers collided in Madhya Pradesh leaving 8 dead and 55 injured. A truck collision in Uttar Pradesh's Auraiya killed at least 24 migrant labourers and injured 37 on May 16th. On the same day another accident in Mithauli killed 24 people who were coming from Rajasthan⁵.

(Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020) in their report based on interaction with more than 11 thousand stranded workers have pointed out several difficulties faced by migrant workers during the lockdown. The sample consists of workers mainly stranded in Maharashtra, Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh. 79 percent of them are daily wage workers, 8 percent work as domestic helps and drivers and 8 percent are self-employed. Left with no work due to the lockdown several of them had run out of their savings. Out of the interviewed

¹ <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/opinion-impact-of-covid-19-on-the-indian-economy/75021731>

² <https://www.oneindia.com/india/during-lockdown-196-migrant-workers-died-in-road-accidents-3094481.html>

³ <https://thewire.in/labour/migrant-worker-crisis-lockdown>

⁴ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52360757>

⁵ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/mapping-accidents-that-killed-over-100-migrant-workers-on-their-way-to-home-during-nationwide-lockdown-2627947.html>

workers, almost 72 percent had ration that would last for a maximum of 2 days, 78 percent of them had less than 300 rupees remaining and 89 percent had not received any payment from their employers. Food crisis has stuck the stranded migrant workers who are fighting for survival. Even though the Government had taken initiatives to provide ration and cooked food, many did not have access to it. Data shows that in the two weeks of lockdown only 1 percent of stranded workers had received ration and in 3 weeks the number slightly went up to 4 percent. Lack of proper records and lack of accountability has aggravated the problem of these people who can neither continue to stay in their workplace nor can they shift back to their hometowns.

III. SCHEMES INTRODUCED BY THE GOVERNMENT

In order to give relief to the migrant workers and to support them, Government has introduced various schemes. Some of those schemes are discussed below:

- Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana- The Government has announced Rs. 1.70-lakh-crore package under the "Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana" which constitutes within its extent health workers, MGNREGA workers, farmers and economically vulnerable sections of the society.
- Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan- The Government has launched a scheme called "Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan" worth Rs. 50,000 crores on 20th June, 2020 to help and empower the migrant workers and the poor facing challenges due to the Corona pandemic. This scheme will play an important role in the country's move towards 'self-reliant India'. This scheme will work in 116 districts across 6 states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Jharkhand and Odisha) where the maximum number of migrant workers has returned.
- One nation and One ration card- Another scheme called "One nation and One ration card" will be enhanced by assuring national portability of 83% by August, 2020 and 100% by March, 2021. The scheme should allow migrant workers to access food in states other than that of their permanent residence. Till now the implementation of this scheme is very low.
- Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY)- Government has announced to launch a scheme under PMAY to convert Government funded housing in the cities into affordable rental housing complexes under PPP mode through a concessionaire.

IV. MEASURES TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT

- Government has facilitated the provision of three LPG cylinders for free to the eight crore beneficiaries of Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana (PMUY) between April and June 2020.
- State Governments have been instructed to provide a relief of Rs. 52000 crores in the form of Direct Benefit Transfer to construction workers from the Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund. However, around 94 percent of the workers cannot avail any benefit from it since they do not have their Building and Construction Workers identity card. (Jan Sahas, 2020)
- Rs. 11000 crore was allocated for the urban poor, which includes the migrant workers, for building shelter homes for the homeless.
- The Central Government will transfer 8 lakh metric tonnes of grain and 50,000 metric tonnes of chana to State Government to provide 5 kg of grain per labourer and 1 kg of chana per family per month for two months free of cost. This is expected to benefit up to 8 crores of migrant workers.
- States have been given permission to use the money of State Disaster Relief Fund to provide accommodation, food and other essentials to migrant workers who were stranded due to the lockdown.
- Indian Railways started 'Shramik Special' trains from 1st May, 2020 to facilitate the movement of migrant workers and other people stranded across the country due to the lockdown.
- Several states have taken the initiative to arrange for transport of workers who set on a barefoot journey to their hometowns.
- Quarantine centres have been set up for workers who have reached their hometown in order to quarantine them for 14 days on arrival to avoid any infection. Proper treatment and screening has been arranged for the migrant workers who return back to their native places.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

- Centre must ensure parity in the economic relief measures that are being announced by the States.
- Centre must ensure uniform distribution of ration across States.
- Doubling the PDS ration for three months including providing it free and through doorstep delivery.
- Immediate cash relief of Rs.7000 to migrant workers and poor households for 2 months.
- Immediate steps to be taken for the unregistered workers in different sectors to ensure that they receive the benefits.
- Payment of wages and clearance of all pending liabilities to MGNREGA workers.
- State Governments should take the responsibility of payment of minimum wages to all workers in the informal sector for the entire lockdown period and 3 months after it.
- Waiving off loans of migrant labourers and also rescheduling or waiving off Self help Group loans.
- Directives to all private and public organisations to not reduce wages or lay off their workers with special emphasis on casual and contractual labourers
- Provision of shelters and relief camps for the migrant workers.
- Immediate emergency support to pregnant migrant workers.
- Ensuring safe stay of workers by imposing restriction on eviction by landlords.
- Provide transport facilities for the travel of stranded workers to their hometowns.

VI. CONCLUSION

Due to Covid-19 there has been a huge fall in employment in almost all sectors of the economy. Many people have lost their jobs. Among these people the migrant workers are facing very bad consequences. Initially the Government was not taking any steps specifically for them. Due to the sudden lockdown they could not return back to their home and were literally left in the roads with no food, money or shelter. Arrangements should be made for their jobs so that they can earn money and take care of themselves and their family. There should be proper address to match the demand and supply of their skills. Laws should be implemented to safeguard the rights of the migrant workers so that they are better equipped to face adversities in the future. We need to give undivided attention to the working conditions of the migrant workers. Migrants are a part of our country and they deserve equal right to life and dignity.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bhagat, R. B., Reshmi, R. S., Sahoo, H., Roy, A. K., & Govil, D. (2020). *The COVID - 19 , Migration and Livelihood in India*. 1–22.
- Dahdah, M. Al, Guérin, I., Ferry, M., & Venkatasubramanian, G. (2020). *The Covid-19 Crisis in India - Chronicle of a Tragedy Foretold*. (April).
- Das, K. C., & Saha, S. (n.d.). *Inter-state migration and regional disparities in India*.
- Jan Sahas. (2020). *Voices of the Invisible Citizens*.
- Stranded Workers Action Network. (2020). *21 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India*.

