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Impacts and challenges of reverse migration in the age of Covid-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Background: Migrant workers were left jobless, moneyless and homeless following the Covid-19 lockdown. With no availability of livelihood and worsening conditions, reverse migration started with all migrants returning to their native homes by any means available. Given its size and spread, management of migrants under and after the lockdown represented massive logistic challenge. Migrants cannot be neglected as a stakeholder in the development process.

Aim: The aim of the study was to assess the struggle of migrant workers during Covid-19 pandemic.

Objectives: 1. To determine the compulsions of migrant workers. 2. To discuss the response, action plan, challenges and strategies of the government to tackle reverse migration.

Methodology: Methodology has been descriptive and analytical. Maharashtra, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Kerala, Telangana provided better facilities to migrant workers.

Results: Government emphasised that immediate concerns faced by such migrant workers were primarily related to food, shelter, healthcare, loss of wages and concerns about the family.

Keywords: Migrant workers, Lockdown, Livelihood, Challenges, Strategies

Introduction

One of the worst affected sections from India's Covid-19 lockdown has been the migrant workers who have been left jobless, moneyless and homeless. Following the Covid-19 lockdown, almost all industries and different economic activities came to a halt deteriorating the conditions of daily wage earners, most of which are migrants. With no availability of livelihood and worsening conditions, reverse migration started with all migrants returning to their native states by any means available. They provide key contributions to high-growth sectors of construction, manufacturing and urban services at the destination sites.

Compulsions of migrant workers

As migrant workers from different parts of India trekked back hundreds of kilometres carrying their scanty belongings and dragging their hungry and thirsty children in the scorching heats from different parts of India to reach their home after the sudden announcement by the government of a complete lockdown of the country amid the spectre of Corona virus, questions were raised as to whether this ordeal could have been avoided through adequate arrangements of food and safe shelter for the workers at the places of their stay in the host cities and places of work. The employers of the migrant workers closed their industries. The workers were also driven out of their rented shelters on the ground that they would not be able to pay the rent. Their paltry saving also were to dwindle soon. The fear of hunger forced the workers to opt for unimaginable journeys of hundreds of kilometres as all modes of transport had been suddenly closed down ^[1]. Their choice was between the devil and the deep sea, between starvation and pandemic. India had not witnessed anything like this mass migration across the plains of the country without food or a night's place of stay for sleep since the days of the Partition of the subcontinent. Yet while scenes of migrant workers walking in long processions caught the cameras of the journalists, it still requires to be asked: What lay behind these long marches? How do caste, race, gender and other fault lines operate in governmental strategies to cope with a virus epidemic? If the fight against an epidemic has been compared with a war, what are the forces of power at play in this war against the pandemic? What indeed explains the sudden visibility of the migrant workers in

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the time of a public health crisis? India had been in a complete lockdown mode. They started walking for miles and miles on highways, carrying their belongings on their heads, babies in arms and struggling elderly family members alongside. They were migrant workers mostly belonging to the unorganised sectors fleeing en masse from Delhi to their native villages. They were neither bothered about the rules imposed by the government during the lockdown to curb the spread of the pandemic nor were they frightened about the impact of the novel corona virus. What forced them to flee was the fear of starvation. They were the migrant daily wagers, the 'invisible population', the marginal, 'nowhere people' in our society. The images of this tragic 'long march' were portrayed extensively in the dailies, became viral in social media and captured slots for discussions in television screens for several days. The announcement of the Narendra Modi government for complete lockdown, which started since 24 March 2020, caused sudden halt in all sorts of economic activities including complete shutdown of factories, markets, construction sites, food delivery systems all over India excluding essential emergency services. This sudden lockdown, which included suspension of work and loss of wages, made the current situation even graver for the survival of these daily wage earners. The journey of these migrant workers from exile to home became a nightmare. Some migrant workers died on the road before reaching their destination. The harsh realities of the lockdown forced them to realise if Corona virus did not kill them, hunger would. Apart from Delhi, the movement has been significant from states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where the Corona virus had taken a substantial toll [2]. In this unprecedented situation, what would be the fate of these marginalised migrant workers in India? Are they not entitled to get minimum necessary support from the state for their survival in this crucial time?

