

India's Experience in Protecting Migrant Workers during Covid-19: An Analysis

Dr.Venkatesh

*Principal, Assistant Professor of Political Science Department, H. K. E. Society's, A. V. Patil Arts, Science and Commerce College, Aland, District Kalaburagi-585302

Abstract

Covid-19 Pandemic crammed into work camps, skilled and unskilled areas of work; stood down from their jobs, stranded in the cities facing high rates of infection with no way home and locked down as where they are bearing the brunt of the coronavirus pandemic in India and around the world. The present paper will discuss about the most affected migrants unskilled labours that don't have proper access to basic needs of their day to day life. As we all know migrant workers are among the most vulnerable are raising levels of discrimination and xenophobia against migrant workers. The worst affected are inter-state migrants workers who are stranded in cities and don't have access to live as there is a little means of access to live in all the major cities. In most the cases where they are stranded they face food insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages etc. States such as Odisha, West Bengal and Bihar, which contribute a large share of migrant workers, have taken some measures to protect migrants in the destination States. Odisha's model of intervention has been quite effective, with timely implementation made through the State Ministries of Labour, Education, Women and Child Welfare and Panchayati Raj institutions. Further the paper will also focus on the issues like extension of access to health services and social protection coverage to migrant workers; address the special hazards of migrant workers living in communal or worksite housing and policies based upon social dialogue and full involvement of employers' and workers' organizations can foster inclusion of migrant workers in national responses.

Key Words: Covid-19, Migrant Workers, Social Protection, Health Services, Basic Facilities

Introduction

In an era of globalization, economic or labour migration is on the rise. Due to lack of employment opportunities in developing countries and increased demands for low-wage workers in developed countries, youth, women and men are pursuing work in other countries in order to support themselves and their families back home. India's total population, as recorded in Census 2011, stands at 1.21 billion. Internal migrants in India number 454 million, or 37 per cent of the population. That said, internal migration remains grossly underestimated owing to empirical and conceptual difficulties in measurement.

IrudayaRajan Bernard D Sami (2020) India experienced rapid urbanisation between 2001 and 2011, with an estimated 31.8 per cent decadal growth. Migration, one of the components of India's urban growth, is expected to increase in the foreseeable future. The number of internal migrants is expected to cross 550 million by 2021. Policies such as the National Smart Cities Mission have also contributed to this phenomenon. During 2001-2011, India saw an increase of 139 million to its migrant workforce. The internal migration almost doubled during 20 years—from 220 million in 1991 to 454 million in 2011. Migration in India is primarily of two types: (a) long-term migration, resulting in the relocation of an individual or household; and (b) short-term or seasonal/circular migration, involving back-and-forth movement between a source and destination. According to National Sample Survey estimates, 28.3 per cent of workers in India are migrants. By this yardstick, India has approximately 175 million internal migrants who move for work in the informal sector and support the lifeline of many State economies.

For the first time in the history of the country, the Economic Survey of India 2017 stated that an average of nine million people migrated between States every year for either education or work. Construction workers are now mostly confined to dormitories, far from the skylines and stadiums they had been building, and stripped of their incomes. The same applies in the retail and energy sectors, staffed almost exclusively by foreign labour.

Annie Jane C (2016) Migrant labourers are usually employed in the 3-D jobs – dangerous, dirty and degrading. These are jobs which the local population of the developed state would not take up and hence, labour is brought in from outside the state for the same wages and sometimes for less. These jobs are invariably associated with more occupational hazards than other jobs. Migrant labourers working on construction sites commonly suffer

from falls, injuries caused by machines, amputations and crush injuries (Schenker MB).Migrants cannot access various health and family care programmes due to their temporary status. Free public health care facilities and programmes are not accessible to them. For women workers, there is no provision of maternity leave, forcing them to resume work almost immediately after childbirth. Workers, particularly those working in tile factories and brick kilns suffer from occupational health hazards such as body ache, sunstroke and skin irritation (NCRL, 1991).

As there are no crèche facilities, children often accompany their families to the workplace to be exposed to health hazards. They are also deprived of education: the schooling system at home does not take into account their migration pattern and their temporary status in the destination areas does not make them eligible for schooling there (Rogaly et al, 2001; 2002).In the case of male-only migration, the impact on family relations and on women, children and the elderly left behind can be quite significant. The absence of men adds to material and psychological insecurity, leading to pressures and negotiations with wider family(Rogaly et al, 2001; 2002).

