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COVID - 19: The Impact Of The Lockdown On Migrants In India – A Few Reflections

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ABSTRACT

This article discussed some of the important issues regarding the effect of epidemics like COVID-19 on the migrant population.India has been in lockdown since March 25, 2020. During this time, activities not contributing to the production and supply of essential goods and services were completely or partially suspended. The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying policies of confinement or lockdown have been amply demonstrated and are possibly reinforcing economic, social and gender inequalities. Because of the nature of the measures that governments took in response to the health crisis, migrants – including the millions of labour migrants in Indian cities – have been placed in a particularly vulnerable situation. These impacts are most troubling for low-income households, which are less well positioned to cope with earnings losses during a recession, have no alternative earnings and have no social security available. Most of these workers earn little more than a subsistence wage and have no other means to protect their incomes if they lose their jobs. Migrant workers constitute quite a large proportion of such vulnerable population. Millions of migrant workers are anticipated to be left unemployed in India due to the lockdown and subsequent fear of recession. Many of the migrant workers have returned to their villages, and many more are just waiting for the lockdown to be lifted. The risk is particularly higher for those who are working in unorganised sectors, and those who do not have writer contracts, or those whose contracts are at the verge of completion. The lockdown and the subsequent recession are likely to first hit contract workers across many of the industries. On the one hand, lockdowns and social distancing measures are drying up jobs and incomes, whereas they are likely to disrupt agricultural production, transportation systems, and supply chains on the other. This poses a challenge of ensuring food security and controlling already rampant malnutrition, particularly among children, which is likely to result in increased infant and child mortality. There is a need to relook at the national migration policies, which should accommodate the assistance and protection of migrants arriving from, or faced with the prospect of returning to, areas affected by health crises. Also, there is a need to establish resilient food systems that

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could reduce food insecurity and the pressure to return to origin among migrants.

Key Words: *Migration, COVID-19, labour force, lowdown, recession.*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying policies of confinement or lockdown have been amply demonstrated and are likely reinforcing inequalities. Economic inequalities are reinforced as the better-off are better able to protect themselves, either secure in their jobs, or by having the resources to support themselves during a downturn. Gender inequalities are reinforced as women tend to be in more vulnerable jobs and are exposed to health risks. Social and identity (race, caste, nationality) inequalities often intersect with socio-economic inequalities.

Because of the nature of the measures governments around the world took in response to the health crisis, mobile populations have been placed in particularly vulnerable situations. Across the world, refugees are amongst the most vulnerable, their living conditions make containing the virus extra challenging, and stigmatisation likely increases. Labour migrants, similarly, often have poor living and working conditions, are exposed to health risks at work, have no social security or insurance to fall back on, and are often stigmatised.

The relationship between migration and health is found to be multidimensional and bidirectional. Health status can drive a decision to migrate, but such relocation may in turn have an influence on health **(Ginsburg et al., 2018).**

The structure of urban and rural populations in India and the dynamic component of migration are likely to exacerbate the COVID-19 epidemic in the country. A large number of migrants who are from rural areas but work in the cities may be susceptible. The quarantine measures taken by the government are appropriate, but these may lead to inefficient outcomes because many of the migrants would prefer to escape the centres of disease, consequently inflicting negative externalities on other uninfected people. Studies indicate that when a disease has an epicentre, the marginal migrant imposes a net negative externality **(Mesnard& Seabright, 2009).**

Labour migrants' vulnerability manifested itself in extreme ways in India, when the government announced a lockdown, and big cities' labour migrants found themselves in the void of having lost their job, sometimes their housing, and in large numbers of cases having lost their income, and therefore with no alternative but to return to their home villages. Their plight has been well described in the media, by civil society organizations filling the

gaps government agencies should be playing, and the efforts of groups of researchers.

Public health interventions mainly aim at three types of population to prevent or mitigate the spread of an emerging infectious disease and its negative effects: (a) the population in the source area, (b) the floating population leaving the source area and (c) the population travelling from the infected area to other areas. Although there have been several studies on how migration affects the spread of epidemic, however, another important dimension of the problem is the way in which an epidemic affects the migrant population. Epidemics not only pose a public health crisis, but often convert into an economic crisis and a migration crisis too. In epidemic conditions, a large number of internal migrant workers are trapped in cities after being laid off due to the measures taken by the government to control the spread of the disease. Most of these workers earn little more than a subsistence wage and have no other means to protect their incomes if they lose their jobs.

