


IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT WORKERS
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Abstract:

COVID-19 has emerged as a catastrophe that has impacted across all human life. The pandemic has disproportionately impacted the poor population of the world in terms of livelihood and survival. India seen a major crisis among migrant workers. COVID-19 pandemic has brought about unparalleled changes in societies and augmented many socio-economic crises. It has impacted people across all regions and classes, but more adverse effect is seen on the poor. Efforts to control the increase of the virus have led governments worldwide to take necessary steps to encourage social distancing and closures of industries except essential services. So many of the migrant workers have returned to their villages, and many more are just waiting for the lockdown to be lifted as they have no jobs on their hands. The risk is particularly higher for those who are working in informal sector.

Keywords: *COVID-19, Migrant workers, informal sector*

The aim of the research was to explore the experiences of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The study was carried out during April -August 2020.

Introduction

In India, a nation-wide lockdown was declared for 21 days on 24th March 2020. It was further extended until 31st May in a phased manner. The enforcement of strict lockdown and other measures, including restrictions on inter and intra-state movements to control the spread of COVID-19, resulted in a severe blow to the livelihood of millions of people in the informal sector, especially migrant workers. COVID-19 has added a large burden on the lives of migrant workers and their families in India.

COVID 19, Lockdown of 75 days

- Lockdown 1.0 (L 1)-25th March to 14th April 2020
- Lockdown 2.0 (L 2)-15th April-3rd May
- Lockdown 3.0 (L 3)-4th May to 17th May 2020
- Lockdown 4.0 (L 4)-18th May to 31st May 2020
- Unlock 1.0 from 8th June to 30th June 2020
- Unlock 2.0 from 1st July to 30th July 2020
- Unlock 3.0 from 1st August to 30th August,2020

Reasons for migration

The loss of livelihood and resulting debt during the lockdown and subsequently. The complete closure of industries except essential services accompanied by mobility restrictions have negatively impacted the informal sector laborers. Most of them were dependent on daily wages, and their loss has negatively impacted their life. Though the complete lockdown was withdrawn after two months, many of the migrant workers were not able to access the same employment options as before. Daily work, are significantly less, even if they were able to get some work. To meet daily living



expenses they had borrowed money from friends, relatives, or moneylenders, particularly since they lacked savings of their own. COVID-19 and subsequent crisis have made the migrant workers and their families impoverished. A sense of worry was experienced by the workers and the same was built up during this period, as many felt it could take months to repay.

Women in the Informal Sector of Economy

Most of the workforce in Indian is in the unorganized sector. “The unorganized sector workers plus informal workers in the organized sector has remained relatively stable, at around 92 per cent. Within the overall category of informal workers, the largest group is own-account workers (32.2 per cent), followed by informal employees in the informal sector (30.0 per cent) and contributing family workers (17.9 per cent).” (ILO, 2017). This informalisation has been more pronounced in the case of female workers. “In India, 94% of women are employed in the unorganised sector, involved in work which lacks dignity of labour, social security, decent and timely wages and in some cases, even the right to be called a ‘worker’.” (Banerjee, ORF, 2019)

Migration and employment conditions

The state of Maharashtra has the highest quota of migrants in India whereas the state of Uttar Pradesh supplies the highest number of inter-state migrants. In India, the bulk of the migration is intra-state i.e. 395.6 million, whereas 54.3 million migrants are inter-state migrants. Due to the absence of any formal hiring system or a database that captures the experience, the migrant workforce usually doesn’t see any systematic rise in salary. As per a survey approximately 86% of the migrants earn between Rs.10,000–30,000 per month and they give as much as 60 percent of their earnings back home. (Ghosh 2019). Most of the migrants are typically younger and 85 percent of the migrants fall in the age group of 18–30 years. These migrants are exposed to below poverty standard living conditions and most of them work under informal sector and so do not have any formal contracts. They generally do not receive any benefits of public schemes such as the public distribution of food (PDS), free education, and health-care facilities due to lack of registration and documentation. Most of their documents are related to their place of origin, with a significant proportion of migrants having no relevant documents. (Bhagat 2014; Bhagat 2020). The migrant workers are out of any job security and their working and living condition is not decided by the state but by their contractors.

The Pandemic and vulnerable population

India has a massive migrant population as every third person in India is a migrant. As per the 2011 census, migrants constitute 455.8(approx.) millions of India’s 1.21 billion(approx.) population which is 37.68 percent of the total population. This includes inter-state migrants and intra-state migrants. Out of 455.8 million migrants, 67.93% are women and 32.07% are men. Migrant workers are being employed highly in manufacturing and construction sector, both of which were hit hard by the pandemic. Thus, reverse migration at a large scale was seen in India. Most migrants originate from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, and Madhya Pradesh. The rural areas were having very limited job openings to absorb the large numbers of people who reached back to their source villages. Action Aid Association conducted a massive survey in two rounds, one during the lockdown (May 2020) and the second during the phase wise unlocking period (23rd August 2020 to September 2020). There has been a constant shift from regular work to casual work corresponding with drastic change in daily wages. It has resulted in overall impact on livelihood struggle for bottom rank of informal workers. The Labour market in India also suffered a severe blow. Unemployment increased from 6.7% on 15th March to 26% on 19th April (2020) and then back down to the pre-COVID19 level by mid-June



2020. ILO estimate showed that assuming a situation without any alternative income sources, lost labour income will result in an increase in relative poverty for the workers and their families in informal sector in more than 21% in upper middle-income countries. The workers in sectors like food industries, construction, manufacturing, wholesale and retail trade, farming and many more are at the receiving end across the world.

Challenges for Migrant Workers & Best Practices of the state governments: Kerala, Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh

- Shelter with utmost care for hygiene
- Universalisation of PDS without conditionality of eligibility criteria of identification and domicile
- The list of beneficiary to be prepared by collector's office
- Water tankers, mobile toilets
- Health posts of the Govt, private sector be made to provide health care facilities
- Special focus on Reproductive and Child health
- Helpline-counselling services for children, survivors of violence, distress due to social distancing
- Repatriation to rural homes
- Payment of all arrears to the workers by their employers

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has everywhere impacts on people across the globe. The vulnerable segments of the population, however, have been excessively impacted by the pandemic, and the case of migrant workers in countries like India is an issue of vital concern. The miserable state of migrant workers and their families, due to the unplanned lockdown and subsequent period of socio-economic and health crisis. The contributions of migrant workers are crucial for the sustained urban economy and therefore policy measures and programs should consider them as central to interventions. Efforts should also be made to restore economic activities that are inclusive, where migrant workers feel confident, secure, and safe.

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