PriyaDeshingkar and ShaheenAkter (2009) Migration in India is not new and historical accounts show that people have moved in search of work, in response to environmental shocks and stresses, to escape religious persecution and political conflict. However improved communications, transport networks, conflicts over natural resources and new economic opportunities have created unprecedented levels of mobility. But as we discuss in following sections, the increase in mobility is not fully captured in larger surveys often leading to erroneous conclusions about mobility levels in India. Although significant in recent years, growth has been unequal in India (Balisacan and Ducanes 2005), characterised by industry in developed states such as Gujarat, Maharashtra and Punjab drawing labour from agriculturally backward and poor regions such as eastern Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, southern Madhya Pradesh, western Orissa and southern Rajasthan. High productivity agricultural areas (“green revolution areas”) continue to be important destinations, but rural- urban migration is the fastest growing type of migration as more migrants choose to work in better paying non-farm occupations in urban areas and industrial zones. Delhi and the states of Gujarat and Maharashtra are top destinations for inter-state migrant labour. Labour mobility has grown and will probably continue to grow once the economy recovers from the current crisis.

Migration for Work

While the driver of the supply of migrant workers may be similar across men and women, the basic demand forces driving women's migration for work are quite different from those of men. This is particularly true for short-term cross-border migration for work, because so much of it is driven by gender-differentiated demand for labour, determined in turn by the gender construction of work roles in most societies. This is what determines that male migrant workers tend to be concentrated in production and construction sectors, while women migrants are usually service workers. Since female migrant workers are dominantly in the care and entertainment sectors, demand for such workers is less dependent upon the economic cycle and more dependent upon longer run demographic and social tendencies in the receiving countries. Aging societies require more care providers. Societies in which women are more active in paid work participation, especially in higher-income activities, need more domestic workers. However, male and female migration patterns are not completely unconnected. A wave of male migration often leads indirectly to a subsequent wave of female in-migration, not necessarily through marriage but because of changing labour markets. Thus, a male-centred culture of entertainment tends to create a demand for female entertainment workers, and this demand grows with the greater presence of male migrants in the destination area. It has been pointed out (CEDAW 2008) that this may be associated with the significant increase in the number of women migrating alone as wage workers.

Social norms and conditions are crucial in determining the ability of women to migrate alone. Many societies have very strong social controls on the movement of women, and these may be combined with legal bans or constraints on women's out-migration, based on such attributes as age, marital status, pregnancy or maternity status, requirement of permission to migrate from the male head of household or other male relative, and so on. In addition, the nature of gender relations in the sending society is a crucial determinant of both the ability of women to migrate and the pattern of migration. In a study based on Census data of five Latin American countries that lie along a continuum of gender relations ranging from patriarchal to matrifocal systems, Massey, Fischer and Capoferro (2006) found very different patterns of female migration relative to male migration. In the two highly patriarchal societies (Mexico and Costa Rica) female householders displayed very low rates of migration compared to males, and marriage dramatically reduced the chances of female out-migration.

But in the more matrifocal societies of Nicaragua and the Dominican Republic, the ratio of female to male migration was much higher, in some case exceeding their male counterparts, and marriage or cohabitation seemed to have no effect upon the probability of female outmigration. Puerto Rico, which occupied a middle position in terms of gender relations, also seemed to blend the two migration patterns.

A significant percentage of all ASEAN workers consist of migrant labour, whose remittances contribute a substantial proportion of GDP in many nations around the region. In light of COVID-19, however, the impact on these migrant workers has been significantly higher and the consequences devastating. Migrant workers are often the most overlooked population during a crisis such as the pandemic, and they are now being viewed as the primary cause for second-wave infections. If issues involving marginalized communities such as migrant workers are not addressed, this will fuel more virus containment obstacles going forward. Although Thailand has a robust domestic healthcare system, regarded as one of the best in the world, owing to its investment in health security, its quick shutdown and restrictive migration policy is precisely what has led to a spike in COVID-19 cases around the region more broadly. Despite announcements from the governments of Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia to warn migrant workers to stay in place, the notice of Thailand's national shutdown in late March consequently created a mass exodus of migrant workers from the country. The lack of coronavirus testing at the time in addition to the long incubation period of the virus makes it unknowable how many of those migrant workers who left Thailand were carriers of the COVID-19 virus. What is knowable, however, is that many of those migrant workers returned to Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia, and subsequently those countries experienced spikes of COVID-19, and their limited health resources exacerbated the problem.

Camille Bismonte (2020) Singapore was originally hailed for its quick COVID-19 response, but time would prove that there were blind spots in its execution, as it overlooked its vulnerable migrant population huddled together in cramped, unhygienic dormitories. According to Singapore's Ministry of Manpower, 1.4 million of the city-state's 5.8 million workers are migrant workers. Therefore, less than 25 percent of people residing in Singapore consist of 85 percent of all its COVID-19 cases. A surprising second wave of coronavirus infections in Singapore swept through migrant dormitories, whose conditions reflect the disparities in treatment between Singaporean citizens and the migrant population. The

cramped conditions of migrant dormitories illustrate that for migrant workers, social distancing is an unavailable luxury.

