

Economic and Social Challenges for Migrant Workers during COVID- 19 Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 pandemic collapses the health, economic and the social structure of the entire world. The government of every country is trying to control the pandemic by imposing actions like lockdown, discipline of social distancing, ensure to wear mask, etc. The lockdown affected the daily wage earners as well as migrant workers badly. During lockdown, their handful savings were exhausted and move back to their respective towns. On their way home, they faced many problems like lack of food, water, transportation.

The Government of India, state governments along with Non-Governmental organisation (NGOs) and charitable societies have taken various steps to mitigate the effect of lockdown on the migrant workers. This paper highlights the issues related to economic and social challenges that were faced by the migrant workers during the lockdown and the strategies adopted by the central state governments, failure of the government on some aspects and what should be done if in future we faced the same crisis again.

Keywords: COVID- 19, Lockdown, Migrants, Internal Workers, Pandemic, Supreme Court, Government of India

Introduction

COVID- 19 pandemic is one of the worst happening in the history of the world. It led to the breakdown in the health of the people, the economic and social structure of the entire world. The corona virus spread from Wuhan, the city of China to worldwide. This epidemic is accountable for migration and mobility of people in India. Although, India had faced many epidemics in past like influenza, smallpox, plague, malaria and cholera but these epidemics were hardly concerned with migration and livelihood.

In India, migrant workers are considered to be the backbone of Indian Economy. Migration is a livelihood strategy of millions of people in India. Most of the migration is for work and employment, directed towards the urban centres. About half of the urban population are migrants and one fifth of them are the inter state ones. Out of 482 million workers, about 194 million workers are permanent and semi-permanent in India as per 2011 census. In addition to this, about 15 million migrant workers are on short term and temporary basis. They carry the burden of India's GDP on their shoulders. They work in various fields like construction industries, agriculture farms, like vendors in vegetable markets, milk and food delivery boys, newspaper hawker, etc. Here, migration rates are higher in high income states like Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Delhi, Karnataka, Haryana and Goa.

There are significant migration corridors within the country like Bihar to Delhi, Bihar to Haryana and Punjab, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Odisha to Gujarat, Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan to Gujarat. Maharashtra has the largest number of migrants. According to the 2011 census of India, most migrants in India originate from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, followed by Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Here mostly men migrate for work and women migrate due to marriage.

The World Bank estimated that in India the magnitude of internal migration is about two and a half times that of the International migration. Within India, an estimated 40 million internal migrant workers which are mostly in the informal economy were severely impacted by the Government's COVID – 19 lockdown.

The Chief Labour Commissioner put the figure at 26 lakh migrants stranded across the country, of whom 10% are said to be in relief camps, 43% on worksites and 46% in other clusters.

Among the states Uttar Pradesh has said 21.69 lakh workers had returned, and U.P. itself had sent back 1.35 lakhs. Bihar has said 10 lakhs had returned. Maharashtra has said 11 lakhs have left the state, Gujarat said 20.5 lakh had gone back home. West Bengal said 3,97,398 migrants' workers from other states were still stranded. Karnataka said that 3 lakhs migrants returned back.

Review of Literature

COVID- 19 pandemic: Mental health challenges of internal migrant workers by R Choudhari.

According to the author, due to the loss of work, absence of occupational safety migrant workers faced psychological distress, physical, mental and socio- economical adversities.

Preparedness & impact of COVID- 19 on migrant workers in India by Muhammad Shakil Ahmed, Riyadh Ahmed, Ritu Kumar Ahmed

According to the authors in India, because of the diversified population, different income groups and social habits of people the extended lockdown has made a severe impact on the lifestyle. Daily wage earners, migrant workers are the severe sufferers. This paper highlights the issues related to health, economic and social challenges faced by migrant workers during the extended lockdown, strategies adopted by central and state governments.

Human Rights violations of migrantworkers in India during COVID-19 pandemic by Chitranshi Negi.