With most transport links shut down, many were trying to walk hundreds of kilometres back to their rural homes with their families. The government, who initially had stopped all the public transportation, and emphasised on 'remaining at home', had to take the decision to allow people to reach bus terminals and city borders and arranged hundreds of buses into service. Further, the Central government asked State governments to take measures to prevent a mass exodus of migrant workers in the wake of the national lockdown. A mass departure of migrant workers from cities in several states to their villages raised concerns that the COVID-19 outbreak could turn into a humanitarian crisis. Realising the gravity of the problem, the government launched a new scheme, namely ***Migrant Workers Return Registration***. This scheme's main motto is to count the number of daily labourers and migrant workers who got stuck in other states, as well as to provide them with 14 days of quarantine facilities and arrangements after they reached their hometowns. State governments across the country launched their portals and accumulated the data of their people (daily labourers and migrant workers), so that they could be shifted to their hometowns easily. A large number of buses were arrangedfor their interstate movement. The Indian Railways also introduced Shramik special trains for the relocation of migrant workers, tourists, pilgrims, students and others. There is a fear that COVID-19 recessions in India can take an extraordinary human toll that extends well beyond temporary earnings losses for unemployed workers. The studies on earlier recessions suggest that the job loss during a downturn sometimes results in long-term unemployment and wage setbacks, deteriorating the health of unemployed workers and increasing poverty. These impacts are most troubling for low-income households, which are less well positioned to cope with earnings losses

during a recession, have no alternative earnings and have no social security available **(Papademetriou et al., 2010)**. Migrant workers constitute quite a large proportion of such vulnerable population. In this article, we have discussed some of the important issues regarding the effect of epidemics like COVID-19 on the migrant population.

LABOUR MIGRANTS IN INDIA

The vulnerability of labour migrants manifested itself in extreme ways in India, with disadvantages of work, identity and migratory status reinforcing each other. Their plight has been well described in media, by civil society organizations and researchers like the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN 2020a, b, c). When the government announced the lockdown, labour migrants in cities found themselves in the void of having lost their job, sometimes their housing, and in large numbers of cases their income. Many of them had no alternative but to return to their home villages, and as transport was cancelled as part of the lockdown, often on foot, exposed to hunger, and risks of infection, harassment, and poor conditions of forced quarantine. Migrant workers that stayed in cities often found working conditions worsen. Many migrants who had returned feel forced to return to cities as they run out of savings **(Patnaik 2020).** As far as I am aware, there are no reliable numbers of the labour migrants that moved back, though there are some estimates of how many people moved by train: estimates have varied between 5 and 40 million. In fact, numbers of internal migrants generally are uncertain **(Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016; Srivastava 2020a; GoI 2017**), with the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 remaining to a great extent a dysfunctional framework **(Sivaram 2020).** Estimates put total numbers of internal migrant workers at about 100 million (against a Census estimate of some 45 million inter- and intrastate migrant workers), mostly originating from poorer districts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, etc., and a relatively small proportion of these workers being from Nepal and Bangladesh. In particular, estimates of, and knowledge about circular and seasonal migration have remained uncertain. Female labour migration also is likely under-recorded **(Shanthi 2006)**, adding significantly to the overall gaps in knowledge on migration. Moreover, academic studies commonly underestimate the role of labour mobility. Theories and models of migration tend to neglect the complexity of patterns of mobility, again enhancing the gaps in knowledge about the extent and impact of population mobility, often particularly important with respect to more marginalised groups.

