

Our National Shame: The Problems of Migrant Labourers due to Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: *The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time and the greatest challenge we have faced since World War Two. The 2019–20 Coronavirus pandemic is an ongoing pandemic of Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome Coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). Affected Countries including India are racing to slow the spread of the virus by testing and treating patients, carrying out contact tracing, limiting travel, quarantining citizens, and canceling large gatherings such as sporting events, concerts, and schools. The pandemic is moving like a wave—one that may yet crash on those least able to cope. But COVID-19 is much more than a health crisis. By stressing every one of the countries it touches, it has the potential to create devastating social, economic and political crises that will leave deep scars. Every day, people are losing jobs and income, with no way of knowing when normality will return. We Indians are also facing many problems for this pandemic. But when the question comes of our migrant workers, it can be said that the people who give their much effort to build the nation, are the most sufferer due to this pandemic. Even their needs of every day's belongings like water, food, medicines, are showed much importance than the fear of the COVID -19 pandemic. Indian Government takes some steps for the help of the migrant workers but they are not sufficient for many causes like the huge number of workers, illiteracy, wrong information, language understanding problem, unawareness about the Govt. Schemes etc.*

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We all know that the COVID-19 virus is a killing villain that taking many lives all over the world every day. It is also a hopeful fact that most of the patients are also recovering but the process of the treatment is also very painful. The antivirus is now the neediest subject of scientists all over the world. So the process to fight with this virus is social distancing because the virus is spread from man to man. But the process of saving lives is a hardship one due to the economical and social background of our India. Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. With factories and workplaces 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. 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. Many migrants also died due to the lockdown, with reasons

ranging from starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care.

There are an estimated 139 million migrants in the country, according to the World Economic Forum. The International Labour Organization (ILO) predicted that due to the pandemic and the lockdown, about 400 million workers would be poverty-stricken. Most migrants in the country 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 majorly comprise 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. Additionally, there was no central registry of migrant workers, despite the existence of the "Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979" Maharashtra has the largest number of migrants, according to the 2011 Census of India, The 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 termini and bus stations, seeking transport to their hometowns. With the nationwide lockdown, all transport facilities were closed.

Problems of the Labourers:

Each of Our Migrant Labor has to face many obstacles to lead even a respectful life. With no work and no money, and lockdown restrictions putting a stop to public transport, thousands of migrant workers were seen walking or bicycling hundreds of kilometers (or even more than a thousand kilometers) to go back to their native villages, some with their families. Many did so while hungry. Social distancing was not possible for these migrants since they traveled together in large groups. According to some of them, they would rather die from the virus in their village than starve because of no work in the city.

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. On 31 March, as many as 120 migrant workers were allegedly beaten up by the police in Gujarat and forcefully rounded up in a single lorry and dropped in Maharashtra, despite being wounded. In Aurangabad, 16 migrants were killed on 8 May after a freight train ran over them while they were sleeping on the tracks, exhausted from walking. 26 migrants were killed in an accident between two trucks carrying migrants in Auraiya on 16 May. Later in May, a 15-year-old girl carried her ailing father on a bicycle for 1,200 kilometers (750 mi) from Bihar to Gurugram for over a week. She was later approached to try out for the National Cycling Academy by the Cycling Federation of India.

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. Migrant workers who decided

to stay back during the exodus faced assault from their neighbors, 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.

Upon their return to their hometowns and villages, they were treated with either fear or a "class bias", being hosed down with disinfectants or soap solution in some cases. 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. Migrants traveling by Shramik Special trains reported that food and water provisions were either not provided or simply dumped at the entrances of the trains, leaving workers fighting with each other to get their share. Passengers then hurriedly filled their water bottles at the railway stations that the trains stopped at.

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. "The rich will get all the help, getting rescued and brought home in planes from abroad. But we poor migrant labourers have been left to fend for ourselves. That is the worth of our lives." A weeping migrant worker stuck in Delhi, who could not see his dying son in Bihar. Due to the lockdown, more than 300 deaths were reported till 5 May, 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 marginalized migrants and labourers, 80 died while traveling back home on the Shramik Special trains, in the one month since their launch.

