

**THE HURDLES FACED BY MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA DURING THE CORONA  
PANDEMIC: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE**

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**BACKGROUND**

**"In proportion as the bourgeoisie, i.e., capital, is developed, in the same proportion is the proletariat, the modern working class, developed - a class of labourers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital. These labourers, who must sell themselves piecemeal, are a commodity, like every other article of commerce, and are consequently exposed to all the vicissitudes of competition, to all the fluctuations of the market." ~ Karl Marx**

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) instrument, A "migrant worker" is defined "as a person who migrates from one country or place to another with a view of being employed other than on his own account, and includes any person regularly admitted as a migrant for employment." The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has differentiated economic migrants from labour migrants as two different entities.

1. "Labour migrants" are defined as those who move for the purpose of employment.
2. "Economic migrants" forms a broader group that has included people entering a state to perform economic activities, such as investors or for business purposes

In this report "Labour migrants" are considered as those who sought work or employment in the host state, and were unable to continue the work and were left behind in residence in the host state irrespective of their documentation.

Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence, across either internal (within the country) or international (across countries) borders. The most recent government data on migration is from the 2011 Census. According to the 2011 Census, India had 45.6 crore migrants (38% of the population) whereas, in 2001, 31.5 crore migrants were reported (31% of the population). Between 2001 and 2011, the number of migrants increased by 45%, while the population grew by

18%. Among the total migrants 99% was internal (inter-state) and immigrants (international migrants) comprised 1%.

### **PATTERNS OF MIGRATION**

Internal migration is classified based on the origin and destination. One of the classification is as follows: i) rural-rural, ii) rural-urban, iii) urban-rural and iv) urban-urban. The other classification is based on (i) intra-state and (ii) inter-state.

This article focuses mainly on the inter-state, rural-urban migrant workers who had struggled in the novel pandemic 2020 period, who had lost jobs and a living and had to pay a fortune to return to homes. Furthermore, statistics shows 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 states at the receiving end. Around 83 lakh residents of Uttar Pradesh and 63 lakh residents of Bihar had moved either temporarily or permanently to other states. Around 60 lakh people from across India had migrated to Maharashtra by 2011.

### **CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT LABOURERS DURING THE LOCKDOWN**

Indian metropolitan cities depend on a vast workforce gotten from the rest of the country, labourers who migrate in search of chance and often leave their families behind for months or years. They work in the field of construction, drive taxis, staff restaurants, so on and so forth, living frugally and returning home each year.

Article 19(1)(e) of the Constitution, guarantees all Indian citizens the right to inhabit and settle in any part of the territory of India, however, they are subjected to reasonable restrictions in the interest of the general public or protection of any scheduled tribe. Consequentially, the migrant workers in India face miserable challenges that hinder the quality of life. Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic faced numerous hardships. To begin with, the factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown imposed in the country, millions of migrant workers, almost anyone and everyone had to deal with the loss of income, shortage of food and ambiguity about their future.

- Lack of social security and health benefits and poor implementation of minimum safety standards law
- Lack of portability of benefits provided by the states especially food provided through the public distribution system (PDS)
- Access to affordable housing and basic amenities in urban areas being denied.
- Studies have shown that families and children of migrant workers experience poor nutritional and health outcomes as a result of poor conditions at their parents' workplace.

The above mentioned challenges were more evident and obvious during the lockdown 2020. On one hand economic shock has vaporized their incomes on the other side the transport restrictions eliminated way back home. The Indian migrant worker had to supposedly move back to their natives. Thousands of migrant labourers with their families left India's largest cities by road on foot as there were no means of transport such as planes, trains, interstate buses and taxis.

The last time people travelled in masses was when India became independent in 1947 and Pakistan was created, millions of people fled to the other side of newly drawn borders. Even then there was transportation such as train. Now, the speed of the transportation shutdown during the lockdown meant that India's tens of millions of internal migrants had no time to get back to their homes and opted to walk hundreds of kilometers.

### **LOCKDOWN: CONTAINMENT LED TO EPIDEMIC**

The livelihoods of a large proportion of the country's nearly 40 million internal migrants had been affected due to the lockdown in India. About 50,000–60,000 moved from urban set-up to rural areas of origin in the span of a few days," reported by the world bank.

According to world bank reports -- 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens' -- the extent of internal migration is more than two-and-a-half times that of international migration. The loss of employment, and social distancing prompted has led to a chaotic and painful course of mass return for migrants labourers in India. It is supposed that COVID-19 containment measures might have contributed to spreading the epidemic as there were no precautionary measures or planning involved in the mass return of the migrant labourers.

### **LONG-TERM IMPACTS**

While direct cash transfers and other stimulus packages aimed at reducing the economic stress experienced by families, group of children, under-aged migrant workers has long-lasting impacts on their health and overall well-being thereby their quality of life put at stake. As thousands of families remain trapped in various parts of the country, any travel advisories issued henceforth must prioritise families with children and ensure safe transport back home.

