

Corona, India and Mass migration: Unfolding Implications for the Present and the Future

***Dr. POORNIMA G. R**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government First Grade College,
Rajajinagar, Bangalore, 560010

****Dr. SURESH KUMAR M. N**

Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, Government First Grade College,
Chamrajpet, Bangalore, Karnataka, 560026

Abstract

Pandemic in general is not a mere serious public health concern but triggers disastrous socio-economic and political crises in the infected countries. The lockdown across the nation has caught the people and the government at crossroads. The pain, neglect, desperation, anger, anguish, frustration and hardships undergone by the migrant labour are beyond comprehension. 30 per cent of them are casual workers and another 30 per cent work on regular basis but in the informal sector. 17 districts account for the top 25% of India's total male out-migration. The outward movement of workers is largely from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh. Delhi has a migration rate of 43%, of whom 88% are from other states and 63% are from rural areas. Mumbai has a migration rate of 55%, with 46% migrants from other states and 52% from rural areas. Surat has a migration rate of 65%, with 50% migrants from other states and 76% from rural areas. They are the unacknowledged drivers of our economy, industry and enterprise. The way they were treated by the employers during lockdown will be a serious deciding factor for migrant labour to return back to work. There are nearly 20 million international migrants and the Centre has to step in for the returning migrants' rehabilitation, re-migration, and reintegration. It's time the government places a bill in the Parliament securing the safety which includes food, shelter and clothing in an unforeseen crisis. Establishing Registrar for Migration Labour is a right step in mitigating migration labour related issues.

Keyword: corona, pandemic, lockdown, labour, economy, migration

Pandemic in general is not a mere serious public health concern but triggers disastrous socio-economic and political crises in the infected countries. COVID-19 has indeed turned out to be a disaster of global proportions and dimensions. As is implied in the name COVID-19, 'CO' stands for 'corona,' 'VI' for 'virus,' and 'D' for disease, and 19 represents the year of its occurrence. The first modern Covid-19 pandemic was reported in December 2019, in Wuhan, China and rapidly circled the globe becoming a pandemic as declared by the World Health Organization.

The lockdown across the nation has caught the people and the government at crossroads. The government, on its part, was to take a decision because corona did play havoc across Europe by then. Any delay in taking a quick decision and consequent tragic fall out had serious political implications. The lock was not only an inevitable but also a quick fix decision. The mysterious nature, guise and effects of corona further tied the hands of the government from venturing into experiment mode.

The Objective: To highlight the impacts of Covid-19 on India with particular emphasis on the migration and reverse migration and its likely fallout on the plight of labour and the intended labour laws in the case of unforeseen calamities.

The central government announced the lockdown on 24 March to halt the spread of Covid-19, resulting in millions of migrant labour, forced out of jobs and with no means of earning a living, began fleeing the cities. In no time, they found unwanted in the cities they build with their labour. Having no bus or train to rush back home piled up the agony. The pain, neglect, desperation, anger, anguish, frustration and hardships undergone by the migrant labour are beyond comprehension. The pictures of men, women and children walking back hundreds of miles to their villages are still fresh in memory.

India's pandemic lockdown migration turned into a human tragedy focusing the spotlight on the vast number of Indians who live outside their home states. The total number of internal migrants in India, as per the 2011 census, is 45.36 crore or 37% of the country's population. This includes

inter-state migrants as well as migrants within each state, while the recent exodus is largely due to the movement of inter-state migrants.

Professor Amitabh Kundu of Research and Information System for Developing Countries estimates based on 2011 Census, NSSO surveys and economic survey, show that there are a total of about 65 million inter-state migrants, and 33 per cent of these migrants are workers. By conservative estimates, 30 per cent of them are casual workers and another 30 per cent work on regular basis but in the informal sector. A study by the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) and Azim Premji University in 2019 estimates that 29% of the population in India's big cities is of daily wagers. Professor Kundu's estimates show that Uttar Pradesh and Bihar account for the origin of 25 per cent and 14 per cent of the total inter-state migrants, followed by Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh, at 6 per cent and 5 per cent.

