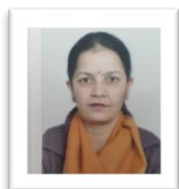


The Migrant Crisis during COVID-19

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has engulfed all the countries around the world irrespective of their categorisation as the first, second or the third world. The imposition of the lockdown as a measure to contain the exponential progression of the pandemic has hit the migrants the most. We all have been witnessing heart wrenching stories of the mass exodus of these marginal and invisible drivers of the urban India. India too declared a nationwide lockdown on midnight of 24th March and almost after three months into the lockdown the misery and the plight of the toiling migrant workers continues unabated. The migrant crisis has stirred the nation's conscience. But the pertinent question which still looms is the plight of the migrant workers, their rights, their identity and their safety and security. My paper titled "THE MIGRANT CRISIS DURING COVID-19" tries to highlight the plight of migrant workers their socioeconomic deprivation and alienation as well as the policy paralysis of the ruling regime to mitigate their sufferings. The pandemic has forced India to finally acknowledge the migrant and their existence in huge numbers. The need of the hour is to feel the pulse of the silent, vulnerable migrant workers. All the stakeholders like the central government, state governments and the native governments where migrant is back has to see the migrants rehabilitation and reintegration into the cycle of development. The present migrant crisis is a telling of India's policy priorities as to how this vast section of its population 10 times larger than India's overseas migrants was left to fend for themselves while the government took proactive measures to ensure safe return of the overseas migrants. The misplaced priorities have definitely made the migrant crisis a humanitarian crisis.

Keywords: Pandemic, Silent, Vulnerable, Migrant, Alienation, Policy Paralysis.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has acknowledged the migrants in India. These migrants are being seen everywhere but were never imagined as a big group to come under limelight. "Will the humanitarian crisis of COVID-19 shake the complacency of the policy makers in ameliorating and assimilating the migrants into the mainstream society economically, culturally, morally and spatially?" The implementation of the lockdown and its repeated extensions brought untold miseries to the migrant workers. This pandemic has badly hit the unskilled and semiskilled migrant worker the most. A large number of inter-State migrants with no means of survival and no means for conveyance are the worst affected by COVID-19 pandemic. Flashing stories of all migrants in the national television depicts their pathetic images of being stranded at various transit points like bus stops, railway stations and the highways carrying placards depicting the group have stirred the Nation's conscience. The unlucky ones are seen walking on foot with their young children in bicycles and hiding in goods vehicles, tolerating the vagaries of nature, at times sprayed by disinfectants and escaping the repression of the police. These images also raise the pertinent questions regarding migrant identity, the responsibilities of the central and state governments in mitigating their sufferings and lack of planning and vision towards the migrants. There has been an utter failure in protecting the country's most vulnerable population. These groups need meticulous handling at source, transit and destination areas. There is no denying the fact that states like Kerala and Orissa have taken effective measures in protecting their migrant population. (Rajan and Sami, 2020). The unprecedented and unseen World War III in the guise of COVID-19 crisis in March 2020 has put the world's economy to a standstill. The worst outcome of this pandemic has been the economic breakdown of business and economic activity through the length and breadth of the nation. The social and economic lockdown necessitated in the words of

economist Jean Dreze “We need an emergency facility in every state where people can go and get some food on the spot, without showing any documents.” He pertinently highlighted that there are sixty million tonnes of wheat and rice in the go downs of Food Corporation of India (FCI). The different states should be facilitated with equitable food distribution so as to prevent starvation amongst the poor and the needy.

P. Sainath founder of People archive of Rural India (PARI) observes in the present crisis situation just four hour notice changed everything. Complete chaos millions walking on foot some 16 migrants sleeping on railway tracks in Aurangabad to be killed under train. A suitable arrangement could have been made for the migrants to avert this disaster. For the overseas migrants hotels were turned to quarantine centres. Belated start of *Shramik* trains initially with full fare, unplanned routes and complicated booking portal along with politicisation of migrants’ home departure added more miseries to the hapless migrants. This time there is definitely a difference, earlier migrants used to move home while earning but now there is definitely a crisis of livelihood. The proposed amendments in various labour laws and the simultaneous approval of the various states is denying the migrants their human rights and violating the spirit of justice social, economic and political (Sainath, 2020).

