

THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses issues regarding the effect of COVID-19 on the migrant workers. These impacts were 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. The first image of COVID-19 that India associates with are not ventilators or medical professionals in ICUs but of migrant laborers trudging back to their villages hundreds of miles away, lugging their belongings. Millions of migrant workers were left unemployed in India due to the lockdown and subsequent fear of recession. Many of the migrant workers had returned to their villages, and many more were just waiting for the lockdown to be lifted.

On the one hand, lockdowns and social distancing measures were drying up jobs and incomes, whereas they were likely to disrupt agricultural production, transportation systems, and supply chains on the other. This posed a challenge of ensuring food security and controlling already rampant malnutrition, particularly among children, which was 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 could reduce food insecurity and the pressure to return to origin among migrants. This paper explores and lists the changes needed and makes recommendations for the same. Even as the pandemic continues to rage, we have to put safety nets to meet the wave!

KEYWORDS

Migration, COVID-19, Recession, Lockdown, Labour

INTRODUCTION

On 24 March 2020, an unforeseen nationwide lockdown was announced, without any concern for those who accounted for more than 90% of the workforce in the country's unorganised sectors, especially daily wage workers, of which a significant share consisted of migrant workers. An overwhelming majority of workers were left to their own fate which resulted in the unprecedented, tragic and desperate mobility of hundreds of thousands of utterly vulnerable workers, whose jobs had suddenly disappeared. Most faced hunger or homelessness because they could not work, and took to highways to reach their native home barely 3 days after the announcement of the lockdown. The images of distress and exodus of workers, clutching their meagre belongings, often carrying children and elderly on their shoulders and backs and trudging hundreds and thousands of kilometres, determined to somehow reach their 'home', were reported both in the print and visual media for several weeks for the subsequent period. These people had lost not only their jobs but also their abode, with no hope of support from their employers or the government; many died on the way, of hunger, exhaustion and accidents. These were ultimate images of precariousness in India since the forced mobility during the partition in 1947; 'citizens' had been turned into 'outsiders'. It seemed as if, at least for a few weeks, the government was in a state of paralysis, with respect to this massive mass of humanity. However after a few weeks, the Central and State Governments arranged transport facilities for the workers. Upon their return to their hometowns, migrant daily workers were feared to be carrying COVID-19 infection from the urban areas where they had been employed. Migrants who traveled by trains have reported that food and water were not provided properly and were dumped at the train's entrance, leaving behind the laborers fighting for their share of resources. There are about 139 million daily laborers in the country, according to the World Economic Forum. The International Labour Organization had said that due to the pandemic and the lockdown, about 400 million workers had been poverty-stricken. Migrant laborers in the country are mostly from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar,

followed by Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, and Tamil Nadu. The cities of Mumbai and Delhi have recorded the highest number of migrant workers. They mainly comprise daily-wage laborers working in the manufacturing industries and constructions. They are often denied adequate healthcare, nutrition, housing, and sanitation, as many of them work in the informal sector. Daily-wage laborers are mostly from rural areas but are found in cities for work and many workers have no savings and live in factory dormitories, which were shut down due to the lockdown. Additionally, there is no central registry of migrant workers, despite the existence of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act. This article focuses on the huge difficulties that India's workers have confronted during the COVID-19 pandemic, need to establish resilient food systems that could reduce food insecurity and it seeks to investigate the causes and policy solutions during the current and ongoing crisis of employment and livelihoods.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

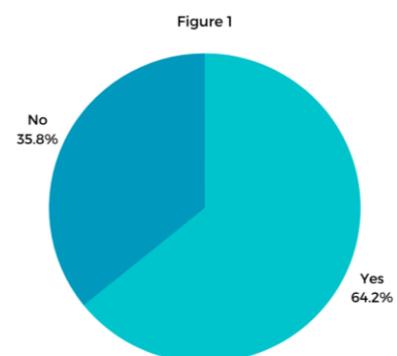
This study had a sample size of 120 participants from different labour chowks. The survey was conducted by August 2021 in Mumbai Suburban district. The sampling method used was simple random sampling with minimal sampling bias. The interview comprised 8 questions and each output variable is represented in the form of a pie chart.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Did you experience lack of work or joblessness during demonetization and GST implementation years i.e. 2017-18?
2. Have you migrated from other places to Mumbai for work or permanently settled here?
3. Do you migrate to Mumbai during the non-agricultural season?
4. What is your median monthly earning?
5. Do you have a second source of income?
6. How many days of ration was left when the 1st nationwide lockdown was imposed?
7. Did you go back to your native homes when the initial lockdown was imposed in March, 2020?
8. How did you travel back to your native home?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