Native dilemma

Professor Tariq Thachil of Vanderbilt University in his research states that migrant populations neither wholly retain nor completely discard their village-based ethnic ties which force them to walk hundreds of kilometers once their source of livelihood is taken away. Delhi has a migration rate of 43%, of whom 88% are from other states and 63% are from rural areas. Mumbai has a migration rate of 55%, with 46% migrants from other states and 52% from rural areas. Surat has a migration rate of 65%, with 50% migrants from other states and 76% from rural areas. As per the 'Politics and Society Between Elections Survey' from 2017-19 conducted by the CSDS, the monthly household income of 22% daily and weekly wagers is up to Rs 2,000; of 32%, between Rs 2,000 and 5,000; of 25%, between 5,000 and 10,000; of 13%, between Rs 10,000 and 20,000; and of 8%, more than Rs 20,000.

District wise migration

District-wise migration data in the Economic Survey for 2016-17 show that the highest influx of migrants within the country is seen in city-districts such as Gurugram, Delhi and Mumbai along with Gautam Buddha Nagar (Uttar Pradesh); Indore, Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh); Bangalore (Karnataka); Thiruvallur, Chennai, Kancheepuram, Erode, Coimbatore (Tamil Nadu). The outward movement of workers is largely from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand and Madhya

Pradesh. As per the Report of the Working Group on Migration, 2017 under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 17 districts account for the top 25% of India's total male out-migration.

Irudaya Rajan, faculty at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram, aptly highlights the magnitude of the crisis thus: "In a sense, this is a refugee crisis now and not merely a migrant crisis." Corona lockdown has finally acknowledged the existence of millions of migrant labour who neither mattered at the work place or well entrenched back home. The migrant labour is neither here nor there for over decades. They touch every sphere of socio-economic life and without them, none of the sectors could really think of moving. The sudden shortage of labour in the aftermath of the lockdown is visible in all sectors. For the first time, the migrant labour has drawn the attention of the governments and the policy makers but at a huge persona, emotional, financial cost.

It is estimated that close to 500 million Indians are today internal migrants either not living in a place they were born or live in one particular place over time. They would be at least 30% of the total migrant population who move from their home state to another for work; earn, send money home and move on to a new place. They are the unacknowledged drivers of our economy, industry and enterprise.

It is an easy assumption to make that after a while, the migrant labour move out of their homes and back to business. But, the way they were treated by the employers during lockdown will be a serious deciding factor. If the treatment is fair, responsible and caring no matter the distance, the migrants would make it. In case of mal treatment and abandonment, the far away labour may not run the risk of trusting those who duped them at a time of grave crisis in a matter of life or death.

International migration

On the other side of the sea, there are nearly 20 million international migrants most of them in six Gulf countries: Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia with \$80 billion as remittances from abroad. In this case, Kerala will be the most affected state, which has the highest share of international migrants. The Centre has to step in for the returning migrants'

rehabilitation, re-migration, and reintegration. The unpreparedness is in itself a big challenge for the government. India has the highest number of international migrants in the world, according to the World Migration Report, 2020. Out of the total population of 272 million international migrants, almost 6 percent (17 million) of them are Indians.

The World Bank's 'COVID-19 Crisis through a Migration Lens' report pegs that nationwide lockdown in India has impacted nearly 40 million internal migrants. It also highlights that the lockdowns, loss of employment, and social distancing prompted a chaotic and painful process of mass return for internal migrants in India and many countries in Latin America. Taking note of the government policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis largely excluding migrants and their families back home, the World Bank has suggested governments to consider short, medium and long-term interventions to support stranded migrants, remittance infrastructure, loss of subsistence income for families back home, and access to health, housing, education, and jobs for migrant workers in host/transit countries and their families back home.

Concluding observations

The large scale and unprecedented migration in the aftermath of the corona invasion is a first of its kind in Post Independence history. It would be easy pointing fingers at handling the crisis for which the world was absolutely unprepared. This glaring lapse on part of the state and government should awake the governments to realize that the migrant labour are the backbone locomotive of the national economy. Many piece meal approaches have been made to attend the issues of migrants. The failure to address the issue in its entirety is largely attributed to the neglect of the migrant labour class as contributors to the development and economy. It's time the government places a bill in the Parliament securing the safety which includes food, shelter and clothing in an unforeseen crisis. Establishing Registrar for Migration Labour would help procure the data on migrant labour classified state wise. Issuing a number to each migrant would help availing health and other benefits.

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