The lack of clear data appears to reflect, and possibly reinforces, the ambivalent treatment of migrants in official discourse **(Deshingkar 2017).** As in other countries, such as China during its years of miracle economic growth and

institutionalised in its hukou system, and mirroring ambivalent views globally about the place of immigrant, migrants and labour mobility in particular have never been fully accepted as part of India's policy. Urban policies demonstrate common apathy and often discrimination towards migrants. Inter-state migrants are at risk of losing access to public social provisions, such as PDS, and even health care that are tied to permanent residence, and often do not have access to housing schemes in cities. The apathy towards labour migration is often reflected in rural policies as well, with a common focus on reducing migration in development and anti-poverty programs (and in much international development policy). NREGA's objectives include reducing labour migration through the provision of locally available work in rural areas, similar to the earlier Maharashtra employment scheme **(Datta 2019: 39–40; Solinski 2012).**

STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT WITH REGARD TO MIGRANT LABOUR DURING THE LOCKDOWN

During the lockdown, several inter-state migrant workers tried to return to their home state. Due to the suspension public transport facilities, migrants started walking towards their home state on foot. Subsequently, buses and Shramik special trains were permitted by the central government subject to coordination between states. Between May 1 and June 3, more than 58 lakh migrants were transported through specially operated trains and 41 lakh were transported by road. Measures taken by the government to aid migrants include-

Transport: On March 28, the central government authorised states to use the State Disaster Response Fund to provide accommodation to traveling migrants. States were advised to set up relief camps along highways with medical facilities to ensure people stay in these camps while the lockdown is in place.

In an order issued on April 29, the Ministry of Home Affairs allowed states to co-ordinate individually to transport migrants using buses. On May 1, the Indian Railways resumed passenger movement (for the first time since March 22) with Shramik Special trains to facilitate movement of migrants stranded outside their home state. Between May 1 and June 3, Indian Railways operated 4,197 Shramik trains transporting more than 58 lakh migrants. Top states from where Shramik trains originated are Gujarat and Maharashtra and states where the trains terminated are Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. Note that these trends largely correspond to the migration patterns seen in the 2011 census data.

Food distribution: On April 1, the Ministry of Health and Family Affairs directed state governments to operate relief camps for migrant workers

with arrangements for food, sanitation and medical services. On May 14, under the *second tranche of the* ***Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan,*** the Finance Minister announced that free food grains would be provided to migrant workers who do not have a ration card for two months. The measure is expected to benefit eight crore migrant workers and their families. The Finance Minister also announced that **One *Nation One Ration card*** will be implemented by March 2021, to provide portable benefits under the PDS. This will allow access to ration from any Fair Price Shop in India.

Housing: The Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan also launched a scheme for Affordable Rental Housing Complexes for Migrant Workers and Urban Poor to provide affordable rental housing units under PMAY. The scheme proposes to use existing housing stock under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Housing Mission (JNURM) as well as incentivise public and private agencies to construct new affordable units for rent. Further, additional funds have been allocated for the credit linked subsidy scheme under PMAY for middle income group.

Financial aid: Some state governments (like Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh) announced one-time cash transfers for returning migrant workers. UP government announced the provision of maintenance allowance of Rs 1,000 for returning migrants who are required to quarantine.

INCLUSIVE POLICIES

It is important to highlight the initiatives that supported migrant workers in India, including civil society efforts (such as SWAN mentioned above and SEWA as described in Homenet 2020), Self Help Group initiatives (IFAD 2020), and Central Government support measures. Bihar's Chief Minister offered to cover the costs of stranded migrant workers elsewhere in India. Odisha's Chief Minister offered to bring back migrants that were stuck in different parts of the country during lockdown; the government set up dedicated hospitals and health centres and announced a package of income and employment support for returning workers **(Mishra 2020; The Indian Express 2020)**. Kerala that stood out for its proactive response to the emerging COVID-19 pandemic provided support to migrant workers that had lost employment **(The Week 2020; The Economic Times 2020)**. It set up camps using, for example, schools and provided basic necessities and health-related information in various languages. Kerala's response may have led to a relatively small proportion of migrant workers returning to their villages of origin **(Nideesh 2020).** While these responses do play a role and have provided essential support to migrants, they are insufficient to address major inequalities and the risks associated with health and other shocks. The disadvantages migrants face—unearthed in this pandemic—are entrenched in economic and social structures. How can