Corona virus outbreak led to a loss of livelihood for those who either worked on short term contracts or those who are without any job contracts. This included several jobs in different industries. For example, in tourism industry, guide, employees of parking contractors, cleaners, waiters in restaurants, suppliers of vegetables and flowers to the hotels, etc. A similar scenario prevailed in other industries like manufacturing and non-manufacturing mainly because of the falling demand. Manufacturing industries such as cement, plastics, rubber, food products and textiles reduced substantial jobs, Transportation sector is also badly affected. This led to the cut down of job market especially those who are employed and also made hardship for job creation. Besides, this will also have an effect on pay-cuts and late increments. India is likely to face the job crisis because of the Covid-19. Migrant workers and workers in informal sector are likely to be badly hit. The most vulnerable section would be those migrant workers who are employed in informal sector, those who do not have either security of employment or any social protection. A large number of migrant workers and workers in informal sector just have been surviving on subsistence wages. The Corona virus outbreak and subsequent lockdown affect them badly leading to their further impoverishment due to loss of livelihood. It also affect hugely their food and nutritional intake, access to health care and education of children.

State and its duty to care for migrants

The dual imperative that drives the modern state is its simultaneous role as the custodian of legitimate coercive power as well as its role as a caregiver. The approach of the states towards the refugees and migrants residing on their soil has been historically premised upon 'calculated kindness' which is shrouded in constant ambivalence between antagonism and hospitality. The ambivalence stems from the fact that the migrants and refugees are perceived as the 'alien other' and they are 'illegitimate encroachers' in the territory of the host state. Such a concept of 'us and them' is premised upon the territorialized and ethnic idea of identity based on national and sub-national consciousness. The migrants who are involuntarily displaced or have voluntarily moved to an alien land for security or better livelihood opportunities remain at the social, political and economic margins in their host states. Such apathy and indifference towards them are not only prevalent in cases of transnational migrants who reside in other countries but also in the case of inter-state migration within a country. The plight of the economic migrants has been more acute in this context as their movement from their native place to their host state where they work is seen as a voluntary act where they work is seen as a voluntary act where the narrative of 'sympathy' which is still associated with the persecuted refugees is absent. Hence the idea of the 'intruding other' that has always seen the migrants as the outsider has invoked two kinds of responses that define the duality of state behaviour. First, the state unleashes its coercive power to constantly 'regulate' or 'discipline' the economic migrants. Secondly, the state tries to exhibit selectively its caring demeanour as acts of generosity towards these apparently 'illegitimate' migrants, who are the potent sources of cheap labour for the host state [3].

Migrant workers and their vulnerabilities in India

These Migrant Workers, whose clamour for returning to their homes are engaged either as daily wage labourers in the formal economy or as a part of the informal economy. They are the ones who are exposed to the threats of not only joblessness and destitution but also directly exposed to the risk of the unfolding contagious health hazard. What has pushed these menial migrant workers to the point of an insurmountable crisis is the fact that their status as 'migrants' in the host state where they work deprives them of all sense of belongings. Such a lack of the sense of belongings stems from their migrant status in their workplace away from their native home, which they left to escape the menace of starvation. But abandoning of their homes in search of a job as means of survival is not the end of their suffering, rather a new beginning of a life in 'exile' where injustice has been the defining principle. They are often engaged in menial jobs with meagre income and no social security as daily wage labourers, domestic help, rickshaw pullers and other vocations in the unknown urban conglomeration where they reel under the perpetual gaze of the administration and the local populace as the 'outsiders'. They often remain figuratively as well as literally at the margins of the society working in sub-human conditions and residing either in squalor slum colonies or even on roadside pavements in an 'exile' bestowed upon by fate. Not only are they subjected to suspicion, but have been perennially

denied their basic rights that are not incumbent over the generosity of the local administration where they work, but are constitutionally guaranteed.

