

THE COVID 19 AND MIGRANT WORKERS: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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ABSTRACT

Migration has become a key policy issue for many developing countries, depending on the state of the national economy and the employment situation. Migrant workers are the backbone of India's informal sector and micro, small and medium enterprises. Their crisscrossing of states for jobs signifies economic integration.

Migration is not new to India, but we never gave it the attention it deserved until the COVID 19 pandemic has exposed and critically dislocated its migrant population. Lacking jobs, money and with public transportation shut down hundreds of thousands of migrants were forced to live their lives without a safety net.

In this paper, we will be studying the challenges faced by the migrant workers and the recovery plans activated by the Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan (Self - reliant India) to deal with the problems associated with migrant workers.

KEYWORDS: Migration, Migrant workers, Economy, Pandemic, Self-reliant.

INTRODUCTION:

India, is known for its great unity in diversity. But that unity bears certain loop holes in maintaining the same in reality. Each state in India has a uniqueness of its own whether it is in culture, geographic pattern, community settlements, economic or natural resources. There is indeed a wide disparity in development which makes rich more rich & poor more poorer. Migrants suffer from the double burden of being poor and migrants. Many programmes meant for the poor do not reach them due to lack of identity and residential proofs. The lack of fulfilment of the economic, social and political rights of migrants is a serious issue even though they are formal citizens, their substantive citizenship rights are not fulfilled.

Once the national lockdown was announced, it was this segment of the population which was hurt the most as many of them lost their jobs (the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, or

CMIE, estimates unemployment to have reached 24.2%, with urban employment being 26%) and had barely any income to tide over the lockdown. Many migrant workers sought to return home to their home town, but the absence of transport prevented them from doing so. State governments were supposed to set up relief camps and shelters providing food and other amenities for these workers, but implementation was skewed. With increasing distress, many migrant workers took recourse to their own means of transport to go home — many had no other option but to walk long distances - before the central government finally notified the start of services of “Shramik trains” to transport them. Migrant workers have continued to travel to escape distress conditions at their places of work and in the absence of any social security net.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To study the Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers
2. To study the challenges faced by migrant workers
3. To study the opportunities for migrant workers

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is based on secondary data. The information has been collected from Journals, Articles, Newspapers and websites.

IMPACT of COVID-19 On MIGRANT WORKERS:

The first case of COVID-19 surfaced in India on January 30, 2020, and following the out-break the lock down in the entire country was announced on 24th March for a period of 21 days. Borders were sealed, transportation got stopped, factories, shops, restaurants and all type of the economic activities were shut, barring only the essential services. This proved to be a nightmare for hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, who lost their livelihoods overnight and became homeless.

One of the most severely affected sections of the population due to the extended lockdown has been migrant workers, especially those in urban areas across the country. The recent Periodic Labour Force Survey conducted in 2017 by the National Sample Survey Office of the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, had estimated that there were around 1,49,53,750 urban workers who had vulnerable jobs. These workers included helpers in a household enterprise and who did not receive a regular salary and casual labourers who received daily

wages; besides this, the number considers only those in bottom 50% of the wealth pyramid in 2017-18, based on their monthly per capita expenditure. This number extended to an estimated 2.5 crore people if those who had salaried jobs but did not receive any paid leave and other benefits were included. Migrant workers numbered more than 81 lakh people among this segment.

Out of 482 million workers in India, about 194 million are permanent and semi-permanent migrant workers as per 2011 Census. In addition, there are about 15 million short-term migrant workers of temporary and circulatory nature. At the state level, in-migration rates are higher in high-income states such as Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka. Some of them are badly affected by the COVID-19 compared to low-income states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Odisha with relatively higher rates of out migration. There are conspicuous migration corridors within the country – Bihar to Delhi, Bihar to Haryana and Punjab, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Odisha to Gujarat, Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan to Gujarat. It is quite likely that the incidence of COVID 19 shows that these metropolitan areas are the centres from where the disease has been spreading to the near as well as far off places.

The Government of India and state governments along with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and charitable societies have taken various steps to mitigate the effect of the lockdown on the vulnerable groups including migrant workers. Though the lack of proper guidelines to implement the strategies posed several challenges in front of state governments in form of lack of preparedness, in line with orders given by central government, majority states have also devised their own strategies and taken substantial measures to protect the lives and rights of migrants during this time.

CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT WORKERS:

These are the instant challenges that are related to stranded migrants:

1. How to deal with dire situation of no work, money or food (basic amenities)
2. To maintain the social distancing for the migrants to check the spread of infection;
3. How to get proper sanitation (soap/ water/ toilet/ waste management), health care and preventive kits to all of them;

4. 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;
5. Screening of the possibly infected persons and quarantine them separately;
6. How to provide counselling and psychological support to the migrants under the distress.
7. There is an urgent need for the development of authentic database for the stranded migrants at destination, in highway camps and return migrants in villages. Data on volume and characteristics of the migrants (in camps, home quarantine) is needed to transfer the benefits of social welfare schemes at present and for future management needs.
8. 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?

OPPORTUNITIES FOR MIGRANT WORKERS:

On 12 May 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi gave the nation the mantra of the 'Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan' or 'Self-Reliant India Mission' during the announcement of the coronavirus pandemic. This self-reliant policy does not aim to be protectionist in nature and as the Finance Minister clarified, "self-reliant India does not mean cutting off from rest of the world". Since then, different stakeholders and experts have been analysing the economic stimulus.

Some of the opportunities or action plan for migrant workers under Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan are as follows -

1. Support for Migrants and Urban Poor during last 2 months
 - Government of India has permitted State Governments to utilise State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) for setting up shelter for migrants and providing them food and water etc.
 - Central Government also released Rs 11002 crore of its contribution in advance to all States on 3rd April, to augment funds in their SDRF.
 - Hygienically prepared three meals a day provided for the residents of Shelters for Urban Homeless (SUH) during the lockdown w.e.f March 28, 2020.
 - 12,000 SHGs have produced 3 crore masks and 1.20 lakh litres of sanitizers.

- Disbursal of Revolving Fund (RF) to Self Help Groups was on-boarded on PAiSA Portal in April 2020 on a pilot basis in Gujarat and is now being rolled out across all the States in May 2020.
 - 7,200 new Self Help Groups of urban poor have been formed during the period starting 15th March, 2020.
2. MGNREGS support to returning Migrants:
- 14.62 crore person-days of work generated till 13th May 2020
 - Actual Expenditure till date is around Rs. 10,000 Cr
 - Work offered to 2.33 Crore wage seekers yesterday in 1.87 Lac Gram Panchayats
 - 40-50% more persons enrolled, compared to May last year
 - Planning for continuing MNREGA works in Monsoon as well: plantations, horticulture, livestock related sheds
3. Free Food grain Supply to Migrants
for 2 months:
- Migrants in various states require food-grain assistance
 - Migrants who are neither NFSA or State Card beneficiaries in the state they are stationed will be provided 5 kg of grains per person and 1 kg Chana per family per month for two months
 - About 8 crores migrants are expected to benefit.
 - Rs. 3500 Crore will be spent on this intervention for 2 months
 - Cost will be fully borne by Government of India
 - State Governments responsible for implementation, identification of migrants and full distribution and providing detailed guidelines.
4. By March 2021 - One Nation One Ration Card:
- Migrant families are not able to access food in other states.
 - This scheme will enable a migrant beneficiary to access Public Distribution System from any Fair Price Shop in the country (Intra-State portability introduced in 20 States)
 - 67 crore beneficiaries in 23 states covering 83% of PDS population will be covered by national portability by August, 2020
 - 100% National portability will be achieved by March, 2021

- All the States/UTs will complete full FPS automation by March, 2021
- 5. Migrant labour/urban poor face challenges in getting houses at affordable rent.
Government will launch a scheme under PMAY for migrant labour/urban poor to provide ease of living at affordable rent by,
 - i. Converting government funded housing in the cities into Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) under PPP mode through concessionaire;
 - ii. Incentivizing manufacturing units, industries, institutions, associations to develop Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) on their private land and operate; and
 - iii. Incentivizing State Government Agencies / Central Government Organizations on the similar lines to develop Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) and operate.

CONCLUSION:

The coronavirus disease pandemic has offered India a valuable lesson on the importance of self-reliance and self-sufficiency that we must aspire to attain the twin goals. Self-reliance will prepare the country for tough competition in the global supply chain, and it is important that the country wins this competition. It will not only increase efficiency in various sectors but also ensure quality. In the package for migrant workers has several notable features not all of which are COVID-19 relief. But, the government has clearly refused to borrow and spend more on boosting demand. If the strategy of boosting supply works, it is fine. However, if it does not work on expected lines, the government will be faced with a bigger problem down the line.

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