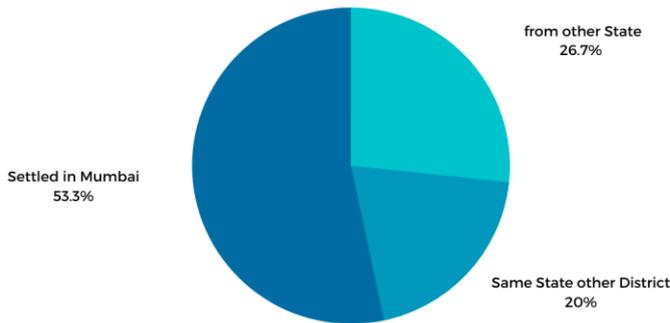
The survey was conducted among 120 volunteers from different labour chowks in Mumbai suburban district. **Figure 1 shows that 64.2% daily wage workers experienced lack of work or joblessness during demonetization and GST implementation years i.e. 2017-18.** The crisis in the world of work in India, to a great extent, is rooted in the neoliberal policy regime of the last three decades, in particular the extreme disruptions due to demonetisation and GST and the utter mismanagement subsequently. Significant job losses due to the shocks of demonetisation and complications of GST during 2017 and 2018, leading to large-scale retrenchment of workers. In short, the world of work, which in any case has been fraught with multiple and increasing vulnerabilities almost throughout the neoliberal era, entered into an even more fragile phase during approximately the last quinquennium, that is, on the eve of the COVID-19 pandemic.



And as we know, soon after the incidence of COVID-19 cases started picking up, a lockdown was imposed on the country, at a notice of 4 hours. The most significant fallout of this measure was the disappearance of millions of jobs, and the particularly heart-wrenching aspect of it was the distress of migrant workers who were forced to trudge along to get back to their distant homes. **Figure 2, shows that 20% volunteers had migrated from other districts in search of work to Mumbai but within the same state. Around 26.7% of the total volunteers had migrated from other states.** The migration of workers is more in urban areas due to the availability of employment opportunities. Internal migrants form a crucial part of India's economy. The Economic Survey 2016–2017 estimated that there are an estimated 100 million internal migrants in India, which make up about 20 per cent of the total workforce. They contribute an estimated 10% of India's economic output (Al-Jazeera, 2020) and play an important role in the economy of the country. Many of the internal migrants travel from poorer states such as Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the north to work in the industrial hubs of more developed states like Gujarat and Maharashtra in the south, or to the metro cities. **Figure 3 shows that only 36.7% volunteers who participated in this study migrated to Mumbai during the non-agricultural season.** They depart from remote villages seeking work in large cities to support families whom they usually leave behind. There are a range of motivations for seasonal and temporary migrant workers to live and work in Mumbai; The most common motivation was financial, to earn money and send remittance back home. **Figure 4 shows that 40% percent of total participants had a second source of income** which also includes seasonal migrants who returned to their homes during agricultural months to aid their families in farming. **According to Figure 5 of the 120 people interviewed 26,7% had a median monthly earning of Rs. 5000, most people fell in the median earning bracket of Rs. 8000 per month- 59.2%, 10% participants earned Rs. 10,000 as median monthly earning and not very surprisingly only 4,2% workers interviewed earned more than Rs. 10,000 monthly.** The monthly earning figures include income from secondary sources too. Migrant labourers who come to Mumbai in search of work are forced by skyrocketing housing prices to live on rent in cramped, dirty and unsafe conditions often in slums and pay rent from somewhere around Rs. 600 to Rs. 2000 a month. What remains is spent on survival and sending remittance back home. Hardly any penny earned gets saved. The near closure of economic activity with a 4-hour notice created complete chaos and havoc for an overwhelming majority of the workers, who did not have any social security or requisite means to withstand the challenges associated with such a huge disruption and uncertainty in their economic lives. Of course, it is not easy to have precise estimates of the unprecedented shock to the world of labour, but it reasonable to assume that for the first few weeks, at least four-fifths of the country's workforce must have been impacted in serious ways, given that economic activities in general were shut down almost entirely. As per Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimates, more than 120 million jobs were lost, that is, close to one-fourth of the workers had been deprived of

their employment. Furthermore, as we know from the official estimates now, the GDP growth in the first quarter of 2020 (April–June) has been put at –24%.