There is wide variation as far as the data on migrants is concerned. The census of 2011 states the number of internal migrants around 450 million which is 30 percent higher than the 2001 data, actual numbers perhaps might be higher than this. Internal migration remains grossly underestimated due to empirical and conceptual difficulties in measurement. During the last decade due to rapid urbanisation and growth of smart cities there is a sudden increase in migrant population and this mark is expected to cross 550 million by the year 2021. The recent National Sample Survey estimates the migrant population to be around 28.3 percent. Thus approximately 175 million internal migrants work in informal sector and support the economies of many states. The Economic survey of 2017 pointed out that on an average nine million people migrate to urban areas for work, employment and education. The survey depicts that a large number of migrants from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh moved to the states of Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat received large Migrants from the States of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh. (Rajan, et.al 2020). Field realities highlight that the state of Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar are the biggest contributors to migrants followed by Madhya Pradesh, Punjab, Rajasthan, Uttarakhand, Jammu Kashmir, West Bengal, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh. The major destination states are Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhara Pradesh and Kerala. Both the census and NSSO do not give a clear data on short term seasonal migrants, local migrants, daily wage migrants and long distance migrants.

For migrants and reverse migrants COVID-19 has proved as - out of the frying pan into the fire.

At home they are in extreme poverty, cruel hands of money lenders make them indebted and bonded labourer for life. Cumbersome land laws make them land less, careless administrative machinery knock at them when they seek redressal of their legitimate grievances. Natural calamities, poor medical facilities aggravate their miseries. Seasonal and viral diseases result in untimely death of women and children in particular. As a result they look to greener pastures in cities outside their states with the help of middle men who act as commission agents of the employers in cities. In the cities another painful struggle for existence starts. Employers prospers by sweat and blood of migrants, disown them to fend for themselves. They ultimately prefer to die at home than to die of starvation. Unplanned and abrupt lockdown was thrust upon them by the Centre and States. COVID-19 has exposed the dilemma of migration and reverse migration. (Dandekar and Ghai2020)

The unanticipated public health crisis in India triggered a large humanitarian crisis the brunt of which was borne by the most vulnerable section of the Indian population that is the migrants. ‘*Ajeevika*’ the labour helpline has been helping the migrant in distress with food, shelter and their return to their native places. The migrants in cities are denied the decent facilities even in normal times as they are not in tax paying circle. They are hired for industries through contractors and the wages they earn are far from satisfactory. In the case of large establishments workers are hired on casual or contractual basis and that too by means of intermediaries. All sort of relief in this crisis situation are out of the migrants reach as they don’t have residence documents. They are outside the purview of government schemes, welfare measures and labour rights. These migrants are the most vulnerable and impoverished rural masses earning the lowest incomes and have been alienated from their rural set up like the land, water and forest resources. This type of distress migration leads to their accepting poor wages and compromised work conditions. (Jayaram and Mehrotra, 2020).

The different states of the Indian Union faced the impact of the pandemic but the state of Bihar is facing the severe form of crisis. The return of the migrant workers and already poor health infrastructure in the state of Bihar has posed a challenge to the state government. This particular state has high migration rate, poor healthcare facilities low literacy, high mortality rate, 33 percent of the population is below the poverty line. In terms of human development index Bihar accounts to 576 HDI. A glance at Bihar’s diseases burden profile from 1990-2016 in various age groups clearly points out that the morbidities conditions in Bihar makes it more vulnerable to COVID-19. There is an apprehension that the return of migrants from the hotspots particularly (Delhi, Maharashtra and Gujarat) will not only spread the virus in the State but will also pose a challenge to their relief and rehabilitation. The state has appealed to the central government for more financial assistance to meet these unforeseen challenges. (Anis and Akram 2020).

The unprecedented lockdown has created a severe dislocation in the lives of migrants. The corona virus has definitely brought a chronic crisis. Newer cities built on the labour of migrants have been witnessing conflicting moral ethos and social crisis for decades. First of all is their dream to secure a margin of economic and spatial stability in the new region of their dwelling. Secondly the migrants as tenants in cities remain the perennial outsiders 'baharwale' as the urban village landlord call themselves 'moolvasis' original inhabitants of the area. In spite of getting steady income of rent from these 'baharwale' they are still blamed for making their villages slums and also inflicting cultural contamination with their distinct language, food habits and other cultures features... Their labelling as 'social others' further alienates them in the new city of economic and social refugee. The crisis of livelihood and ambivalence at home is posing a big challenge to them. (Das and Kumar, 2020). The exodus of migrant workers not only has led to loss of livelihood but there is a potent threat of carrying of infections to the native places (BBC News 2020). Migrants contribute to a great extent in economic development, growth, skill development and building of today's smart cities. But they are not recognised as an important stake holder in city's growth. The welfare measures and their manifestation are out of their reach. The goal of sustainable development cannot be realised without considering their stake in development. Being most vulnerable they are engaged in 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous and demeaning). Nearly 70 percent of migrants work in and around growth centres in the north, west and south of the country. Industrialists and employers are worried for the first time, that industrial establishments won't see any revival and perhaps a large time will go without these workers. There is no access to civic security, social security and labour security. They definitely suffer from being poor as well as a migrant. JanSahas an Indian nonprofit organization recently conducted a survey, "Voices of the Invisible Citizens," about the impact of the lockdown on migrant workers. They interviewed 3,196 migrant construction workers from northern and central India. The results paint a dismal picture: "62 percent of workers did not have any information about emergency welfare measures provided by the government and 37 percent did not know how to access the existing schemes." The defining images of the consecutive lockdown and the unlock period may be of the migrants moving desperately back homes but the image is also of India's deep-rooted financial divide and two different political cultures. Being socially and historically marginalised they are definitely without a political social and economic cushion. There is all of a sudden appearance of these hapless migrants in the national discourse. (Chatterjee, 2020). Migrant workers face perennial problems as far as social indices are concerned. The outbreak of the pandemic has become the immediate reason for the sudden visibility of deplorable condition of the migrants. The migrant crisis is due to the culmination of prolonged structural denial of basic economic rights by the state as well as social and moral abhorrence towards the majority

