

Migrant Workers in India during the Covid-19 Pandemic. (The Problems Faced by the Migrants Workers during the Corona Virus Pandemic)

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ABSTRACT: Eighty per cent of the Indian workers are employed in the unorganised sector; uncounted millions of workers in urban areas at great distances from rural homes. When the Government of India (GOI) announced the sudden 'lockdown' in March to avoid the spread of the pandemic, migrant informal workers were mired in a survival crisis, through income loss, hunger, destitution and persecution from authorities policing containment and fearful communities maintaining 'social distance'. In this context, the article analyses how poverty, informality and inequality are accentuated by the COVID-19 pandemic experiences of 'locked down' migrant workers. The article examines the nature and scope of problems faced by the migrant's workers during the covid-19 pandemic and a fluctuating economic climate, to protect this vulnerable group and mitigate dislocation, discrimination and destitution at this moment and in future.

Keywords: Covid-19, migrant's workers, poverty and inequality, disaster and emergency.

I. INTRODUCTION.

The Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. With factories and shut down due to the **lockdown imposed in the country**, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their future. Following this, many of them and their families went hungry. workplaces Thousands of them then began walking back home, with no means of transport due to the lockdown. In response, the Central and State Governments took various measures to help them, and later arranged transport for them. 198 migrant workers died due to the lockdown, with reasons road accidents.

As millions of migrant workers in India began their long trek home, carrying children, crowding disrupted transport networks, and resourceless, after the sudden lockdown in the

wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic, they faced hunger, destitution, and suspicion of communities and tragic death. The suffering borne by the uprooted informal workers, who have helped to build India's US\$2.9 trillion economy demonstrate the of state social protection systems. Unorganised-sector workers and circular migrants working on casual and irregular contracts and they are at great risk. The pandemic caused by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19), is poised to disrupt social, economic and political systems and lives worldwide. As preventive measures, India initiated harsh controls since March, people to stay at home for the period of lockdown unless involved in permitted

essential services. that is, 'reducing the number of COVID-19 cases ... to prevent the clogging and collapse of healthcare system'. This article discusses how poverty, informality and inequality have been accentuated in the context of COVID-19 caused by the virus through the experiences of migrant workers in India during the period of pandemic 'lockdown'. The article examines how social policies under changing political regimes and fluctuating economic climates designed protection instruments and how these safety nets can be mobilised by democratic and accountable governance to respond to the crisis of millions of informal workers displaced by COVID-19. Overall, the aim is to discuss the scope of current social policy in India to protect the most vulnerable in the context of dislocation from work, loss of income and livelihoods and the added problems of stigma, discrimination and destitution. For the analysis and discussion, the article draws on sources such as academic articles, policy briefs, government surveys, reports, press notes and advisories and current newspaper and online media reportage of the unfolding health and humanitarian crisis about informal migrant workers. The article finds that the debates about entrenched poverty among India's rural and urban

informal workers, and debates in recent years shaped by economic growth optimism, change in political regime, delayed data and fragmented, scheme-based interventions. The article argues that the scale and depth of poverty revealed by the COVID-19 migrant issue suggest renewed attention towards the urgency of adequate financial resources to consolidate social protection and democratic governance that demonstrate commitment to protect the basic entitlement and fundamental rights of all, and especially its most disadvantaged citizens. Discussion in this article, we trace the trajectory of social policies in India and its ideological underpinnings, how these addressed new risks under neoliberal globalisation, including successes and criticisms. The principal focus here is on poverty eradication, goals and outcomes under different policy and political-economic regimes and how the current pandemic may affect its course. We look at the situation of informal workers, especially migrants, their vulnerabilities following the 60-day lockdown measure and the path it shows for the need for social protection in the short and longer term. We look at all possible

social safety nets being mooted by the government, activists, civil society groups,

planners and academics that can be put in place to protect displaced informal workers and stem the exponential growth of poverty and inequality.

