

Impact of Covid-19 on Migrants in Un-Organized sector – An Indian Experience

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Abstract

Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic every sector of the economy in every nation has come to a screeching halt. Millions of workers especially in un-organized sector in India who are dependent on daily wages for their survival have lost their source of livelihood. It is important to diagnose the scale of the economic crisis accurately. Those migrant workers, who have lost their jobs, would be helped by the respective governments. It is morally imperative that the governments, the civil society and other stake holders immediately address the miseries of the poor and vulnerable by providing money as well as food. This study highlights the problems and prospects of migrant workers and some remedies are also suggested.

Key words: migrant workers, epidemic, livelihood, economic development,

Introduction

During outbreak of communicable diseases, such a COVID-19, and the restrictions imposed on routine activities as part of social distancing norms to prevent the spread of the disease, scores of migrant workers tend to move back to their native places. During the prevailing COVID pandemic also, many migrant workers used all possible means to reach their destinations. Many of them are however stuck at borders, including state, district and at national border areas. These are the most marginalized sections of the society who are dependent on daily wages for their living, and in times of such distress need sympathy and understanding of the society.

We saw this in the wake of the sudden clamp down – without notice – of a 21 day closure of the country, which had no plan for hundreds and thousands of migrant workers working all over the country, no provision for their needs, no contingency measure for their food, shelter, health, their families, and life. Thousands upon thousands, evicted from their temporary shelters, without money and food, desperately tried to reach home – villages and small towns – from wherever they were working. Tens of thousands of migrant workers – mothers with children, young boys and girls, single women, husband and wife, young single workers - trekked hundreds of kilometers, some reports tell of workers walking five hundred kilometers to reach home, with some perishing on the roads. We do not know how many lost their ways, how many reached home in what condition, how many perished, but we know of savage incidents as the one when a group of workers was sprayed with disinfectants like dead animals to purify them of Covid-19. Migrant workers carrying their belongings and small children were beaten up, baton-charged and frog-marched on interstate highways because they had disturbed the lockdown measures and the disease containment plan.

The absolute importance of agricultural workers, fishery workers, and transportation workers linked to deliverable agricultural products like food items or flowers tells us of the way the formal economy is subsuming informal modes in food production and consumption and horticulture. Agribusiness has extended beyond mere stripping localities of resources, and is taking a turn towards turning massive extractive operations into discontinuous networks of production and circulation across territories and at different scales. Specialized agriculture in zones in the country such as the Punjab, Maharashtra, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir are the “commodity regions” of India embedded in the national geography and producing a flexible migrant labor market, which has now produced challenge to the country’s government to manage its vast population in the time of an epidemic.

Objectives of the Study:

- To study the problems being faced by migrant workers during the COVID-19 epidemic in India.
- To analyze the Socio-economic conditions of migrant workers.
- To recommend some of the suggestions which are helpful for their better life.

Methodology:

This study is based on the secondary based on the secondary data, which is available in the central government portal, magazines, research papers in the journals, newspapers and periodicals.

Migrant workers in India during Covid-19.

There are an estimated 139 million migrants in the country, According to the ILO, due to the pandemic and the lockdown, about 400 million workers would be poverty-stricken. Most migrants in the country originate from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, followed by Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The cities of Mumbai and Delhi attract the highest number of migrants. While most men migrate for work, women migrate due to marriage.

With no work and no money, and lockdown restrictions putting a stop to public transport, thousands of migrant workers were seen walking or bicycling hundreds of kilometers (or even more than a thousand kilometers) to go back to their native villages, some with their families. Many did so while hungry. Social distancing was not possible for these migrants since they travelled together in large groups. According to some of them, they would rather die from the virus at their own village than starve because of no work in the city.

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. Others died in accidents on the roads after walking or hiding in vehicles. On 31 March, as many as 120 migrant workers were allegedly beaten up by the police and forcefully rounded up in a single lorry and dropped in Maharashtra, despite being wounded. In Maharashtra 16 migrants were killed on 8 May after a freight train ran over them while they were sleeping on the tracks, exhausted from walking. 26 migrants were killed in an accident between two trucks carrying migrants in on 16 May. Later in May, a 15-year-old girl carried her ailing father on a bicycle for 1,200

kilometres (750 mi) from Bihar to Gurugram over the course of a week. She was later approached to try out for the National Cycling Academy by the Cycling Federation of India, and received praise.