According to the author, India is a founding member of the ILO and it has been a permanent member of the ILO Governing Body since 1922. India has not ratified the two-core fundamental convention. It is necessary to maintain important aspects of labour standards and labour rights. Migrants Rights and aim of achieving a system where there are no barriers to the smooth process of the Rule of Law.

Objectives of the Study

1. To understand the problems faced by the migrant workers during COVID- 19 pandemic.
2. To understand the efforts done by the government for the migrant workers.
3. To understand the failure of government efforts.
4. The finding of the study can help the government to face the situation in a more efficient and well managed way.

Research Methodology

The study is exploratory and quantitative in nature. The secondary information is used for the analysis of the problems. Sources for the secondary data are originated from the various sources like government reports, websites, certain agencies etc.

Impact of COVID 19 on Migrant Workers

COVID- 19 has been particularly brutal to the migrant workers. The first case of covid was found in the month of January 30, 2020. This was followed by the lockdown in the entire country which was announced on 24th march for a period of 21 days. All

the state borders were sealed, transportation got stopped, market, malls, restaurants factories and all types of economic activities, were shut down. Only essential services were being provided by the government. This lockdown was continued till may and from June the government had started to unlock the country in various steps. The lockdown proved to be a nightmare for thousands of migrant workers as they lost their livelihoods overnight and became homeless.

Challenges Faced By The Migrant Workers

During COVID- 19 pandemic, Indian migrants have faced multiple hardship. The immediate challenges faced by these migrant workers were related to food, shelter, loss of income, fear of getting infected, anxiety, uncertainty about their future. As a result, thousands of them started to flee from various cities to their native places. Sudden lockdown affected badly the migrants of different cities in India. Those who were travelling were stuck up at station or state or district borders. Many of them were forced to walk hundreds of miles on foot to reach their hometown and villages as there were no means of transport due to the lockdown. More than 300 migrant workers died out of starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and lack of timely medical care. As migrant workers started walking or bicycling hundreds of kilometres to go back to their native place, social distancing was not possible for these workers because they travelled in the large groups. Some of them even said that they would rather prefer to die from virus at their own hometowns than to starve because of no work in the city. Many of them got arrested for violating the lockdown, after being caught at inter state borders. In Gujarat on 31st March, 120 migrant workers were allegedly beaten up by the police and rounded up in a single lorry and dropped in Maharashtra despite being wounded. In Aurangabad, 16 migrants were killed on 8th may after a freight train ran over them while they were sleeping on the tracks, exhausted from walking. Despite the launching of special trains and buses by the government, the migrant workers chose to travel either by foot or in large groups in the cargo compartment of trucks and containers. They did not wait for their turn to board the government arranged transport mainly due to starvation. In addition to this, they thought that by going back to their villages they could return to farming and take up small jobs under MGNREGA. Also, after they returned to their home towns and villages they were feared of being carrying corona virus from the urban areas as a result of which they were assaulted, harassed by the people of their home towns. They were treated with either fear or a 'class bias', being hosed down with disinfectants or soap solutions in some cases.

Protest Done By Migrants

Thousands of migrants have protested across the country for reasons ranging from demanding transport back to home, quality of food served, not being allowed to cross the borders and against government directives preventing them to walk home. Some of those protests turned violent. On 30 March 2020 the Supreme Court of India agreed to

hear a petition on behalf of the migrant workers. The court asked the central government to file a status report with respect to the situation of migrant workers. On 26th May, the Supreme court admitted that the problems of the migrants had still not been solved and that there had been “inadequacies and certain lapses” on the parts of the governments. The court ordered the centre and states to provide free food, shelter and transport to stranded migrant workers.

