



CONTEXTUALISING THE CHALLENGES CONFRONTED BY MIGRANT WORKERS OWING TO COVID19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

For decades, millions of workers have moved from their rural homes and villages to major areas in search of better prospects and a better way of life. Migrant workers from rural India work as domestic helpers, on building sites, in factories, industries, agriculture, and other fields in search of better jobs, higher earnings, and a higher quality of living. The lockdown instantly harmed already vulnerable communities by restricting people's freedom to leave their homes. All modes of transportation—roads, airlines, and railways—were halted, as were the hospitality, educational, and industrial sectors. One of the outcomes of the country's lockdown measures has been an extraordinary migration of workers and families from big metropolitan centres to rural India. As the factories and workplaces closed down, millions of migrant workers had to deal with loss of income, food shortages and an uncertain future. With no money, no job, and no idea when the lockdown would be ended, the migrant workers had no choice but to return to their villages. This paper is a attempt to study the hurdles faced by the migrant workers due to the covid 19 pandemic

Key words – migrant worker, pandemic, insecurity.

1.0 Introduction

The year 2019 brought with it a horror dream for the globe in the form of a new pandemic, the COVID-19 which was first reported in the month of December as per the reports from World Health Organisation. It plunged the entire globe into an unparalleled crisis, leaving it in a condition of lingering insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic was triggered by the SARS-CoV2 virus spreading over the world. It caused a widespread worldwide

shock, resulting in, a global public health crisis, innumerable deaths and a significant economic slump. There has been a global downturn in all economic sectors, and more than one-third of the world's population has been placed under lockdown. The virus wreaked havoc on existing systems, creating a vortex of obstacles that human had never encountered before and had no clue how to solve. Due to the novelty of the crisis, the ambiguity it brought with it about how and when the situation would return to normal, and the dread of approaching calamity, this finally caused overwhelming terror and increasing anxiety among the masses. People were affected not only physically, but also mentally, economically, socially, and politically as a result of the pandemic. People from diverse socioeconomic strata were badly impacted in this scenario, regardless of their social rank, because everyone had fallen victim to this catastrophe in some manner. It has taught the world about the futility of the rat race and the fragility of human life. The pandemic has caused a paradigm shift in people's behavior patterns that has never been seen before.

One of the categories of individuals negatively impacted by the crisis scenario were migrants, who had to relocate to other regions of the country in search of work to support their families. There are about 100 million internal migrant workers in India, and most of them are daily-wage workers who have travelled out from different states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal, etc. to other states in search of unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Based on the data obtained from the National Sample Survey (NSS) 2007–2008, out of the total workforce in India, about 28.3% were migrants. According to 2011 census, about 37% of India's total population was found to be migrants. These migrants were stuck in the lockdown having no work and no money, resulting in a significant economic setback as well as being separated from their families due to the unexpected shutdown. Because of the existence of far more serious and nagging difficulties like as insecurity and hunger, the idea of social distance has no relevance for migrants. Despite the fact that the lockdown affected the whole population and forced people to stay at home, migrants could not even stay shut in with their families; instead, they were doomed to be trapped in a migrant land with no means of survival. As a result, this group had to face greater adversity than everyone else, not just financially, but also socially and psychologically.

2.0 Objectives

The prime objective of this paper is to study the negative effects of covid 19 pandemic upon the migrant workers of India. The paper is also objectified to reveal the problems encountered by the migrant workers due to the lock down measure.

3.0 Methodology

The present study is a qualitative one based on descriptive analytical method. The interpretations is based on the synthesis of various secondary data collected from various sources like books, journals, articles, news papers and web links. APA 7th edition referencing style has been used to authenticate the data used in the study.

4.0 Results And Discussion

Migration is a constant global phenomenon which is as old as civilization is. Since times immemorial people worldwide are on a move for various reason and purpose. In search of economic gain, better condition of living, security, poverty alleviation, educational opportunities etc. people moves from one area to another area which was not a problem before the creation of the artificial boundaries of states. There are two major types of migration: one that takes place within a country across a district or a state-border, which is known as internal or national migration; and the other a migration that involves crossing international borders, which is referred to as external or international migration.¹ According to the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS), the migrant workerers are mainly from rural areas and come from very poor backgrounds and belong to the lower social classes.² According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the inter-state migration in pursuit of an occupation every year around the world was estimated to be around 9 million, and this is acknowledged as “temporary, contingent and non-standard” in nature with minimal access to societal perks and worker privileges .

When the epidemic broke out, migrants were among the people who suffered the most from the lockdown. These daily wagers are regarded to be the weakest and most socially ignored population among Indian nationals, forming the typical nobodies. Migrants were stranded in their migrated areas, far away from their relatives and loved ones, with terrible health-care facilities and living circumstances, in addition to being jobless and without money or means of subsistence. When the lockdown was implemented, the biggest concern among the migrants was getting back to their family safely. Isolation from their families increased their stress and tension, and they were increasingly concerned about their travel options. Thousands of migrant workers flocked to the city's bus terminals after the government failed to deliver on its promise to supply basic essentials like food and water. However, not everyone was able to board a bus and return to their homes. Thousands of migrant workers strolling with their children on major roads throughout India. According to surveys conducted by Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), many migrants had very little food and were on the verge of famine owing to a lack of money and food. Hundreds of individuals died tragically their way to their homelands during the epidemic, as a result of hunger pains and police violence.