Figure 2



From the findings of our survey and *as stated in Figure 6 only 6.7% labourers interviewed had ration for a week. 10.8% had ration left maximum for two days while 26.7% people had ration only for a day. Horrifically 55.8% of total workers interviewed at various labour chowks said they didn't have access to cooked food.* Maharashtra was among the worst-performing states concerning workers' access to food. In Maharashtra, close to 95% of workers had no access to the government ration. This left no choice for the migrant workers but to return to their villages. *Figure 7 shows that*

out of 120 workers interviewed 72.5% went back to their native homes when the initial lockdown was imposed in March, 2020.

This figure not only includes workers who had migrated for work to Mumbai from other states or other districts of the same state but also daily wage labourers who had settled in Mumbai. No work meant no wages and no wages meant no money for paying off rent and buying ration. Huge numbers of laborers from a few states go back to their native places by walking. As also stated in *Figure 8 nearly 65.5% of workers interviewed who went back to their native homes travelled this distance on foot.* The migrants were unemployed as organizations and foundations had shut down. In the absence of money, jobs, food, savings, or shelter in large cities, they were desperate to reach their villages. They took to highways, hungry, tired and helpless walking for miles. Many NGOs and individuals came to their rescue providing them water bottles, meals and other aid however countless migrants died on their way because of the absence of food. After a few weeks, the Central and State Governments arranged transport facilities for the workers. *34.5% of workers interviewed stated that they went back by trains or buses provided by the government.* But Migrants who traveled by either trains or buses have reported that food and water were not provided properly and were dumped at the entrance, leaving behind the laborers fighting for their share of resources. Upon their return to their hometowns, migrant daily workers were feared to be

Figure 3

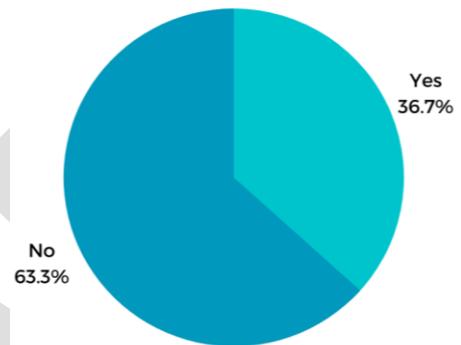
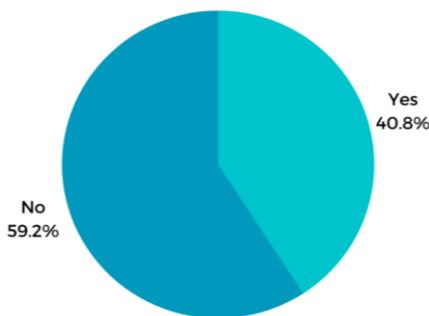


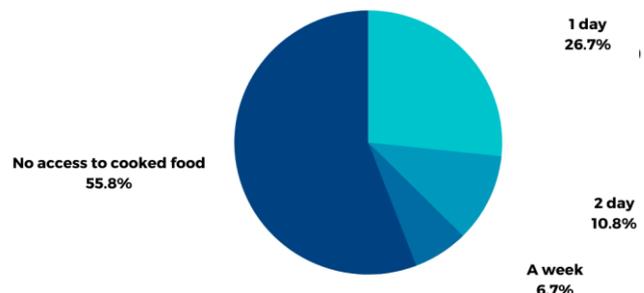
Figure 4



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Figure 6

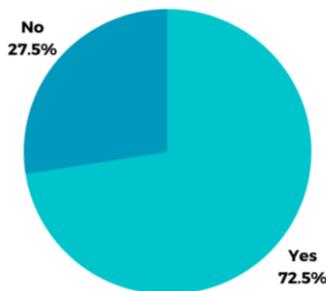


their hometowns. These laborers meet their economic crises by borrowing money.

