



## IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON MIGRANT WORKFORCE IN INDIA

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### Abstract

*Migrants constitute a large portion of the world's population. Thousands and millions of migrant workers are anticipated to be left unemployed due to the lockdown and economic crisis prevailing in the country. The fear of recession is quite evidently seen among the people in India. Many of the migrant workers have returned back to their respective villages and the risk of unemployment is higher among the unorganized, marginalized and contractual based workers. The country wide outbreak of the covid-19 pandemic has subsequently increased recession in India. Thus there is a need to implement national migration policies, which should accommodate the assistance and protection of migrants, also there needs to be an installation of resilient food system that could reduce food insecurity and the pressure of returning to their origin. Thus the research paper focuses on how the Covid-19 pandemic has adversely impacted the migrant workforce within India.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, Migration, Lockdown, Labour Force, Recession.



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### Introduction

The relationship between the migration and health is found to be multidimensional. The health status, socio-economic conditions can drive the masses to take a decision to migrate, but such relocation ultimately has an implication on health. Migration is also associated with the spread of health conditions as well as behaviors between destination and origin areas, affecting the health status of others. On one hand the structure and composition of urban as well as rural population in India and on the other hand the complex concepts of migration are likely to exacerbate the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The threat of recession is particularly important for India, as the pandemic arrived at a time when the country was already facing problem of economic slowdown. Early estimates by the government suggest that there will be a hit of 0.3-0.5% on the GDP in the next fiscal year, and growth in the first two quarters of the



next fiscal year could be as low as 4-4.5% (Economic Times 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Generally it is observed that economic crisis in the destination reduces the number of migrants, reduces remittances and disrupts migrant systems. As mentioned by the Economic Survey 2016-2017 it has been estimated that more than 10 million people migrate annually within the country resulting into internal migration. While the metropolitan regions like Delhi, followed by Mumbai is the top destination for migrants, in order to have better livelihood opportunities many people are migrating to the developed cities for instance the Southern states, like Bangalore, Chennai, etc. The increase in number of these migrants sets off from the states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal and Assam where the development is not in a considerable perspective. The migration of the workers is more in urban areas due to the availability of educational, employment opportunities as well as better standard of living. The Centre and State governments are preparing strategies to cope up with the economic crisis caused due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Also several States and Union Territories have been suggested and advised to take into consideration such vulnerable groups in order to make them aware of the measures taken by the government. The Union government is planning to give unemployment benefits to a section of organized workers who have lost their jobs due to Covid-19 pandemic. The Ministry of Labour and Employment has been initiating to extend the scheme and allow workers to avail unemployment insurance if they are impacted by corona virus pandemic. However, the measures and preventive restrictions are not adequate enough for considering the severity as well as the intensity of the crisis and therefore the government needs to relook and rebuilt more effective and sustainable policies to protect the masses and the overall economy. The corona virus pandemic has come with extraordinary and intense uncertainty. It is difficult to estimate how long and to what extent will the impact of the pandemic be on the lives of people and economy of the country. The higher officials and government needs to come up with a well-crafted strategy to tackle the economic crisis. At the national and state level, greater efficiency and coordination is required between government agencies separately

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<sup>1</sup> The Economic Times, 2020, "Government prepares an action plan to reskill unemployed migrant and informal sector workers post lockdown".

<https://m.economictimes.com/news/economy/policy/govt-prepares-an-action-plan-to-reskill-unemployed-migrant-and-informal-sector-workers-post-lockdown/articleshow/75433631.cms>



tasked with migration and health mandates<sup>2</sup>. The Covid-19 pandemic has raised the issue of human rights violation and there is a need to tackle it because it is affecting the dignity of the migrant workforce. The problems of migrant workers have become very important in many developing as well as developed countries of the world. One of the reasons behind the human rights violation of state migrant workers in India are political and economic in nature. Hence more research and detailed study is required to measure the impact of the pandemic crisis on migrant workforce.

### **Objective**

To study and analyze the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on migrant workers in India.