Later in May, despite the launching of special trains and buses by the government, the migrant workers chose to either travel together in large groups in the cargo compartments of trucks and containers, or travel by foot. They did not wait or their turn to board the government-arranged transport, mainly due to starvation. Additionally, they felt that going back to their hometowns, they could return to farming and take up small jobs under the the various central and state government schemes.

Visuals of hundreds of workers wearing gamchas, carrying heavy backpacks and wailing children, and walking on national highways. This tough measure was met with fear, anger and frustration in many parts of the country. They don't have food, shelter and money.

Migrant workers problems.

During the lockdown period the central and all State governments imposed many restrictions on movement. Since this was the sudden decision, millions of workers in unorganized sectors were not equipped to adjust the situation. In Pune, Mumbai, Nagpur, Delhi, Calcutta and other big metropolitan cities lakhs of migrant workers found themselves without work, To make matters worse, there was little or no guarantee that they would get basic amenities such as food and water. This forced thousands of migrant laborers to go to their natives.

The governments initiatives.

The central government in its second tranche of the economic stimulus package announced to provide free food grains to migrant workers who do not have ration cards. The Centre spend Rs 3500 crore for this purpose. There are nearly 8 crore migrant workers don't have the ration cards, who are not covered under the food distribution system have been also provided 5kg of grains per person and 1kg chana per family per month. Apart from measures for migrant workers, the second tranche announced by the government included an extension of credit facilities for urban housing, street vendors and farmers and interest subvention scheme for small businesses. As part of the stimulus package, the central government decided to create affordable rental housing for the urban poor and provide relief worth Rs. 1,500 crores to small businesses through an interest subvention scheme. The government decided to provide Rs, 10000 as initial working capital.

Like central government many state governments have announced packages for migrant people. Karnataka government has also waived two-months fixed electricity bills of Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs), including similar support to daily-wagers like barbers, taxi drivers, auto rickshaw drivers and washermen. The state government thought that the Migrant laborers are mostly moving in the districts but not out of the state. But the government announced that exact number of migrant laborers in Karnataka is not available. The state government don't have the data on migrant laborers, Government announced that 21 lakh construction workers will be paid Rs 1,000 per person, adding that the government under Badavara Bandhu (interest-free loan to roadside vendors) scheme, has decided to waive Rs 13.20 crore loans. This include Rs 9.10 crore in 2018-19 benefiting 15,120 people, and Rs 5.16 crore in 2019-20, benefiting 6,500 people. An economic relief package of Rs 1,610 crore, the Karnataka Cabinet decided to raise the compensation by an additional Rs 162 crore to cover more people. Given the heavy losses incurred by horticulture farmers and weavers due to the fall in demand and breakdown in transportation during the Covid-19 lockdown, the State announced compensation of Rs 15,000 per hectare for horticulturists and extended the Rs 2,000 assistance to powerloom workers as well.

Measure should be taken.

The central and State governments should have to come up with clear-cut measures, holistic policies and objective initiatives. Some of the important measures should be taken, they can be as follows.

1. Help them to acknowledge that this is an unusual situation of uncertainty and reassure them that the situation is transient and not going to last long. Normal life is going to resume soon.
2. Be prepared with all the information about possible sources of help. Inform them about the support being extended by Central Government, State Governments/ NGOs/ health care systems etc..
3. Make them realize their importance in the community and appreciate their contribution to the society.
4. The central government would take the initiatives to frame the new labor laws and labor rights for the informal sector on the pattern of organized labor and think to expand the social security system available for labor in the informal sector.
5. Needs to take the initiative to legislate and implementation of a new law to identify each migrant worker by name. Even if they are part-time, this can

really possible in this digital era. If the governments have this data, it is very easy to identify the migrant workers and extend the benefit.

Conclusion

In India more 90% of the workers are in unorganized sectors. These people don't have any basic facilities such as job cards, Ration cards, bank accounts, health insurance and other facilities. These workers even don't aware of the government's policies and packages and don't know how to access these packages. So the government as well as civil society comes up with holistic approaches to develop their wellbeing. These people who really work hard for the development of the society as well as the nation, but in this pandemic situation these are the real sufferers. Our Constitution shows the way to solve all the problems. But we must have holistic polices to handle this grave situation.

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