Conspicuously free from any reported COVID-19 fatalities, Vietnam is an example of what meticulous tracing, solidarity among citizens, and a public health campaign held on a massive scale can do to protect a population. As of May 22, according to the Johns Hopkins University coronavirus resource center, Vietnam has had 324 reported cases of COVID-19 within its borders, and no deaths. What is particularly interesting to note, however, is not only its reported cases, but its ratio of testing to confirmed cases in its borders. Unlike South Korea and Singapore which have been utilizing mass testing to trace and quarantine potential coronavirus patients, Vietnam has been utilizing mass surveillance instead. Low-tech tracing has been instrumental to its success. Following SARS in 2003, during which Vietnam was one of the hardest hit nations, they were ultimately motivated to create the infrastructure necessary to track contagious diseases. By doing so, Vietnam utilized the time it had in the early stages of COVID-19, even before it was declared a public health emergency by the WHO, to deploy its measures.

Problems Faced by Migrants during Lock-down period

Like millions of migrant workers left jobless by India's coronavirus lockdown, Swain was left penniless and facing starvation and could only afford the 1,700 km trip back to Odisha after his family wired him money. Countless workers in India have walked thousands of miles home after losing their jobs, many dying in accidents along the way, and the ordeal has made them reluctant to return to work despite India easing restrictions to reboot industrial activity. "Nobody was understanding our problems there. My employer did not lift the phone when I contacted him to ask for my 10 days' wages pending with him. They are big people. What can we do?" Swain, 45, told the Thomson Reuters Foundation by phone. "The lockdown in India has impacted the livelihoods of a large proportion of the country's nearly 40 million internal migrants. Around 50,000–60,000 moved from urban centers to rural areas of origin in the span of a few days," the bank said in a report released on Wednesday.

According to the report -- 'COVID-19 Crisis Through a Migration Lens' -- the magnitude of internal migration is about two-and-a-half times that of international migration. "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,” Thus, the COVID-19 containment measures might have contributed to spreading the epidemic, the report said. Governments need to address the challenges facing internal migrants by including them in health services and cash transfer and other social programmes, and protecting them from discriminate. World Bank said that coronavirus crisis has affected both international and internal migration in the South Asia region. As the early phases of the crisis unfolded, many international migrants, especially from the Gulf countries, returned to countries such as India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh until travel restrictions halted these flows. Some migrants had to be evacuated by governments, such as those of China and Iran, it said. Before the coronavirus crisis, migrant outflows from the region were robust, the report said.

The number of recorded, primarily low-skilled emigrants from India and Pakistan rose in 2019 relative to the prior year but is expected to decline in 2020 due to the pandemic and oil price declines impacting the Gulf countries. In India, the number of low-skilled emigrants seeking mandatory clearance for emigration rose slightly by eight percent to 368,048 in 2019. For the first time in the history of independent India have the two issues grabbed national attention, though between them, migrants make better ‘copies’ and offer heart-rending visuals to those who still nurse values. The eerie silence of the nation’s most loquacious prime minister has strengthened the narrative of utter indifference, though he has, of late, been making feeble comments in sotto voce. In fact, the images of literally hundreds of migrant workers killed while trudging unbelievable distances home, mainly on foot, do not seemed to have excited the regime at all, as much as ensuring inhuman working hours did. The Union of India, however, argued most vehemently before an unusually accommodative apex court that no directions need to be issued to it, as it rolled out unverifiable statistics of how it had stretched its helping hand to those on the long march back. Without further ado, let us go straight to the root of the problem, which is bigger than just the visible destitute who trudge along so pathetically. As hinted, the issue involves the ‘informal sector’ or ‘unorganised labour’ of which the migrant workers are a large part.

Migrants Returning Home with Empty Hands

A day before the Janata Curfew announcement on March 21, 2020, hundreds of thousands rushed to train and bus stations to head back home, according to ground reports. This never-before, countrywide reverse migration increases the risk of the virus spreading, as has been seen in Italy in early March 2020 and China in January 2020.

Internal migration in Italy typically moves from the country's south to its prosperous northern regions, according to a 2015 paper published in the journal Demographic Research. On March 8, 2020, hours before the Lombardy region was locked down, a news leak led thousands to crowd railway stations and jam roads. The reverse migration led to cases in the south (centre, south and island regions) to spike from 51 on February 29 to 16,164 on March 27, 2020, according to data released by the Italian government. As of March 28, 2020, Italy has 86,498 registered cases, according to data collated by the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre.