### **Impact of Covid-19 pandemic on migrant workers within India**

In India, it is estimated that most of the lowest paying jobs are in sectors like construction, hospitality, textiles, and domestic workers. 90% of the workforce comprises the informal or 'unorganized' sector of the economy, and migrant workers are a big part of it. The report published by World Bank with regards to Covid-19 pandemic and economic crisis clearly mentions that 40 million people in India are facing major brunt of the situation. This pandemic has lead to severe conditions and issues like starvation, being stranded away from the family, and loss of jobs which in turn will impact the mental health of the masses and also will increase the risk of modern slavery a thousand- fold. Firstly, it is estimated that increased risk of enslavement due to the rise in supply of workers who are at risk of exploitation. Secondly, the major impact is the disruption of education due to COVID-19, as most of the children will be forced out of school to make a living to sustain their families. A huge number of children will be trafficked across borders where they will get paid a meager salary and might also suffer physical, emotional, and sexual violence. Not only the migrants are facing high risk of corona virus but are also considered as major victims of social discrimination. And because of all adverse issues these

people are termed as vulnerable. They reside in slums areas where social distancing is compromised, and access to masks and sanitizer is a luxury, which in turn puts them at more risk of COVID-19. The ultimate and unfortunate reality is that their condition does not only

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<sup>2</sup> Quint, May 19 2020, "A Policy framework for India's Covid-19 Migration"

<https://www.bloomberquint.com/coronavirus-outbreak/a-policy-framework-for-indias-covid-19-migration>



put this group at COVID-19 risk but also at the next big 'hunger pandemic'. The [International Labour Organization](#) has predicted that around 500 million workers will fall into poverty as a result of the loss of job. Several months into lockdown and miseries of the migrant workers were unending. It is very evidently seen that thousands of workers had to travel long by foot to escape the suffering of being stranded in cities without food and water. The most important concern for the migrants at present is of food, clothing, shelter and employment. When the lockdown was officially declared by the Indian government, it did not take into consideration the transport, financial and safety measures of the vulnerable masses. Which had an direct impact on these people. However a study was carried out under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Scheme (MGNREGS) in the state of Rajasthan with regards to improvement in the wages and working conditions of the masses in rural areas during the lockdown. The scheme evidently showcased that there was an increased demand for work in the month of May and June 2020 and about 25.2 million rural masses that demanded work in August 2020 which was increased by 66%. This has been the highest demand for work under the scheme. Thus India's estimated 1.5 billion population came to terms with the changes of enforced social distancing, but there are 40 million migrant workers who faced different consequences due to the lockdown and recession. As the nature of work is very precarious in India many daily wage laborers lost their livelihoods during lockdown and hence migrated to their origins. Now the outbreak of pandemic has lead to many serious problems like impacting the mental health of the people, unemployment, recession, starvation, separation from family and having no alternative forms of employment. Inter-state migrant workers are often those who are lowest paying and the nature of their job is non permanent but rather insecure in the sectors like construction, textiles, manufacturing, transportation and domestic work. The domestic migrants may not get the rights similar to those of the local workers. The masses not having a sustainable and concrete job will be more vulnerable at this time. Many migrants are not having proper accommodation space and therefore are forced to live in crowded places or dormitories which pose great challenge in implementation of social distancing. They have limited access to personal protective equipment, such as masks or sanitizer. The workers who are employed in the producing factories such as canned or processed food are not in a position



to distance themselves physically on labour-intensive production lines.<sup>3</sup>

The infection risk is still high even if the lockdown has ended rather in many states partial lockdown has been still prevailing and because of this crisis very few masses are usually offered hardship benefits or incentives. There is also increase in number of masses who have lost their jobs and are not eligible for assistance as well as receiving unemployment benefits from the government. Homelessness, recession, food shortage, lack of adequate facilities are therefore on the rise and ultimately leading to modern slavery. When people become way too desperate they are ready to compromise their working conditions and expectations with regards to payment, accommodation and simply being able to sustain. However this will result in increased exploitation because there are many people who will be and are desperate for work. Rather receiving appropriate wages they will accept bare necessities like food, clothing, shelter just for survival. Now migrant workers can often lack freedom of movement because they have a immigration status and their passports can also be confiscated. Because of this they are at a high risk of exploitation as they seek to find employment out of desperation. But migrants play a crucial role in the pandemic situation in critical sectors with unfavorable conditions. As of November 3<sup>rd</sup> 2020 emigrants from 20 countries constituting higher number of Covid-19 cases accounted for nearly 28% of the total international migrant stock. Many countries have now implemented travel restrictions and border shutdowns leading to an unprecedented impact on the mobility. The pandemic also poses great threat to those caught between home and their final destination and are now living in crowded refugee camps where the term social distancing carries very little meaning.