migrants who happen to be the most marginalised communities. The mere belated arrangement of *shramik* trains/transport facility is no panacea for their ills (Ravendran, 2020). The special *shramik* trains to ferry migrants were all of sudden suspended so as to hold back the labourers against their wills so as to fulfil the demand of cheap labour so as to facilitate the real estate lobby is an utter violation of Article 23 of the Indian constitution. The various pressure groups like the Confederation of Indian industries (CII), Federation of Indian chambers of commerce and industry (FICCI), are Associated chambers of commerce (ASSOCHAM) are liaising with the central and state governments for relaxing the existing and proposed labour legislations. Certain state governments have also agreed and amended the laws by means of ordinances. The states of Rajasthan, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat have decided to stretch the working hours from 8 to 12 hours. These moves highlight an upending of an entire global history of the struggle of workers' rights and of a political system in which the livelihood, dignity and human rights of those which are neither noticeable, nor important are sacrificed for the benefit of those who are visible and consequential. (Ray and Subramanian, 2020).

The migrant workers don't fear death as felt by those who are inside their homes safely. They can be seen walking thousands of kilometres facing vagaries of weather without food and water at times sprayed by disinfectants. A large number of migrants have died on the way. There is an acute lapse on the part of central and state government regarding policies. The uprooted informal sector has not been inspired by the International Labour day as if their identity is lost somewhere. They are not against government but are desperate to reach home. The migrants are the biggest contributors to the economy but they are a neglected lot. Labour laws are being amended by means of ordinances to facilitate the capitalist loss. A proper relief package would have been mandatory for averting the migrant crisis. (Singh, 2020)

Taking cognisance of media reports on inadequacies and lapses in handling migrant crisis the Supreme Court on 5th June 2020 gave fifteen days time for the central and state governments to transport all stranded migrant workers to their respective places free of cost. A proper database on migrant's registration, employment and other relief should be ensured. (Mathur, 2020) As per the International Labour organisation (ILO) India is likely to face the job crisis because of COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown and migrant workers in informal sector are likely to be badly hit. Apart from food and nutritional crisis there is probability of denial towards health care and education of children. An expert on migration from the centre for development study Irudaya Rajan points out that the migrants are moving unabatedly to their source states. There is an acute probability of another crisis that of rural villagers struggling and adjusting with the returnees who are now left high and dry due to remote chances of employability. For three months at least these

migrants must be provided 25000 per month. These migrants are unable to cope in villages, they are used to the ways of cities. Most of them have relinquished their shares and landholdings in favour of their other family members. After highways, railways a new conflict and crisis stage has been ushered. (Narayanan, 2020)

Government of India is also concerned about the mental health of these migrant workers and issued guidelines Government emphasised that the 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. As an immediate response measures to be taken to address these concerns and need for social distancing, adherence to protocols for management of COVID-19, putting up mechanisms to enable the migrant workers reach to the family members through telephone, video calls etc and ensuring their physical safety(GOI 2020). As per the directions of Supreme Court trained counsellors and civil society groups need to be send to the relief camps to remove any anxiety or queries that the migrants may be going through.(Press Trust of India, 2020).All the states governments are devising their own mechanisms and relief policies for the migrants so that their rights and livelihood be protected. States have also involved NGO's, Municipal bodies, civil society groups, jail mates and various volunteers for mitigating the impact of the migrant crisis.

Aim of the Study

The aim of the paper is to highlight the issues and challenges posed due to COVID-19 on migrants and strategies and inclusive policies which need to be implemented so that they are recognised as as take holder in the country.