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 (along with sacks of lime) rammed into a stationary truck, also carrying migrants, in Auraiya district of Uttar Pradesh. 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. According to government reports, there was enough food grain stocked up in the FCI godowns to feed the poor for at least a year-and-a-half. While government schemes ensured that the poor would get additional rations due to the lockdown, the distribution system failed to be effective as the ration cards are area-specific and fair price shops were largely inaccessible. Additionally, the 'One Nation, One Ration Card' system has been implemented in very few states, as of mid-April. While the scheme allowed migrant workers to retrieve food grains for free anywhere across the country, very few were aware of the scheme. In addition to this, the scheme also required biometric authentication, which was discontinued due to fears of spreading the virus through common fingerprint sensors. In Telangana, many could not avail of the ration due to a lack of Aadhaar cards. As such, many were left without food and money due to the lockdown.

As of 28 May, 91 lakh migrants had traveled 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, the general lack of information from the government

to the migrants had resulted in them paying large sums of money to register themselves. In late March, the Uttar Pradesh government decided to arrange buses at Delhi's Anand Vihar Bus station to take the migrants back to their villages for free. Large crowds then gathered at the bus station. However, with the extension of the lockdown, many remained stranded till the last week of April, when the state governments were permitted by the central government to operate buses, but not trains. As of 23 May, 40 lakh migrants had traveled to their homes by bus. Condition in the buses is generally poor, with social distancing being impossible due to overcrowding and higher fares being charged than promised.

On 1 May, the central government permitted the Indian Railways to launch "Shramik Special" trains for the migrant workers and others stranded. On 3 May, the Ministry of Home Affairs mildly reprimanded the state governments for hurriedly requesting for trains to transport migrants, stating that the trains were primarily mainly meant for those who were stranded due to the sudden lockdown, and not the migrants. Additionally, this service was not free, with additional charges over the normal fares. The government announced that the Railways would offer an 85% subsidy on the train fares, with the state governments funding the remaining 15%. However, the migrants were still forced to pay an undisclosed amount in some cases. The central government initially declined to share the details regarding this with the Supreme Court, but later confirmed that it was not paying for anyone's fare. Additionally, the central government's directives regarding which states should pay for the migrants' travel resulted in disagreement between Maharashtra and other states.

Further, migrants faced many hardships while traveling by these trains. Many reported having no food and water arranged for them while they traveled. A train from Goa to Manipur reported a 58-hour delay, no proper food or sanitation facilities on the train, and stone-pelting. Others who received food packets and water reported that the provisions were simply dumped at the entrances, leaving workers fighting with each other for their share. 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 centers were used for these trains. As per a report given by the Indian Railways on 23 May, migrant labourers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh comprised 80% of the train travelers. Additionally, it was expected that 36 lakh migrants would be traveling in the ten days after the report. 4,277 Shramik Special trains had transported about 60 lakh people, as of 12 June.

Measures of relief taken by the Indian Government:

It is a fact of surprise and also to be ashamed as a human being for us that in our country, the people who belonged from below the line of poverty are the primary victims in any distress. Soon after the nationwide lockdown was announced in late March, Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a ₹1.7 lakh crore (US\$24 billion) 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 crores 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 (US\$2.80) from the earlier ₹182 (US\$2.60), as of 1 April. ₹1,000 crores from the PM CARES Fund was allocated for the support of migrant workers on 13 May. On 14 May, FM Sitharaman further announced free food grains for the migrant workers, targeting 80 million migrant workers by spending ₹35 billion (US\$490 million). The governments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya

Pradesh and Gujarat sought to temporarily revise their labour laws in early May to attract industries and investments. Labour unions criticized this as being harmful to the migrant workers while giving more authority to the employers. Ten of them then wrote to the ILO on 14 May regarding the same, to which the ILO responded by reassuring them that it had contacted Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

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. 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 concerning 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.

A plea requesting payment of minimum wage was rejected by the Court on 21 April, on the grounds of workers already being provided free meals. On 16 May, the Supreme Court rejected a PIL to direct the District Magistrate 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. Hours before this ruling, senior lawyers from Mumbai and Delhi wrote a strongly-worded letter to the Court, regarding its "self-effacing deference" towards the government thus far.