II. BACKGROUND.

There are an estimated 139 million migrants in the country, according to the World Economic Forum. Most migrants in the state originate from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, followed by Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The cities of Mumbai and Delhi attract the highest number of migrants. While most men migrate for work, women migrate due to marriage. Migrant workers consist majorly of daily-wage labourers working in the manufacturing and construction industries. They are often denied adequate healthcare, nutrition, housing and sanitation, since many of them work in the informal sector. They are mostly from rural areas but live in cities for work for most of the year. Many have no savings and lived in factory dormitories, which were shut due to the lockdown. There was no central registry of migrant workers, despite the existence of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979. According to research published in the Royal **Geographical Society**, the workers who have been treated the worst are from areas like Odisha, Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, in which the indigenous population's natural resources were extracted by outsiders. Further, workers paid

the least for the hardest work belong to the backward and down-trodden classes, or communities. The research also indicated that the families of the migrant workers supported them by maintaining their houses and taking care of them, either when seasonal work is unavailable or when they are no longer able to work. Its state government imposed a lockdown on 20 March in Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and Nagpur, leaving the migrant workers with no work. Thousands then gathered at the train and bus stations, seeking transport to their hometowns. With the nationwide lockdown, all transport facilities were closed.

Worldwide, 81 per cent of all workers are affected by partial or complete lockdown due to the preventive actions taken to curb the spread of the academic.

Businesses and enterprises face insolvency, and workers are facing loss of income and employment (ILO, 2020). But the impact will be the worst among informal workers, who are least protected among all types of workers (ILO, 2020). Millions dependent on the informal economy face survival crisis in India (UNDP, 2020). Workers, manufacturing workers (factories, workshops, homes), street vendors, transport workers and waste pickers (Chen, 2020). They bear multiple deprivations and injustices due to the nature and character of their employment conditions.

III. LACK OF FOOD.

A survey published by 'The Hindu' states that 96% migrant workers did not get rations from the government, and 90% of them did not receive wages during the lockdown.

IV. EXPERIENCE OF MIGRANT WORKERS.

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, a sudden proclamation of the national lockdown (24 March to 31 May), the first phase for 21 days, extended for 19 days, further extended for 15 days and extended again for 15 days starting May 18, to break the chain of transmission of the coronavirus caused panic among millions of migrant workers in India's big cities. As the announcement of lockdown with a notice of less than 4 hours spread, migrant workers were rendered instantly without work. Panic-stricken workers arrived at bus stops and highways in large crowds hoping to reach their distant rural homes. The point of the lockdown measure was to initiate 'social distancing' to prevent the spread of infection. But there was no way that the migrant workers could fulfil those conditions in their temporary, cramped

urban homes without work, income or social protection. Their response to the directive for preventive confinement over the next days and weeks exposed the insecurity, uncertainty and precarity of their life and circumstances. According to a Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) report, India's lockdown order led to a jump in unemployment rate from 21 per cent to 26 per cent in mid-April and a weekly decline in labour market participation (The Economic Times, 2020, April 29). The following the lockdown, millions of workers left from industries such as retail, construction, textile, tourism and leather. From New Delhi, men, women and children walked to neighbouring Uttar Pradesh. On 27 March, a man working as a welder left the southern state and information technology (IT) hub, Bangalore, to walk home, an impossible 800 km to Rajasthan. Reporters found him in Tumkur, 70 km away, where he had reached in 18 hours on foot (Nagaraj & Srivastava, 2020). Another Reuters story, carried

on 21 April, described how a group of 50 construction workers, women and men with small children, walked from the national capital, Delhi, after lockdown, on the midnight of March 24, to their village in drought-affected Bundelkhand in the state of Madhya Pradesh, a distance of nearly 500 km. They reached their village after walking and taking lifts from the occasional truck carrying essential goods.

Migrants began fleeing the cities out of fear of COVID-19 infection. The initial government response to prevent migrant movement towards their homes was informed by the fear that they would carry the contagious coronavirus to their hometowns and villages leading to community transmission of the COVID-19. Thus, migrants were not allowed to leave the city. When the Government of India (GOI) went to the Supreme Court to clarify why migrants could not leave their destination cities, the Apex Court had asked the central government to ensure the provision of food, water and shelter for the migrants (Bindra & Sharma, 2020). Health experts had questioned the assumption that most migrants were likely to be COVID-positive (Bindra & Sharma, 2020). Later, the state governments were tasked with the responsibility of arranging quarantine for all returning migrants and providing them with health services if required. The return of migrant workers has led to social tensions in many

States. Many were arrested for violating the lockdown, after being caught at inter-state borders, forests between states and even on boats to

cross rivers. Some of the migrants died of exhaustion. Others died in accidents on the roads after walking or hiding in vehicles. Later in May, despite the launching of special trains and buses by the government, the migrant workers chose to either travel together in large groups in the cargo compartments of trucks and containers, or travel by foot. They did not wait or their turn to board the government-arranged transport, mainly due to starvation. Additionally, they felt that going back to their hometowns, they could return to farming and take up small jobs under the MGNREGA.