The migrant workforce which is present in the entire world is at a high risk of facing xenophobia and discrimination as the society grapples with this pandemic situation. Due to increase in demand some factories and industries are being asked to produce more products with reduction in the number of workforce. While some other industrial sectors are non-operational due to health and safety measures. It is important that government, owners of

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<sup>3</sup> Malvika Tyagi, August 05 2020, “How much do we really know about the migrants who shuttle between Bharat and India?” <https://thewire.in/labour/india-migrant-workers-covid-19-crisis-socio-economic-status>



several industrial and employment sectors should uphold human rights and labour laws in order to protect the masses during the pandemic crisis. At present, the state needs to intensify and expand the coverage of emergency relief, income, food transfers and free health services, including Covid detection tests and the cost of hospitalization.<sup>4</sup> Rural economy and government safety nets for rural distress may have to be scaled up to support returning migrants and their families. Migrants leave the city never to return, what will emerge under present conditions are simply poorer villages and communities. It is said that the second wave of pandemic is likely to hit many parts of the country which will lead to more adverse effects and recession in the economy affecting the general life of the masses. Women have been hard hit by the collapse of informal economies, and with so many schools closed; children are increasingly at risk of sexual exploitation and the worst forms of child labour. The fight against trafficking and efforts to identify and assist victims has also hit hard as government use their resources elsewhere during the pandemic. Thus a well-crafted strategy, more informed and effective policies should be implemented by the government to tackle all the issues arising in the back drop of Covid-19 pandemic.

### **Conclusion**

The Indian government has lifted up the lockdown now by granting some relaxations. But the second way of corona virus is been observed in Delhi as the number of cases have increased there. Similarly in Ahmedabad additional Chief Secretary Rajiv Kumar Gupta had announced complete curfew from November 20th 2020 (Friday) 9pm till November 23rd 2020 (Monday) 6am allowing only milk and medicine shops to remain open. And these measures have been taken because of sudden increase in cases observed post Diwali. As post lockdown the Government has allowed restarting the factories with a reduced number of workers and some state governments have also granted exemptions from legal provisions, which is majorly including protection of laborers in industrial sector and other establishments.<sup>5</sup> The acute shortage of workers in urban areas has directly lead to reverse migration, along with relaxations

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<sup>4</sup> The Hindu, May 2020, contempt-for-labour-the-hindu-editorial-on-dilution-of-labour-laws available at <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/editorial/contempt-for-labour-the-hindu-editorial-on-dilution-of-labour-laws/article31538103.ece>.





in basic occupational and industrial health-related laws, has forced the available workers to work for 12 hours rather than usual 18 hours shift mainly to boost the production. However it is against the Factories Act of 1948 which stands for the protection of laborers. And the long working hours in the absence of protective welfare legal provisions would also mean a direct reduction in rest hours and consequential increase in the psychological stress and may lead to occupational mental illnesses. Taking into consideration the overall crisis situation there is a need for implementing effective laws, protecting the welfare and financial interests of the unorganized sector workers.

Hence the public health policymakers, while framing Covid-19 pandemic policy need to pay adequate attention to the psycho-social issues of the internal migrant laborer. In the state of Maharashtra, Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister have addressed the state on November 22<sup>nd</sup> 2020 mentioning to follow the Covid-19 preventive guidelines lead down by the government and government authorities are going to observe the condition in Maharashtra in the coming 8-10 days and on the basis of it the lockdown should be re-imposed or not will be taken down into consideration as the number of cases are increasing in Maharashtra too. However this will have an impact on the migrant workforce as they are a vulnerable community for the development of severe, acute and chronic, adverse mental health consequences due to Covid-19 <sup>6</sup>pandemic. Mental health is a critical aspect that needs to be addressed, thus enforcement of more sustainable and viable health as well as migration policies should be implemented by the government to safeguard the rights of migrants and also provide them with adequate protection and essential provisions.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The Indian Express, November 22 2020, “*Why Ahmedabad has hurriedly imposed a weekend curfew*”  
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