

Socio-Economic Problem and Challenges of Migrant Workers in Murshidabad District: A Study in the Context of Covid-19

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Abstract: *For a long time migration has been playing a vital role in shaping the socio-economic condition particularly in rural India. Generally, migration takes place from economically less developed places to the better ones. The scenario of the development and poverty in the Murshidabad district makes it a critical example of the peripheral region in the entire space of development. Murshidabad district holds one of the records for the highest migration of workers.¹ The outbreak of COVID-19 compelled many poor communities in different places of the World to face very challengingly in the case of the socio-economic aspect and to earn a livelihood. The migrant workers in Murshidabad district are not also an exception. This paper targets to analyses this socio-economic scenario to determine how the pandemic is causing various problems and how to recover from this critical crisis. Murshidabad is the northernmost district of the Presidency division of West Bengal and is located at its northern-eastern boundary. It is lying centrally in the lower Ganga valley. The district is separated from Maldah by the river Ganges on its north. It is bounded in the north by the Maldah district, on the west by the district of Birbhum, on the south by the districts of Burdwan and Nadia and the east by Bangladesh.² It is well known that Murshidabad is a frontier and backward district of West Bengal mainly in the socio-economic aspect. Stagnation is always observed in all spheres of the district economy.*

Keywords: Migration, Poverty, Challenge, Pandemic, COVID 19

The present study focuses on determining the impact of Covid-19 on Murshidabad district of West Bengal, the problem and challenges like-the livelihood conditions in this epidemic situation of the migrant workers of Murshidabad, estimate the changing socio-economic condition of the district due to Covid-19 and the role of government and non-government organizations in this regard.

The sources of data and methodology for the present study is Census of India-2011, district census handbook, and many others published and unpublished like -books, journals, online sources, newspapers, e-papers, e-journals, etc. Besides this many of the reputed NGO data give extensive information about the cause of out-migration and also socio-economic crisis and their challenges in this pandemic situation.

The backwardness of the district of West Bengal is reflected in the lower agricultural output, skewed distribution of land and higher incidents of landlessness, higher dependency on agriculture and lack of industrialization and several socio-economic and institutional barriers. This situation is considered as the leading factor of heavy out-migration workers from Murshidabad district to other states of India and out of India too. In this paper, we discuss socio-economic issues and challenges following the pandemic covid-19 lockdown period with the focus on the belong to migrant workers of the Murshidabad district.

Murshidabad can well be labeled as one of the most backward districts [Human Development Index(HDI) of Murshidabad is 0.46] in West Bengal.³ There are a host of factors that have contributed to such a poor reflection of the district's HDI. Absent of any major industries, lack of employment opportunities and so many other factors have led to low per capita income of this district, making it seedbed for out-migration of regular and casual labourers. In the last few decades, a huge number of workers have been migrating not only to different parts of West Bengal but also out of Bengal and in India.⁴ Most migrants from Murshidabad are working as masons and labourers in the construction sectors. Generally, masons get higher wages than the labourers. The majority of the migrants earn anywhere between fourteen thousand to twenty thousand per month. Most of the migrants get wages on a contractual basis, and often they have to suffer from irregular payment. Other than masons and labourers, we can see the people are engaged in different skilled trades like carpentry, repair and maintenance of electrical gadgets, colour and paint artisanship etc.⁵

It is noted from the census data(2011)that in Murshidabad, Muslims constitute 66.3% of the total population, followed by Hindus 33.2%. Barely 0.5% of the population of the district belong to other religious sections.⁶ Naturally the number of Muslim migrants is far more than the Hindu migrants, but it is not just reason responsible for the outcome. Most of the male Muslims learn the masonry work from a very tender age because this artisanship is handed down to them by their ancestors.⁷ In the absence of any major industry in this district offers little scope for employment in infrastructure and construction work. So migrating out is an obvious decision for them. This ancestral artisanship (masonry job) has helped the Muslims migrate out to different parts of the country for sustenance and a better source of earning. And they have earned a reputation of being good at it. Naturally, the present generation finds this corridor to be easily accessible and familiar.