Challenges and Future Strategies

The end of the lockdown and commencement of the unlock period has not led to the betterment of the migrant worker woes. There is definitely a lack of clarity on the part of central and state governments to address the challenges of the migrants. Certain immediate measures are required for the migrants – the basic livelihood facilities for the migrants and their families, preventive health care measures, social security net and proper counselling/psychological support. In terms of the long term relief and rehabilitation measures certain measures are indispensable. A proper and authentic database of the migrants featuring the type of migrants like: the seasonal, permanent and the footloose; source and destination areas, type of employability, details about family and wages drawn. Certain measures have been suggested by the central government to bring the migrants back to the workplace so as to restart the economic activity. The social justice and empowerment ministry has proposed for flagship programme of Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojna(PM-JAY) or the Ayushman Bharat plan so as to facilitate the migrant work medical and health access.. Each and every migrant should be registered automatically to 'migrant worker welfare fund' based on the collective contribution of the

migrant, the employer, government at source and destination states and the central government. This fund will be under the supervision of labour ministry and will cater to the needs of the migrants. A vision document in the form of 'National employment Policy' will provide employment avenues and skills for the migrants. Certain confidence building measures for ameliorating the welfare and educational needs of the migrants will be addressed. A simplified version of the Building and construction workers (BOCW) Act catering to two crore construction workers will be simplified and made migrant friendly. More researches on the migrant issues need to be done so that suitable planning can be done for the betterment of their lives. The migrants are the important links in the demand supply chain, without their return all sort of activity will be hampered.(Pandey & Gupta,2020)As of today 60 million metric tonne of food grains are lying as buffer stock in the godowns of Food Corporation of India(FCI) and the ensuing months will again contribute in surplus food grains. Need of the hour is to feed the needy. It is ripe time that the recommendations of UNESCO, UNICEF, ILO and the working group on migration report may be implemented. The migrants are the biggest stakeholders in developmental process and their redressal should be a matter of concern. The migrants bear the double brunt of vulnerability-economic and social. Thus their betterment and amelioration should get a priority. The need of the hour is to establish a proper coordination between central and state governments. All stakeholders should come forward for managing and mitigating the migrant's crisis. (Bhagat et.al 2020)The Corona crisis can in a way conceal the ground reality of India's in build conflicts and socioeconomic inequalities. There is definitely an unprecedented economic crisis impacting the migrants. The migrants' life is replete with social tensions, miseries of slum existence, exploitative and manipulative whims of the employers. Few workers are aware of their rights as migrants and workers, never mind as citizens of India. They are the perfect workforce. The four hour notice lockdown has definitely turned their already "bury din" to destitution. These millions of invisible drivers of the Indian economy are now well aware of the government's indifference and indecisiveness in mitigating their woes. The migrants have realised the naked truth of the political class is to protect the well off section by its preferential approach. The COVID-19 has definitely brought a tsunami in their lives. (Vombatkre, 2020)

For the migrants, the authorities at the state and the local level must ensure that they are not stigmatised and perceived to be the super carriers of the disease. This will be the first step in ameliorating their pain and their acceptance in their rural communities. A holistic approach comprising of society as well as government should be followed. A fair migration governance system should deliver services and opportunities for the migrant workers. Migration will continue as long as there is civilization, hope, aspirations and an alternative livelihood option better than those available at home. Need of the hour is to follow a human centric approach and feel the

pulse of vulnerable people. (Shabrinath and Verma, 2020). India definitely needs a unified labour market and universal social security system which can ensure security, safety and dignity to all migrants. Pandemics as we are witnessing today do not differentiate between living spaces and work spaces. However it sounds that current policy responses to the crisis and towards the migrants are still embedded in a short-sighted framework that recognises and reinforces the idea of two Indias. (Srivastava, 2020)

Conclusion

It is right time to feel the pulse of the silent, vulnerable migrants. All the stakeholders like the central, the state government and the native government where migrant is back has to foresee the returning migrants' rehabilitation, remigration and reintegration in the cycle of growth. Ultimately the post COVID-19 situation will see new trends. Long distance migration will be affected. Presently these migrants are badly hit but in the long run they will win. No smart cities, no industrial growth, construction, hospitality industry and e-commerce can flourish without them. The extent of the issue need to be realised and proper planning to be done otherwise the cycle of recession will take a heavy toll on all the classes. The plight of the migrant worker most pathetic today but in the days to come all the classes will face the same negative spiral. The present crisis has given migrants a sudden visibility in the national discourse. The central planning has miserably failed both in addressing the rights of the migrant labourers as well as in welfare measures. We need to adopt such a model of development where the rights of the migrants and their basic livelihood needs are met. Significant investments are required in agriculture, ensuring stability in livelihood, preventing the migration to urban areas and rural empowerment. Food security Act, the Public Distribution Act, the Mahatama Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and other centrally sponsored schemes should be implemented in letter and spirit. The migrant contribution in the economic development is substantial and thus there is utmost necessity to secure their constitutional rights. There should be a change in behaviour of the society towards the migrants. An egalitarian social order based on labour rights and dignity, affirmative policies, social and economic security and respect of the workers from socially marginalised are ensured. The government should adopt a rapid universal benefits approach so that everyone has the right to support for basic needs of livelihood without any documentary proof.

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