Top 10 Migrants Destination States in India

By % of Migrant Population and Migrant Population greater than 7 Million

Sl. No	State	Migrant Population	State Population	% of Migrant Population	IMPEX Score
1	Kerala	18 Million	33 Million	53	63
2	Maharashtra	57 Million	112	51	44
3	Punjab	14	28	50	40
4	Andhra Pradesh	38	85	45	49
5	Gujarat	27	60	45	34
6	Tamil Nadu	31	72	43	40
7	Karnataka	26	61	43	33
8	Delhi	7	17	43	34
9	Haryana	11	25	42	35
10	Odisha	15	42	37	34

India Migration Now. Source: Census India 2011.

As the world steps up the fight to prevent the spread of the pandemic, it is essential to ensure that migrant workers are not unduly disadvantaged. The implementation of migrant workers' human rights and international labour standards is even more critical during the pandemic with rising levels of xenophobia, violence and harassment, and social tensions. Ensuring equal working conditions and access to workplace safety and health and to social protection, in line with nationals, is fundamental. The ILO is taking concrete measures in this direction. It is helping to support: evidence-based policymaking through the creation of monitoring and rapid assessment tools, and trade unions and Migrant Worker Resource

Centers to circulate questionnaires to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers' health and livelihoods, while also providing assistance for recovery of migration expenses and unpaid wages and, where needed, health kits for returning migrants.⁵⁸ At the regional level in Asia and the Middle East, a number of country specific efforts are ongoing. For example, ILO is offering support to the Government of Qatar in the development of guidelines on health and employment for all workers⁵⁹ and to the National Commission for Women in India in issuing guidelines for the protection of internal women migrant workers. Together with its partners, ILO is reorienting development cooperation activities to assist governments in Africa, Asia and Latin America to ensure national health and safety, social protection and economic policies are inclusive of all migrant workers. To help address the challenges of labour market reintegration of returning migrant workers, ILO is updating technical guidance and tools, including on skills recognition, for targeted delivery in various countries and regions. The challenge is to scale up these efforts quickly to support national efforts to ensure migrant workers are not left behind in national COVID-19 responses as countries move beyond the pandemic.

Measure taken by the Government of India during Covid-19 Pandemic

Good news is that Government of India has now increased its focus on nutrition (besides food)- security and raising farmers' income (rather than enhancing farm productivity). Changing the consumer behavior with suitable programs and incentives is already in the agenda. In urban areas, it is a fact which is leading to the widespread loss of jobs and incomes for informal workers and the poor. Estimates by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy show that unemployment shot up from 8.4% in mid-March to 23% in the first week of April. In urban areas, unemployment soared to 30.9% as of April 5. The shutdown will cause untold misery for informal workers and the poor, who lead precarious lives facing hunger and malnutrition. The best way to address this urgent need is to use social safety nets extensively to stabilize their lives with food and cash. The Indian government has quickly responded to the crisis and announced a \$22 billion relief package, which includes food and cash transfers. Several state governments have announced their own support packages.

Going forward, one can foresee many challenges as farmers and farm labourers set out to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Migrant labourers who have managed to return will not be able to go back immediately. Some may not wish to go back also, given the travails

many may have endured following the lockdown. There is a need for both relief and rehabilitation measures, to help the affected and pick the threads again, overcome the loss sustained and rebuild their lives. Precautionary measures like maintaining social distancing and hand washing will have to continue as COVID-19 continues. Proactive measures by the state with humanitarian perspective are called for as we begin operating in a 'new normal': more relief in kind (e.g. making the PDS universal, ensuring whoever is needy gets the necessary support and is not left starving due to bureaucratic hurdles like lack of ration card); and enlarging the scope of MNREGS to include harvest of crops on farmers' fields by labour and value addition to produce by women.

Policy Suggestions

Cash transfers. Unemployed informal workers need cash income support. The government has provided Rs. 500 (\$6.60) per month to the bank accounts of 200 million women via the Jan Dhan financial inclusion program. But this too is insufficient. We need to have a minimum of Rs.3000 (\$40) per month in cash transfers for the next three months. Migrant Workers. There are about 40-50 million seasonal migrant workers in India. In recent days, global media have broadcast images of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from several states trudging for miles and miles on highways; some walked more than 1000 kilometers to return to their home villages. They should be given both cash transfers and nutritious food.

Conclusion:

India's nationwide lockdown amidst the COVID-19 pandemic has critically dislocated its migrant population. Lacking jobs and money, and with public transportation shut down, hundreds of thousands of migrants were forced to walk hundreds of miles back to their home villages with some dying during the journey. Although the coronavirus has galvanized populist sentiments in an effort to protect domestic interests, we must recognize the effects that restrictive migration policies may have on ASEAN's migrant worker population and be prepared to mitigate the risks. Some countries of origin are enhancing unilateral measures or consular services in countries of destination. They are establishing dedicated helplines, website, and focal points in line ministries and information exchange that target the specific needs of their nationals working abroad, including information services, legal assistance and humanitarian support to stranded workers

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