Murshidabad is a surplus labour district. In the construction industry, millions of workers are scattered in almost every state across the country even abroad. They are engaged in the agricultural work in their district only for three or four months in a year. These unorganized workers and their families are in extreme poverty. There is no government security for their monthly or yearly earnings.

Migrant workers from Murshidabad have been spread not only in every state of the country but also in many countries abroad-specially in Central Asia, Arab Countries, South Africa, Singapore, Hong-Kong, Malaysia and also in East Asia. The world-famous tallest building(*Burj Khalifa*) was build by masons of Beldanga which is situated in the Murshidabad district.⁸ Goldsmiths of Murshidabad district have been largely spread at Surat(Gujrat), Mumbai, and in many countries abroad. The number of migrant workers going to work abroad is more than sixteen lakh.⁹ At present the population of Murshidabad district, with a population is around seventy-two lakh and of them about one-fourth of the population make a living from outside of the district and send the surplus income to their families. In another word, the economic deficit of the district is largely filled by the provision of these external economic sources. Some of these migrant workers are exploited and persecuted in the country and abroad, sometimes they die as a result.

Soumendra Kumar Gupta, a history researcher from Murshidabad district has written an article on the migrant workers, named “ *Jela Theke Kajer Khoje Baire Dure*” in the April 25

and May 10, 2014, issues on '*Bikshan*'. In his excellent article, he explained the population of Murshidabad, the number of agricultural workers, and migrant workers.

| Year | Total Population | Agricultural Laborers | Percentage | Out Migrant Workers | Percentage |
|------|------------------|-----------------------|------------|---------------------|------------|
| 1981 | 36,97,552 | 3,18,128 | 8.603 | 2,31,429 | 6.258 |
| 1991 | 47,40,149 | 4,07,874 | 8.604 | 2,96,259 | 6.249 |
| 2001 | 58,66,569 | 5,53,604 | 9.436 | 3,66,482 | 6.249 |
| 2011 | 71,03,807 | 7,00,837 | 9.865 | 4,67,652 | 6.583 |

Source: Relevant census of India and compiled by me; Soumendra Kumar Gupta, '*Bikshan*', Murshidabad, 2014.

In the above table we can see that every ten years from 1981 to 2011 according to the census, the population of the district has increased from 8 lakh to 12 lakh. That is an average of one million. The influx of refugees is all there. It is seen that one to one and a half million agricultural workers have increased every ten years as a percentage from 8 % to 10 % (approx). The number of migrant workers has also increased from 1981 to 2011 is 2.5 lakh to 4.5 lakh and above. It is clear from the above table that with the growth of population the number of agricultural labourer is increased despite the number of migrant workers are notably enhanced.

As per a report on the daily newspaper '*Pratyohik Khabor*', dated on 27th February 2011, that the number of migrant workers was 12lakh. It was 13lakh according to Congress sources, 15 to 16 lakh according to CPIM sources. According to a Trinamool Congress source after 2011, the 100 – days (*eksho din er kaj*) work project was well implemented and the number of migrant workers has become half near about 6 lakh.¹⁰

From the early period of the 1970s with the introduction of agricultural machinery like tractor, crushers, chemical fertilizer in cultivation, the agricultural workers have become surplus. Therefore these unemployed workers were forced to move abroad or to other states of India in the hope of work and earning.

We all know that global pandemic Covid-19 is now raging in the world. Even so, till now the migrant labourers are coming to their homeland or ancestral home by bus, labour special train, by-cycle, etc. After reaching homeland they are strictly following the quarantine of fourteen days and other social and medical rules also.

According to the local report around twelve thousand migrant labourers have returned by a special train from the various parts of India to their homeland Murshidabad in May 2020 and then after also.¹¹ The migrant labourers said that they are happy to be back home. One of them said, "we were without work due to the Covid-19 lockdown, and were living out of doles by the government authorities and NGOs' in Kerala."¹² He also said, the labourers, who worked

in different professions from masons to plumbers and other jobs, were desperate to return to their homes and were happy to have finally made it back.