this be turned around? What policies are needed to address the deep-rooted barriers that keep migrants vulnerable? And does the current crisis provide an opportunity for such changes? Critical, in my view, is the need to accept migration, and the specific patterns of migration and the contribution migrant workers make to local economies. Often, there is a greater—and important—concern for the well-being of migrants abroad, and it is important that the vulnerability of internal migrants is equally recognised. With the benefit of hindsight, the way the Government was caught by surprise by the chaos caused by the lockdown—and the public health risks this may have caused— is part of a pattern of neglect of labour migration. Despite their essential function in the urban economy (and possible costs to the economy of labour shortages workers have left), seasonal and circular migrant workers do not have a fixed or accepted place in cities **(Kundu 2009)**, with as mentioned many of their entitlements based in their villages of origin. Accounting for these migration patterns, and their impactson household forms, in surveys (for example in the form of Kerala's migration survey) and census is a critical first step. A 'regularisation' of migrant workers ensures all citizens can access rights and entitlements independent of their current residence. During the crisis, some countries and authorities limited the rights of migrants, while others enhanced these. Bahrain declared an amnesty during 2020 for irregular workers in the country to get regularized without paying any fees or fines **(Sorkar 2020)**. On the sending side, countries like Bangladesh that for many years have institutionalised support to international migrants—often supported by IOM—put in place schemes for returning workers including soft loans for training and starting economic **activities (Sorkar 2020)**. The Philippines' government in collaboration with non-state actors has been commended for its proactive role in repatriating, and welfare measures for migrants **(albeit with significant gaps in implementation; Liao 2020)**. Ensuring migrants have access to their right requires a range of reforms and new measures, most of which are not new. Social protection measures need to become 'portable' **(Srivastava 2020b)**; subsidised food, for example, needs to be accessible independent of location. The 'one nation one ration card' initiative could be a critical step towards this goal, and there is a need and opportunity to apply existing technology to enable easier transfers of financial support **(Shreedharan and Jose 2020)**. Where migrants move with families including children, education (CREATE 2008) and mid-day meals need to be accessible—similar to education initiatives under Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the District Primary Education Programme **(Majumder 2011)—**to them. Registration for welfare provisions needs to be simple. Migrants should be able to avail the same political rights NRI's have been given, to vote by ballot (Ghosh and Bandyopadhyay (2020); recent analysis by Gaikwand and Nellis (2020) shows low political participation by migrants, and hence a lower likelihood that politicians represent their interests. Health

services—regular care as well as pandemic services—need to be accessible to migrants as much as local populations **(Kusuma and Babu 2018; Nitika et al. 2014).** Sustained advocacy for workers rights, such as by Aajeevika, SEWA, and more recently new networks as mentioned above, as well as effective representation by trade unions is an essential element of ensuring migrants can realise their rights.

WHAT IS NEXT?

When large-scale population migration occurs as a direct result of a health crisis, the movement mostly tends to be internal, temporary and early on in the health crisis. It generally happens to regions directly outside the immediate crisis zone, and mostly happens because of misunderstandings and panic, including financial crisis or fear of losing job. During the 2003 SARS outbreak, up to 1 million people left Beijing. In such example, people tended to go back to their native villages and return to the city after the crisis had subsided. A pneumonic plague broke out in Surat in August 1994, and receding that was a bubonic plague in Maharashtra's Beed district. Compared to its bubonic form, the pneumonic plague spreads rapidly, and the plague in Surat caused widespread panic. The outbreak of the disease led to more than 200,000 peoplefleeing the city, making it one of the largest post-independence migrations in the country **(Leo, 2020)**. Bihari workers fled from Maharashtra some years ago, when hostile nativists turned against them. Similarly, racial hostility spread panic among migrants from the North-East living in Bangalore in 2016. Whether it is economic recession or an epidemic like COVID-19, migrant workers in large cities are forced either to stay in perilous conditions in the urban areas, or go back to their places of origin— villages or smaller towns. Initially, they change from becoming providers of remittance incomes to their households, to becoming dependents of these households. Many of these migrant workers come from the most depressed and backward regions of the country, where there is currently little potential for employment and education **(Kumar et al., 2009)**. In this way, any health or economic crises at the destination also increase return migration to origin communities **(Castles, 2011)**. Another major challenge raised by the pandemic could be on the food security and nutrition. The COVID-19 may bring hunger to millions of people around the world. Available evidence suggests that insecurity is one of the main reasons why people abandon their livelihoods and move to other places. Crisis increases food insecurity and limits the livelihood options of migrant populations. On the one hand, lockdowns and social distancing measures are drying up work and incomes, whereas they are likely to disrupt agricultural production, transportation systems and supply chains on the other. According to the United Nation's World Food Programme (WFP), an estimated 265 million