We must not forget the fact that these migrant workers who have hit the streets amid the lockdown are mostly Indian citizens with the legal right to move freely within the country to work and are entitled to social protection from the state. Article 19(1) clauses (d) and (e) of the Indian Constitution guarantees all citizens the fundamental right to move freely throughout the territory of India, as well as reside and settle in any part of India. However, their citizenship rights are confined to the mere legalistic entitlement to an identity without much access to the more substantive social and economic rights. Thus, their 'thin' citizenship status without meaningful assistance from the state, which they are entitled to, keeps them at the periphery of the political, economic and social paraphernalia which constantly denies or overlooks their existence. These workers have to face the wrath of state's coercive power in their daily struggle for existence. Difficult living and working conditions, exposure to occupational health hazards, violence at the workplace, exclusion from the access to public services and limited social protection for migrants due to regulatory procedures in destination states and the lack of inclusion of migrants in the social-political dynamics of the city, mark the life of migrant workers. But the state's continuous abnegation of its responsibility as well as its ethics of care towards these migrant workers have only given them multi-layered vulnerabilities, both material and psychological, that have rendered them as the 'nowhere people'. Their vulnerabilities and the state's apathy resurfaced in the public glare as India battles the spread of the pandemic. Lack of assurance from the host state for their security and giving them basic necessary material for survival in the time of pandemic made them desperate to flee for their native villages where they feel they will be safe and secured living with near and dear family members [4].

State and its concern

As the images of apathy of these crowds of migrant workers began to spread on media, especially on social media, these faceless and invisible people suddenly captured the imagination of the society and the state⁵. However, more than sympathy, it is the fear of the spread of the Corona virus due to such huge migrant gatherings that catapulted the respective host state governments to spring into action. The action has largely been two-fold. First, the migrant workers who threatened to walk down hundreds of kilometres to their homes were initially blocked and manhandled by the police at the state borders and were put in 'crowded quarantine' jails to stop their march towards home. When such repressive measures were found to be counterproductive, the state government in a unique show of solidarity coordinated to send a section of migrants back home in buses. Second, in order to stop the upsurge of the migrant workers, their host states persuaded them to stay back during the lockdown and arranged for their lodging and food at the state expense they were termed as 'guest workers' underlining their 'outsider status' in more presentable nomenclature. The state Chief Ministers were also found calling each other to request the host states to kindly take care of 'their people'. West Bengal Chief Minister's letters to the Chief Ministers of 18 states urging them to take care of the migrants from Bengal and her

assurance to provide protection to migrant workers from other states is a case in point⁶. This was done that the migrants don't march to their home states without medical tests as they were perceived to be potential carrier of the Corona virus. The images, in which disinfectants were sprayed on the migrant workers in Uttar Pradesh in order 'clean' them of any potential infection that they might be carrying, are emblematic of the insensitivity of the state towards the migrants. Under such circumstances, the migrant workers who have been always at the receiving end of their home states' as well as host states' neglect, seen many a time rejecting the relief offered to them in disbelief, suspicion and distrust towards the state.

Tackling the reverse migration risk

Reverse migration in the age of Covid-19 poses a grave healthcare risk for both the migrants and the residents of their home states. As the employer-states are industrial states, they have pockets of high population density, where the propensity of infection spread is higher. A large proportion of the migrant workers reside in one of these high-density pockets and are therefore more susceptible to getting infected. Further, the home states of migrants are typically economically constrained with limited healthcare facilities. Thus, the states receiving an overwhelming influx of migrants need to be extra-vigilant and strategic in combating this risk. The receiving states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan viewed new rise in cases, which is likely to be the collateral effect of reverse migration [7].

The travel pattern of the migrants presented a silver lining to this entire situation. Travelling from and to the same location in groups led to natural clustering. Two-fold randomised testing -one by the sending state and other by the receiving state can help estimate the propensity of infection in each of these clusters. This needs to be supplemented with an isolation or a follow-up strategy for containing the spread in case the authorities find a significant number of positive samples within a cluster. This can further aid in focused future testing efforts and predicting potential red zones [8].