V. RESPONSE OF THE GOVERNMENTS/RELIEF MEASURES

a) Directives.

On 27 March, the Home Ministry ordered the states to ensure that migrants would not move during the lockdown, permitting the states to use the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) for providing food and shelter to the migrants on 28 March.

On 29 March, the government issued sweeping orders directing that the landlords should not demand rent during the period of the lockdown and that employers should pay wages without deduction. It 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 states.

On 16 May, the government announced the National Migrant Information System (NMIS), an online database created by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). This was to help streamline the movement of the migrant workers. It will help states find the current number of stranded migrant workers and their location. The government planned to keep the workers updated by feeding their phone numbers in the system.

b) Relief camps.

Soon after the central government directive in late March, state governments set up thousands of camps to house lakhs of migrants and stop the exodus. Delhi government provided free food to 4 lakh people every day, as of late March. Over 500 hunger relief centres were set up by the Delhi government. By 5 April 75 lakh people were being provided food across the country in food camps run by the government and NGOs.

c) Transport arrangements.

As of 28 May, 91 lakh migrants had travelled back home in government-arranged transport facilities. However, according to the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN),

migrants were confused about the exact procedures to register themselves for travel. Additionally, many state registration portals were either in English or the local language of the states they lived in, which very few migrants could understand. Further, general lack of information from the government to the migrants had resulted in them paying large sums of money to register themselves.

d) Buses.

As of 23 May, 40 lakh migrants had travelled to their homes by buses. Condition in the buses is generally poor, with social distancing being impossible due to overcrowding and higher fares being charged than promised.

e) Trains.

On 1 May, the central government permitted the Indian Railways to launch "Shramik Special" trains for the migrant workers and others stranded, this service was not free, with additional charges over the normal fares. The government then announced that the Railways would offer an 85% subsidy on the train fares, with the state governments funding the remaining 15%.

Further, migrants faced many hardships while travelling by these trains. Many reported to have no food and water arranged for them while they travelled. A train from Goa to Manipur reported a 58-hour delay, no proper food or sanitation facilities on the train, and stone pelting. Some migrants also died during the train journeys, but the Railways stated that most of them had existing illnesses. According to Railway Protection Force, there have been almost 80 deaths on board the Shramik Special trains between 9 and 27 May.

50% of the coaches converted into COVID-19 care centres were used for these trains. As per a report given by the Indian Railways on 23 May, migrant labourers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh were 80% of the train travellers. Additionally, it was expected that 36 lakh migrants would be travelling in the ten days after the report.

f) Relief measures.

Soon after the nationwide lockdown was announced in late March, Finance Department announced a ₹ 1.7 lakh crore spending plan for the poor. This consisted of cash transfers and steps to ensure food security. By 3 April, the central government had released ₹ 11,092 crore to states and UTs under the NDRF, to fund food and shelter arrangements for migrants. To help provide jobs and wages to workers, the average daily wages under the MGNREGA were increased to ₹ 202 from the earlier ₹ 182 as of 1 April. ₹ 1,000 crore

from the PM CARES Fund was allocated for the support of migrant workers on 13 May.

The government of India launched the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan initiative to tackle the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers in India. It is a rural public works scheme which was launched on 20 June 2020 with an initial funding of ₹ 50,000 crore for 116 districts in 6 states.

g) Quarantine measures.

Many states reported high numbers of positive cases of COVID-19 among the migrants returning home as lockdown restrictions eased. State governments opened thousands of quarantine centres to house them, with some states imposing mandatory institutional quarantine. States also imposed strict measures for migrants to follow, either while leaving or after entering state borders. Conduct towards migrants workers.

Migrant workers who decided to stay back during the exodus faced assault from their neighbours, who accused them of being infected with coronavirus. They thus could not venture out to buy food. Many also faced police brutality if they ventured out of their homes.