people could be pushed to the brink of starvation by the end of year 2020 **(Dahir, 2020).** India is one among the countries where child undernutrition is severe. Around 38.4 per cent, 21 per cent and 35.7 per cent of children below 5 years suffer from stunting, wasting and underweight, respectively. Malnourishment results in compromised immunity, which puts an individual with a greater risk and susceptible to the spread of the virus. Undernutrition is a major underlying cause of child mortality in India, as it is the primary reason behind 69 per cent of deaths of children below the age of 5 in India **(UNICEF, 2019).** Contemporary theories of migration suggest that decisions to move or stay and the overall patterns of movement are closely related to economic conditions in places of destination and origin, relationships that connect people between origins and destinations and the accumulated experiences at destinations among individuals and members of their community **(Haas, 2012)**. Evidence from the Asian Financial Crisis and the Global Economic Crisis indicates that migrants' cumulative experiences and shared migrant associations might influence the propensity for migrants to return to origin after an economic tremor (**Curran et al., 2016**). A number of migrant workers who left the big cities during the crisis may never return, preferring to drag out a living on their marginal farms or find work in nearby towns. It would deprive industrial centres such as Delhi, Gurugram, Surat and Tiruppur, Mumbai, etc. of labour for a long period of time, resulting in temporary shortage of human resources in the industries. An epidemic is a problem that tests the ability of a nation to effectively protect its population, to reduce human loss, to save the economy and to rapidly recover (**Rachaniotis et al., 2012**). The Central and State governments are preparing strategies to cope with the crisis. The states and union territories have also been advised to make these vulnerable groups aware of measures taken by the government, including provision of free food grains and other essential items through public distribution system (PDS), and streamline the procedures. The Union government is planning to give unemployment benefits to a section of organised workers who may lose their jobs due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The labour and employment ministry are looking to extend the scheme and allow workers to avail unemployment insurance if they are impacted by coronavirus **(Jha, 2020)**. However, these measures are not sufficient considering the intensity of the crisis. Much more can be done by the government to protect its people and economy. The coronavirus epidemic has come with extraordinary, intense uncertainty. It is difficult to estimate how long and to what extent will the impact of the epidemic be on the lives of people and economy of the country. The government has to come up with a well-crafted strategy to deal with this crisis. At thenational level, greater coordination is required between government agencies separately tasked with migration and health mandates. There is also a need to relook at the national migration policies, which should accommodate the assistance and protection

of migrants arriving from, or faced with the prospect of returning to, the areas affected by health crises. Establishment of resilient food systems could reduce food insecurity and the pressure to return to origin among migrants. More research is required on the impact of health crises on migration, particularly in distinguishing health from other motivations to migrate.

CONCLUSION

The marginalisation of migrant workers in India is deep-rooted, has a long historical background and continuity since the colonial period, and manifests itself in the absence of knowledge and data of how many migrant workers live and work outside their place of residence. Urban authorities and employers have continued to take the pattern of circular migration for granted, providing minimal facilities and security for its workers, reinforcing a lack of belonging and ability for migrants to settle with their families. The unique shock that COVID-19 implied, but equally importantly the government's response, lockdown and extremely limited support for the tens of millions of migrant workers, showed how deep this neglect is, and the potential costs for the migrants themselves but also the health system and the economy more broadly. Crises provide opportunities for 'building back better': in the case of migrant workers these consist of essential immediate social protection, but also, and likely much more challenging, addressing deep-rooted inequalities that keep workers in marginalized positions, and the invisibility of the migrants that once again were absorbed by their villages of origin. This case of neglect of migrant workers during the pandemic in India was quite widely reported, at least during the early months of the pandemic. The rapid survey of sources on which this essay is built suggest that there has been much less reporting in other parts of the world; this may be a case of under-reporting, or an indication of particular and widespread vulnerability of migrants in India. Responses to shocks for international migrants have seen both new supportive measures, and further marginalisation and stigmatisation. It seems important to develop exploration of the varied responses and of the policies and advocacy that can address the deep-rooted disparities that migrant workers face.

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