This pandemic is first of its kind in several decades, however, similar scenarios have arisen at the time of other disasters. In Odisha, post-disaster work showed that the mental and physical health of labourers and most importantly their children needed more attention. Safe and child-friendly shelters that provide nutritious food, water and sanitation facilities for families must be arranged by relief camps, labour colonies and transit camps at state borders, as well as in quarantine services arranged at the block level or panchayat level. These places must act in response to the

psychosocial needs of labourers, children and adolescents, specifically those who are alone as they hamper the risk of abuse and exploitation. Psycho-social health is seldom noticed and addressed in situation like this therefore it is important to take into consideration the psycho-social health and well being of the labourers and their family.

## **PSYCHO-SOCIAL ISSUES**

During outbreak of communicable diseases, such a COVID-19, and the limitations imposed on day to day activities as part of social distancing norms to prevent the spread of the disease, scores of migrant workers intended to move back to their native places. Many of them are however were stuck at borders, that includes state, district and at national border areas. These are the most marginalized sections of the society, the voiceless and the ones who are dependent on daily wages for their living. Immediate concerns faced by such migrant workers was lack of food, shelter, healthcare, fear of getting infected or spreading the infection, loss of wages, concerns about their families, uncertainty about future, anxiety and fear. At times, they also faced harassment and pessimistic reactions of the local community. All of which called for strong social protection.

As an immediate response, measures to be taken should include, ensuring community shelters and community kitchens, making other relief material available, emphasising on the need for social distancing, suspected cases of infection should be identified and protocols for management of such cases must be adhered, putting up mechanisms to enable them reach to the family members through telephone, video calls etc. and ensuring their physical safety.

## **STEPS TAKEN BY GOVERNMENT**

As it was earlier mentioned, during the lockdown, several inter-state migrant workers tried to return to their home state. Due to the suspension of public transport facilities, migrants started walking towards their home state on foot. Consequentially, buses and Shramik special trains were permitted by the central government subject to synchronization between states. Between May 1 and June 3, more than 58 lakh migrants were transported through specially operated trains and 41 lakh were transported by road.

### **Measures taken by the government to aid migrants include-**

**Transportation:** The State Disaster Response Fund was authorised to be used by the central government on March 28<sup>th</sup> to provide accommodation to travelling migrants. It was recommended to the states to set up relief camps alongside highways with necessary medical facilities to guarantee people stay in these camps while the lockdown is in place. The Ministry of Home Affairs allowed

states to co-ordinate individually to transport migrants using, On April 29th. After March 22<sup>nd</sup> ever since the railway services stopped, the Indian Railways resumed passenger movement On the 1<sup>st</sup> of May with Shramik Special trains to smooth the progress of the movement of migrants trapped outside their home state. Between May 1 and June 3, Indian Railways operated about 4,197 Shramik trains transporting more than 58 lakh migrants. Major states where shramik was operational were Gujarat, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

**Food distribution:** The Ministry of Health and Family Affairs recommended to the state governments to operate relief camps for migrant workers with food, sanitation and medical services. Under the second tranche of the “Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan”, the Finance Minister announced that free food grains would be given for two months to migrant workers without a ration card. The measure was expected to benefit almost eight crore migrant labourers and their families. One Nation One Ration card will be implemented by March 2021 as announced by the Finance Minister, so as to provide portable benefits under the PDS. Thereby ensuring access to ration from any Fair Price Shop in India.

**Housing:** The “Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan” also launched a scheme for reasonably priced Rental Housing Complexes for Migrant Workers and Urban Poor to provide affordable rental housing units under PMAY. The scheme proposes to use existing housing stock under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Housing Mission (JnNURM) as well as incentivise public and private agencies to construct new affordable units for rent. Further, supplementary funds have been allocated for the credit-linked subsidy scheme under PMAY for the middle-income group.

**Financial aid:** one-time cash transfers for returning migrant workers was announced by some state governments like Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The UP government announced that there will be a provision of maintenance allowance of Rs 1,000 for migrants who returned and were required to be quarantined.

However, empirical studies have showed that the help from government has not reached millions of migrant workers who are in actual need. It is important to check and follow-up with the dissemination of the above mentioned materialistic help.

#### **WAY FORWARD:**

Migrant workers faced with the situation of spending a few days in temporary shelters, which may be quarantine centres, while trying to reach to their native places, are filled with anxieties and fears stemming from various concerns, and are in need of psycho-social support. As part of such support, following measures can be adopted: 1.migrant workers should be treated with dignity, respect,

empathy and compassion especially during these tough times. 2. Their needs cannot be generalised therefore it is important to recognise specific and varied needs for each person/family. 3. They are in need of reassurance that this situation is transient and will not last long. 4. It is important to spread among them the source of support being extended by Central Government, State Governments/ NGOs/ health care systems etc. since there is a dearth of information. 5. Importance of their staying in their present location has to be emphasised as the mass movement could greatly and adversely affect all efforts to contain the virus.

Governments need to address the challenges faced by internal migrants by including them in health services and cash transfer and other social programmes, and protecting them from discrimination.

It is recommended that the Integrated Child Development Services—Anganwadi (ICDS-AW) and auxiliary nurse midwives (ANMs)—be advised to expand their outreach to include migrant women and children in the scheme. The government should involve in follow-up measures to ensure that the schemes are at reach for the migrant labourers. Every citizen of a country is a valuable asset the nation and their well-being is not only important that individual and their family but also to the community, the society and the whole nation.

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