They were feared to be carrying coronavirus from the urban areas where they had been employed. They faced assault and harassment from the people of their hometowns. Since many of them belonged to the lower castes, they had to face caste slurs. Thousands got into property disputes. Many migrant workers expressed a fear of returning to their old jobs in the cities, after facing unemployment during the lockdown. Companies reported labour shortages from mid-April. Estimates state that this would last for at least another six months.

VI. SUPREEM COURT HEARING.

The Supreme Court of India agreed to hear a petition on behalf of the migrant workers on 30 March. The Court asked the central government to file a status report with respect to the situation of migrant workers. In its report, the central government stated that the migrant workers, apprehensive about their survival, moved in the panic created by fake news that the lockdown would last for more than three months. The court added that it was satisfied by the government response thus far.

On 16 May, the Supreme Court rejected a PIL to direct the District magistrates to identify and provide free relief and transport to the migrant workers, stating that it was the responsibility of the state governments. Speaking about the workers killed sleeping on the Aurangabad railway tracks, the Court stated that it could not have been

prevented. Further, the central government stated that inter-state transport had already been provided to the migrants and requested them to wait their turn instead of choosing to walk.

On 26 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 part of the governments. It thus ordered the Centre and States to provide free food, shelter and transport to stranded migrant workers.

VII. DEATHS.

The causes for these deaths have been reported as with reasons ranging from starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care. Among the reported deaths, most were among the marginalised migrants and labourers. 80 died while travelling back home on the Shramik Special trains, in the one month since their launch.

Notably, on 8 May, a freight train killed 16 migrants who had stopped to rest on railway tracks near Aurangabad in Maharashtra. On 14 May, eight migrant workers were killed and nearly 55 injured when the truck they were in collided with a bus near Guna, Madhya Pradesh. On 16 May 24 migrant workers were killed and many more were injured when a trailer carrying migrants. According to data collected by Save LIFE Foundation, an NGO working in road safety, 198 migrant workers were killed in road accidents, as of 2 June.

VIII. RECEPTION.

Thousands of migrants have since protested across the country, for reasons ranging from demanding transport back home, quality of food served, not being allowed to cross the border, and against government directives preventing them to walk home. Some of the protests turned violent.

Labour unions organised nationwide protests to protest the changes in labour laws, with the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh organizing one on 20 May^[137] and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions and the All India Trade Union Congress organizing another on 22 May. Seven left parties wrote to the President to intervene in the issue. Ten labour unions wrote to the International Labour Organization (ILO) regarding the labour laws, on 14 May.

IX. CONCLUSION.

The crisis of COVID-19 has, for the first time, brought 'invisible' migrants and the phenomenon of migration to the centre stage of

policy concern around social protection. Migrant worker tragedy unfolding in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown is reinforcing the necessity of consolidating the social policy efforts of the past decades. Migrant workers occupy a special position in the debates around development and social protection. They have driven the engine of globalisation, though not reaped great benefits from the process. In the wake of COVID-19, the very factors that made them desirable as a workforce are turning against them. The current tragedy of poor migrants is hiding the bigger story: mass-scale unemployment and insecure, unprotected work that has characterised labour. Post-COVID 19, workplaces must provide better protection and decent work standards for informal workers based on existing policy framework. Government must also recognize that rural employment that continues to support the subsistence of millions is facing adverse conditions. Rural social protection schemes, such as public works under MGNREGA, should be expanded to urban areas, and other welfare measures, such as maternal and child protection, should be made portable. Similarly, farmers and the agrarian rural sector will need greater commitment from the state as urban informal work and migrant remittances dry up. As special trains leave with groups of migrants, 58 days into the COVID-19 lockdown, India's social policy experiments and vibrant democracy must rise up to address resurgent poverty brought on by the new challenges of the 21st century.

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d) Notes

1. The estimation of 90 per cent informal workers is based on Government of India, 2019. Periodic Labour Force Survey 2017–2018.

2. On 18 May 2020, 315,822 deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic was reported by Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Centre. Retrieved from <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

3. For a detailed discussion of risky migration supporting economic growth in India, see Bird and Deshingkar (2009).
4. Continued uncertainty prevails about the lifting of lockdown after May 31.
5. See <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/Policy-Responses-to-COVID-19#I>

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