CONCLUSION

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 a job as was experienced in India. A major challenge raised by the pandemic was food security and nutrition. On the one hand, lockdowns and social distancing measures were drying up work and incomes, whereas they also disrupted agricultural production, transportation systems and supply chains on the other. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the weakness of the global food system, with hunger becoming a critical issue in most countries. With slowing agricultural growth, expanding populations and resource constraints, achieving food and nutrition security will remain a major challenge long beyond the pandemic. A few policy changes are essential to improve India's hunger situation:

Figure 7



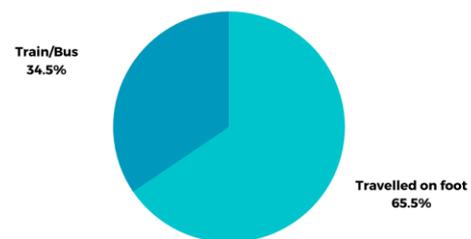
1. Universal PDS and supplementary programmes for nutrition

The plight of migrant workers at the height of the pandemic showcased that the lack of a universal PDS is a major limitation in achieving food security. The 'one nation one ration card' scheme should be operationalised through the proper issuance of ration cards to individuals seeking foodgrain so that the PDS can be accessed at any geographical location in the country.

2. Increased budget, technology, and research and development

In the 2021-22 Union Budget, funding allocations for the health sector have been nearly doubled due to the pandemic. The Budget also allocated more funds towards agricultural credit, and for the promotion of animal husbandry, dairy and fisheries sector. But merely allocating funds will not be enough for a nation that is home to about a third of the world's malnourished children. With supply-side constraints, the role of research and development crucial as it can offer long-term solutions for Indian agriculture. Farmers' access to the latest research can help in improving seed quality, decreasing pest and disease problems, increasing sustainability, reducing irrigation problems, lessening incidents of soil erosion, and increasing productivity to feed a burgeoning population. In fight against food insecurity, the global community needs to understand country-specific food security policies instead of constraining developing countries with limits under the WTO rules. The pandemic is a wakeup call for the world to ensure food security for all.

Figure 8



Though there is no official data available, it is estimated that currently there are at least 10 crore migrant labourers, accounting for 10% of India's GDP. Despite their contribution, their interests have not been effectively met. Unlike farmers, who benefit (though inadequately) from several government schemes and labourers in rural areas who benefit from MNREGA — migrant labourers receive no formal government support. There is a need to implement a comprehensive national strategy for migrant labour welfare. In light of

the lessons learned on the plight of India's migrant labourers, the following aspects must be incorporated in our country.

1. National migrant labourers data-base and unique identity

A unique Aadhar linked identification card must be generated for every inter-state migrant labourer. This Aadhar linked identification must be linked to the JAM trinity (Jan-Dhan, Aadhar and mobile) and would bring them under the formal net. Receiving benefits that are designed for migrant labourers, including cash transfers, must be contingent on obtaining this identity.

2. Comprehensive skill development roadmap

India's vast migrant labourers would continue to be short-changed, so long as they are low or not skilled. With rapid technological progress changing the landscape of employment across all industries, India's migrant labourers need to be enabled to not just be relevant, but also to take advantage of these changes. Training of India's ten crore migrant labourers with industry relevant vocational skills would go a long way in making India a global manufacturing hub. The wages that the migrant labourers receive must also be indexed with the skills they possess.

3. Migrant Labourer Provident Fund

The government must enact a law that institutionalises a provident fund covering all migrant labourers. A fixed amount must be determined, based on parameters such as age and skill levels, and must be deposited into a dedicated provident fund account. This contribution must be jointly made by the central, destination state and home state governments. This fund would act as a social net for the migrant labourers and their families.

The coronavirus epidemic has come with extraordinary, intense uncertainty. It is difficult to estimate how long and to what extent the impact of the epidemic will be on the lives of people and the economy of the country. The government has to come up with a well-crafted strategy to deal with this crisis. At the national level, greater coordination is required between government agencies separately tasked with migration and health mandates. As mentioned earlier 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.

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