Stepping out of the compartments after the train came to the home station the migrants were greeted by senior administrative, police, and other officers. Officials also give them food and water and they were taken for a mandatory medical check-up by the medical team. Several buses and small vehicles were arranged by the state government to send the migrant workers to their homes from the station. In this pandemic situation, the social activities of the government officials have become regular norms.

But the actual problem is arising after one or two months when their savings are towards the end. They have their wives, children and old parents in their homes. Because of the lockdown, they are unable to earn anything now. What reserve money they had, they were able to survive. But now it has become almost impossible for them to maintain themselves and their families. A famous NGO of Murshidabad district, '*Karna-Subarna Welfare Society*' has prepared a list of 240 such individuals.¹³ Many NGOs and various other local organizations have come forward to extend their hand to the distressed sectors of society.

Henceforth, the nationwide lockdown has resulted in financial losses and has affected all segments of society. Murshidabad is among the biggest contributors to the migrant workforce from Bengal. So for that financial crisis they had decided to return to the workplaces, both within and outside. They earned a good amount of money in other states. But they are not getting similar jobs in their homeland.

Under these circumstances, to run their livelihood of their families many labourers are insisted to return to their old workplaces. Such instances are very common in various parts of the Murshidabad district. *According* to the renowned newspaper report headline '*Covid-free document in hand, Bengal migrants back to the job in other states*'; Thousand of workers in West Bengal's Murshidabad district queuing up at medical centers to get 'Covid-free certificates', so that they can return to their workplaces, both within and outside the state.¹⁴

A senior district health officer is also in the same opinion on the condition of anonymity. He said that 'till Monday 126 people in Murshidabad had tested positive for Covid-19 and more than 95% are migrant labourers.¹⁵ Had they not returned to their villages the virus might not have been spread to remote areas so fast.'

It is also evidenced by the above-stated discussion as well as in words of Jafikur Sheikh, Naushad Alam different wage workers. Jafikur Sheikh, a wage labourer from Shamsherganj block said "I used to be the main mason at the construction sight in Kerala and earned around Rs.800 per day. Here I am being offered Rs 200 for the same job. I will leave soon." Another migrant labour named Naushad Alam said "I used to work at the workshop of a renowned jewelry company in Surat. I lost my job and I was worried about my family. I have not got any work here so far. I will leave in a day or two."¹⁶

In the voice of another worker the picture of lockdown is reflected, Ibrahim, the resident of Bhagobangola block of the district was stranded in Orissa in the lockdown and his wife mortgaged her last resource (jewelry) and with great difficulty brought back to return her husband. But once again she is raising money to send her husband abroad because of the monetary crisis and not getting any way of earning. She said 'if not, what is the way to do? There

is no income here. what to eat?'¹⁷The elected representative of Akhriganj Gram Panchayat Mrs. Sundara Bibi said that still (from April) a total of 36 days work has been done. One has been working for 17 or 18 days.¹⁸ She claims that the number of people hired is more than a workspace. Despite this pandemic situation, it is not possible to prevent them from returning to their old job places. Additional district magistrate (general) said 'the district administration is trying to provide 100-days of employment to these people under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MNREGA) schemes. However, we cannot stop anyone from returning to their old places of work.'¹⁹

However, it is not the workers of all works of life who have faced the economic crisis. many affluent workers are going abroad for better opportunities. In this critical situation the distributions of essential commodities through the rationing system by the Government of West Bengal given them a bit of relief. Through they are not depending on the single income the financial crisis to continue other activities till remain.

The covid-19 crisis has hit the Indian economy that is already slowing down. The damage will persist throughout the whole economy but most notably in the unorganized sectors. More people out of the labour force, and increased poverty. A key priority across these dimensions is migrant workers who have been the backbone of the Indian economy and are now some of the hardest hit. Allowing for an interstate migrant worker to return to places of work will be critical to reopening the economy but will require sufficient protection of these workers both in terms of exposure to the virus and their incomes and working conditions.

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