Aspect of Government's Response to Deal with The Crises of COVID- 19 Pandemic

1. Government announced relief packages to deal with COVID – 19 related crises. Finance Minister Smt Nirmala Sitharaman announced 1.7 lakh crore (US \$ 24 Billion) spending plan for the poor. This consisted of cash transfer and steps to ensure food security. By 3rd April, the Central Government had released 11,092 crores to states and UTs under the NDRF, to fund food and shelter arrangements for migrants. To help provide job and wages to workers. The average daily wages under the MGNREGA were increased to Rs 202 from the earlier Rs 182 as of 1st April. 1000 crore from PM CARES FUND was allocated for the support of migrant workers on 13th May. On 14th May, FM further announced free food grains for the migrant workers by spending 35 Billion (US \$ 490 millions).
2. Subsequently, limited numbers of train and bus services were also started to carry stranded inter – state workers to their homes.
3. On 29th March 2020, the Government issued sweeping orders, directing that the land lords should not demand rents during the periods of lock down and the employers should pay wages without deduction.
4. It is also announced that those who violated the lockdown were to be sent to Government run quarantine facilities for 14 days and that it had asked state governments to set up immediate relief camps for the migrant workers returning to their native places. Soon after the Central Government directives in late March, state governments setup thousands of camps for migrants and stop the exodus.
5. Delhi Government provided free food to 4 lakh people every day as of late March. Over 500 hunger relief centres were setup by the Delhi Government. By 5th April 2020, 75 lakh people were being provided food across the country in food camps run by the Government and NGOs. As of 12th April, 37978 relief camps and 26225 food camps had been setup. As of 28th May, 91 lakh migrants had travelled back home in government arranged transport facilities.
6. The Government of India launched the “Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan” initiative to tackle the impact of COVID – 19 on migrant workers in India. It is a rural public works schemes which was launched on 20th June 2020 with an initial funding of 50,000 crore (US \$ 7.0 Billions) for 116 districts in 6 states.

Conclusion

From the study, i would like to conclude that the number of corona virus infected cases and deaths have continued to rise because of the lack of proper guidelines to implement the strategies posed several challenges in front of Government. The policies and programs of urban development and planning in India hardly launched any specific programs for the migrants. Many programs do not reach migrants due to various reasons like lack of identity and residential proofs.

The free distribution of rations has failed because the ration cards are area specific. Because of that migrant workers could not get food grains for free where they were residing before started to their native place. Though “One Nation One Ration card” system has been implemented in few states but very few migrants were aware of this scheme.

Migrants have to register themselves for travel but many state registration portals were either in English or in the Regional language of the state. So very few migrants could register themselves and that resulted in paying large sums of money as middlemen got involved.

The buses provided by the government were in poor condition and so over crowded that the social distancing became impossible. In spite of giving free services, they charged high fares.

The government announced that railways would offer 85% subsidy on the train fares and remaining 15% will be paid by state government. Even then, the migrants were forced to pay an undisclosed amount in some cases.

Migrants reported that they did not get food, water, milk for their children while travelling. Others who received food packets and water reported that the provision was simply dumped at the gate (entrance) of the trains and they have to fight with each other for their share.

Neither the central government nor the state governments have admitted that they are clueless about the migrant's problems. Some state governments also refused to accept migrants from certain states like Maharashtra as it is the most affected state. Bihar had withdrawn its blanket approval for all migrants coming from Maharashtra.

Suggestions

Migrants are just not the matter for charity who need one's support. Internal migrants are key income generators that play a vital role in Indian society and should never be overlooked again.

1. It is suggested that each stranded migrant worker in cities should be given Rs. 6000 (i.e. Rs. 202 per day×30 days) by the central government in addition to the financial support by the state government per month for at least 4 to 5 months. It would be advisable to give monetary support in cash to the stranded migrant workers.
2. Food grain and pulses need to be supplied on weekly basis instead of monthly basis to meet the food and nutritional needs of migrant workers and their families.
3. Public health system particularly at the primary and secondary care needs to be strengthened.

4. Health insurance schemes should be started for internal migrant. It can be helpful for the migrants as well as state government at the destination especially during any pandemic.
5. It is suggested that the authentic database about the migrants and the sectors where they work should be updated and released through census, National sample survey and Migration surveys. The available data are very old and mostly not available on time.
6. There may be a large number of international migrants who might lose their jobs due to COVID-19 pandemic and they are forced to come back to India. So, the government should provide them training, guidance and financial support so that if they want to set up their own business, they can do it successfully.

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