Union Home Minister Amit Shah on Saturday said the employment scheme, launched by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, will help migrant workers and the poor facing challenges due to the Coronavirus pandemic. In a series of tweets in Hindi, Shah also said that the 'Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyaan' will ensure job opportunities to people near their homes based on their skills.

Protest of Suffered labourers:

When the subject becomes to save the life of their own and the family, anyone has to show his/her last self-power. 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 organized nationwide protests to protest the changes in labour laws, with the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh organizing one on 20 May and the Centre of 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. In response, the ILO expressed "deep concern" to PM Modi and requested him to instruct the central and state governments to uphold commitments (towards labour laws) made by India.

Negative comparisons have been made between the situation of many domestic migrants and Indians abroad: Shekhar Gupta criticized the media and Modi for focusing on the Vande Bharat Mission and thus the more affluent at the expense of the working class. Some politicians criticized the central government for not focusing enough on migrant workers. NITI Aayog CEO, Amitabh Kant, admitted that the migrant workers could have been better-taken care of and stated that it was the responsibility of the state governments. Economist Jean Drèze stated that the lockdown had been "almost a death sentence" for the underprivileged of the country, further stating, "The policies are made or influenced by a class of people who pay little attention to the consequences for the underprivileged".

Some probable solutions:

An advisory issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare divides migrants into three categories, according to how far along they are on their journey home.

India has instituted a national lockdown to contain the spread of Covid-19. This timely decision will have significant consequences on jobs, manufacturing, construction, and more importantly, on the informal migrant labour that enables these sectors. These must be tackled swiftly.

The current situation poses an interesting opportunity to harness information on internal migrants across the country and to optimize social-security benefits for 'hard to reach' populations in tandem with existing efforts to contain the spread of the virus.

In the long term, this would help shape the states' response to internal migrants in need, at the time of pandemics, disasters and normal day-to-day circumstances while being cognizant of the right to life and livelihood of the poorest of the poor.

Conclusion:

India always had an internal problem of migrants. The Covid-19 pandemic has only made it look worse. More than 10 crore people are estimated to be migrant workers in India. A vast majority of them have been pushed out from poorer states to more developed ones. That the migrants carry the burden of India's GDP growth on their shoulders is evident from their labour in the construction industry, farms of agriculturally developed states, sprawling offices in the services sector, vendors lining up vegetable and fruit markets in big urban clusters, milk and food delivery boys, newspaper hawkers and factories in manufacturing hubs of the country.

That the migrant workers have never been the focus of serious policymaking of governments is also evident from the fact that there is no concrete number of migrants in India. States have looked clueless in having an effective SOP for sending back migrant workers home in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic. If the government had accurate data about the number of migrant workers, their average monthly income, their family size and their cost of living, it would have known how much they had in their pockets when Shramik Special trains were allowed to run for those stranded in camps.

A large number of migrants have already reached their villages, and millions of others who are currently in the shelter homes and many who decided to stay back in cities are desperately waiting for the end of the lockdown period to move to their native places. This time many labourers will not come back due to shock and uncertainty, which means that most small and medium-size

companies/factories and other businesses may face the heat once the lockdown period is over. There would be a shortage of labour or contract skilled workers and households also find it tough to run their daily work without the helpers/drivers/maids etc. The production and profits of small/medium size factories or businesses will suffer due to a shortage of labourers and other contract skilled workers. Because the scale of their production/business would get reduce and their wage bill will also rise due to higher pay to retain the limited available labour-force. The shortage of workers poses a challenge to restart the economy.

For migrants, distance matter and the lockdown have given a new lesson that could lead to a significant reduction in long-distance migration, especially without appropriate incentives and adhering to safety norms They need to create more job opportunity in rural areas particularly in non-farm activities with gainful employment to those migrants who do not want to go back to the cities and rely on their day to day labour for earning their livelihood and make a decent living. Undeniably, this is an unprecedented situation at the times of pandemic and the ways and means to tackle the same have to be sensitive, responsive, quick and above all caring. In the post-Covid-19 situation, bringing back the confidence and trust of the migrant workers, over time, by the governments and market stakeholders, will be one of the most important foundation stepping stone towards the envisaged vision of New India.

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