The pandemic left the migrant workers with numerous problems which can be summarized as follows-

4.1 Financial difficulty

According to the International Worker Organization (2020), migratory workers are the worst afflicted by the present economic crisis. Because they were fired from their jobs and had no other sources of income, the expenses of essential sanitary items required for individual protection during the pandemic (such as detergents, soaps, and sanitizers) have become unreasonably costly and inaccessible for the migrants. The financial crisis brought on by the COVID-19 epidemic has made it impossible for low-income households to pay for food,

clothes, and medications. Many enterprises have either terminated migrant workers without warning or ceased paying their salaries. The NITI Aayog (National Institution for Transforming India) dropped food subsidies from 75 to 60 percent in rural regions and from 50 to 40 percent in urban areas, adding to the migrants' financial troubles.³ studies have shown that loss of work during an economic crisis generally leads to longstanding unemployment and income obstacles, deteriorating or worsening the health of jobless people, and hence increasing poverty.⁴

4.2 Loss of Job

The covid 19 resulted in loss of jobs or fear of losing jobs among thousands of migrant workers. Thousands of migrant worker working in different sector like manufacturing, construction, transport and in various other services were trapped in their jobsites. Even those who did not lose their employment because they provided important services were subjected to salary cutbacks imposed by their employers. As a result, they were concerned about how they would pay their usual costs, such as food, clothes, medication, and lodging. There was no job security for workers who were gone from their jobsite for multiple days at a time, which caused them to become extremely anxious. Those who lost their employment also had to consider if and how they would be able to return to their native lands. There was no way of knowing whether or when they would be able to return due to the current travel restrictions and lack of transportation facilities.

4.3 Deplorable condition of relief camps

Before the lockdown, not all migrants were able to return to their homelands. The government provided food and shelter to all those who were left behind. But the bulk of the relief camps lacked basic amenities such as power, light, fans, latrines, and water, and most of them were completely overcrowded, with the previous inhabitants refusing to let newcomers in. As a result, there were numerous clashes, mistreatments, and bullying incidents among migrant groups. Many workers were forced to live in exceedingly cramped and crowded quarters with hardly enough to eat. Seven to eight people were crammed into a small room with little to no ventilation and no place to make food.⁵ Notwithstanding the fact that the government had allocated food and housing for the migrants, it was discovered that most of the shelter houses and relief camps did not get enough food in a timely manner. They had to wait three to four hours in lengthy lines for their meals since the morning.

4.5 Inadequate health services

The migrant population, which included mothers, children, and pregnant women, was genuinely concerned about their well-being and their health inside the shelter houses. Because of hunger, malnutrition, socioeconomic position, job dangers, and poor living circumstances, this population was already prone to communicable illnesses. The poor conditions in the relief camps hindered them from taking any fundamental

safety precautions, such as social distance, frequent hand washing, and the use of sanitizer and masks, which were all necessary as part of the usual method for combating COVID-19. Unfortunately, amid their cramped and ill-equipped camp-accommodations, these precautions were exceedingly difficult or impossible to implement, putting the group at high danger of catching the illness.

4.6 Shortage of food

The report by SWAN that was released on 15th April 2020, stated that, “only 51%, of who were surveyed, had rations left for less than one day” .⁶ It further observed that, “two weeks into the lockdown, only 1% of the stranded workers had received rations from the government, and three weeks into the lockdown, 96% of the migrants had not received rations from the government at all, 70% had not received any cooked food, 78% had less than Rs.300 left with them and 89% had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown”.⁷ This distribution method became defective as a result of the lack of inter-state transferable ration cards that were accepted in all states. The impact of this situation has been exacerbated because a substantial number of migrants do not have a valid ID and have not been registered under any particular schemes set up for them.

4.7 Psychological issues

Migrants' deplorable living conditions and shortage of basic requirements have caused tremendous emotional stress which has resulted in their lives as relationship issues, substance misuse, alcoholism, sexual exploitation, domestic violence, and psychiatric diseases. Some of them developed suicidal inclinations as a result of their persistent financial difficulties, loneliness, worry, dread, and feelings of hopelessness and isolation. Not everyone was allowed to return to their homelands when the lockdown was imposed. Instead, they were left in migrant areas with no money and even just the prospect of returning home, causing them to become mentally distressed and restless. In the minds of these displaced workers, there was a residual dread that the recession that followed the epidemic would result in job cuts. The migrants' anxiety and misery accompanied them on their journeys back to their homelands, and it also prevented some of them from returning.

5.0 Concluding remarks

In general, the migrants' overall situation was pitiful. Their fears and difficulties did not go away. From being trapped in migrant regions to facing the hardships of reverse migration and survival issues, struggling through quarantine and financial crises during the pandemic was a harsh battle they had to fight while attempting to stay alive and avoid starvation and infection. They became vulnerable to a variety of physical and psychological diseases, and hardly receive any government provided medical care. They experienced social challenges such

as prejudice and violence from the local population, in addition to a lack of basic physical facilities and a paucity of allotted resources. Owing to the unpredictable nature of the pandemic and the uncertain turns it was taking with the passage of time, there was no end in sight for the crisis, and so the migrants couldn't expect any relief from this tragic situation they were locked down in. Due to because of the pandemic's unpredictable nature and the unforeseen twists it was taking with the passage of time, there was no end in sight for the crisis, and the immigrants couldn't anticipate any respite from the dreadful predicament they were trapped in. The government initiated a number of efforts to improve the well-being of migrants. One of these is the "Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan," which provided free food grains to migrant workerers without ration cards for two months. Another government initiative was the "Affordable Rental Housing Complexes for Migrant Workers and Urban Poor," which supplied low-cost rental housing units under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana. Although the government launched several similar projects, the most of them were poorly executed, and as a result, they became non-functional and failed to reach the full migrant community. For the welfare of the migrant workers who are living under absolute uncertainty about their work the government should try its best not only to initiate schemes but proper execution of the same.

Notes

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