The action plan

The key to fighting a pandemic at nationwide scale is a priori prediction of red zones, hotspots and anticipatory containment actions, rather than playing cat and mouse with the Corona virus. Our analysis estimates that the actual number of Covid-19 cases in India is significantly higher than the currently observed numbers. Based on our estimates of the actual number of cases for each state and India as a whole, we argue that it is important to perform stratified randomised testing in order to estimate the spread of the disease in subsections of the population [9]. Along with regional randomised testing, we also recommend two-fold randomised testing on reverse migrating workers. It is feasible to predict future red zones by combining the results from regional and two-fold randomised testing coupled with a follow-up strategy. The central government's Covid-19 response committee, in consultation with the state governments, can then use the information on potential red zones across to strategically allocate medical resources. The best way forward is to act pre-emptively and contain the spread before it becomes fatal [10].

Response of the central and state governments

To mitigate the effect of the lockdown on the vulnerable groups, Government of India on 26 March 2020, announced Rs. 1.70 lakh crore package under the 'Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana'. It has within its ambit health workers, farmers, MGNREGA workers, economically vulnerable categories, especially women, elderly and unorganised sector workers, Jan Dhan account holders and Ujjwala beneficiaries. The Scheme entails an additional 5kg. of wheat or rice and one kg. of preferred pulses to 80 crore beneficiaries for the next three months i.e. upto June 30, 2020. These benefits have been extended upto November 30, 2020 as the announcement made again by the Prime Minister on June 30, 2020. 'One nation, One ration card' Scheme is going to be launched by the Central Government which will be useful for the migrant workers all over the country. Central Government also gave an order to the state governments to use Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund of Rs. 52000 crores to provide relief to Construction Workers through direct benefit transfer (DBT). Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) also asked the landlords not to charge rent during this crisis and employers to make the payment of wages of their workers without deduction for the period of closure. MHA set up control room to monitor the situation 24x7 to ensure the access to essential commodities to anyone. States were allowed to utilise money in the State Disaster Relief Fund (SDRF) to provide food, accommodation and medical care to homeless, including migrant workers, stranded due to lockdown and sheltered in relief camps and other places. Till 31st March, 2020, 6.6 lakh migrant workers were accommodated in the 21,604 relief camps with provision of food, shelter and other basic necessities.

Government of India also talked about the mental health of these migrant workers and issued guidelines. Government emphasised that immediate concerns faced by such migrant workers are primarily related to food, shelter, healthcare, fear of getting infected or spreading the infection, loss of wages, concerns about the family, anxiety, fear and mental health.

Though the lack of proper guidelines to implement the strategies posed several challenges in front of state governments in form of lack of preparedness, however in line with orders given by central government, majority states devised their own strategies and took substantial measures to protect the lives and rights of migrants during this time. The states of Delhi, Bihar, Odisha, Kerala and Maharashtra provided temporary shelters to all the migrant workers. Many states like Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Kerala, Telangana, Karnataka provided free food or ration bags to migrant workers, homeless and poor people along with the distribution of food grain kits. Many municipal corporations and local bodies too took the initiative to assist migrants and stranded people by starting community kitchen, health care to migrants, providing awareness to them and collecting funds to support the needy.

States have also initiated the involvement of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), Jail mates and volunteers to support them in this endeavour. NGOs have now started crowdfunding efforts to find a way out to help those in need and they are making substantial efforts to feed people, provide them meal kits, hygiene kits, family kits of essentials

Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan (GKRA) was launched by the Prime Minister on June 20, 2020. The campaign will help provide jobs to a majority of migrant workers on an immediate basis and even throw up opportunities for the rehabilitation of all those willing to stay back and work in home states. 116 districts from six states have been selected for coverage under the scheme for rearing 125 man days^[11]. Several other schemes have been launched by the Central and State Governments for the relief of migrants.

There are more than 200 million migrant workers in India, however there is no estimate of migrants stranded at different locations. The relief provided by the Government and Non-Government Organisations may bring some relief to the migrants, but looking into the huge migrant population, the amount of services provided have proved highly inadequate.

Challenges and future strategies

There is a huge uncertainty about how long this crisis will continue and what damage it would do to the economy, livelihood of the people and availability of basic healthcare services. Given its size and spread, management of migrants under and after the lockdown represents a massive logistic challenge. Some of these challenges need to be addressed instantly and some are the long term

1. The instant challenges are related to stranded migrants.
 - i) How to provide food and basic amenities at camps/shelters by maintaining better hygiene and sanitation to all of them?
 - ii) How to provide basic health care and preventive kits (like mask, sanitisers and gloves, etc.)?
 - iii) How to appraise quickly their conditions and do the screening of the possibly infected persons and quarantine them separately?
 - iv) How to maintain the social distancing for the migrants to control the spread of infection?
 - v) How to provide counselling and psychological support to the migrants under the distress?
2. There is an urgent need for the development of authentic database for the stranded migrants at destination, in highway camps and returned migrants in villages. Data on volume and characteristics of the migrants (in camps, home quarantine) is required to transfer the benefits of social welfare schemes at present and for future management needs.
3. During and post-lockdown period, how to provide the basic income support to migrants and their left behind families who are not registered to the social schemes and depend on daily wages for survival?
4. With severe disruption, the question arises, whether reverse migrants will come back to work in towns or stay in their villages. If they do not return, how to deal with likely economic stress in destination areas?

Long term challenges and strategies

1. Migrants cannot be neglected as a stakeholder in development for a long time. Integration of migrants with development is the need of the hour. Government should seriously look into the recommendations of UNESCO-UNICEF and the Working Group on Migration and implement them at the earliest.
2. Public health system particularly at the primary and secondary care levels needs to be strengthened,

investment should be increased, drug supply and equipments need to be made available at a massive scale and most importantly human resources of the public health system need to be augmented at a spectacular level.

3. There is need to accept decentralisation as a basic strategy of providing health services. Apart from decentralisation, convergence of various services related to food and nutritional programmes, water and sanitation programmes, employment generation and livelihood programmes must be made effective. It is high time to establish synergy and coordination between the central and state governments. Other agencies need to be mobilised to fight Covid-19 by taking help of Village Panchayats, other local bodies and Self Help Groups, stakeholders of society, NGOs and Corporates. It is a time to help these voiceless marginalised migrants so that they recover from the loss and gradually they get rehabilitated after the normalcy of the economy.
4. Starting of health insurance scheme for migrants may be helpful for the state government as well as migrants at the destination especially during any epidemic or pandemic. For instance, in Kerala, a health insurance scheme named 'Awaz Health Insurance Scheme', which aims to support migrants and also it is helpful to provide valid documents to migrants. Also, it helps the government to have record of migrants and also migrants get the benefit of health insurance.
5. There is a need to strengthen the database on migration and migrant households through Census, National Sample Survey (NSS) and NFHS and Migration Surveys. The available data are very old and also not available on time. As migration and migrants have affected the households in almost all dimensions in both rural and urban areas, an effective inclusion of migrants in our official statistics and access will be helpful in formulating robust and inclusive policy and programmes in the country.
6. Fiscal stimulus for the demand side must be formulated so as to provide immediate monetary support to migrants. Plans for job growth at a rate faster than the number of entrants into the labour force must be devised to address the issue of unemployment. Decent work opportunities for all migrant workers should be provided in the home state. The focus should be on the knowledge-centric and technology-centric development by bridging the knowledge gap between a city and a village by imparting skills and knowledge.

Conclusion

Migrant workers are typically hand-to-mouth consumers, earning subsistence living and spending a large part of their income in the local economy. In their capacity as consumers, they are a part of an informal economy which generates and sustains volumes for the FMCG industries, which will take a blow due to reverse migration. The reverse migration will put stress on the native states as it quashes the remuneration flow from other states at the same time there will be a question of employability of returned migrants. They are stigmatised as the 'carriers' of the disease¹². Programmes addressing the problems of returning migrants like employment, health must be devised by the states as well as the centre. Proper movement strategies

must be devised for future action if the migrant return again to work states.

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