



## COVID-19 AND MIGRANT WORKERS: INDIAN EXPERIENCE

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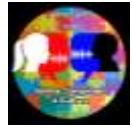
**Abstract:** *This paper aims to highlight the issues confronting India's internal migrant labourers during the recent pandemic. Our economy relies heavily on migrant workers. With the declaration of lockdown due to the pandemic COVID-19, migrant labourers not only lost their jobs, but their lives were also jeopardised. They had to deal with a hostile reception from their communities. Initially, the central government and several state governments did not place much emphasis on this issue. Following pressure from the media and, later, the judiciary, the central government resumed special train services to bring back migrant workers, announced free rationing, and announced the “Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan” for their employment. State governments also announced free rations for their citizens, as well as bus services to transport workers from stations to their destinations, provide food, and establish quarantine centres in various schools and colleges. Instead of blaming each other, both governments should work together and take a humanitarian approach to deal with this situation.*

**Key Words:** *Pandemic, Internal Migration, epicenter, industrialization, lockdown, initiatives, humanitarian approach.*

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### Introduction

Migration and population movement have always been an important part of human history. Millions of Indians rely on migration as a source of income. Migrants have become engines of our economic growth because they provide cheap labour to the destination economy while also maintaining consumption growth in their homes through remittances. In general, the flow of migration is heavily influenced by the different levels of economic development in different regions. The migrant movement can be broadly classified as either international or national. Internal migration refers to a movement within a country's borders. Internal migration, both intra- and inter-state, is massive and has complex dynamics. International migration is migration that



occurs outside of a country's borders. This article aims to highlight the various aspects of our country's internal migrant workers, particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic period. However, information on internal migrant labour is limited and out of date. These are the most vulnerable and undocumented migrants, migrating from rural to urban areas in search of work.

### **Objectives:**

The objectives of this article are as follows:

To highlight the factors responsible for the internal migration of India

To highlight the problems faced by the migrant labours during the recent pandemic.

To highlight the measures initiated by the central and state governments to solve the problems of migrant workers.

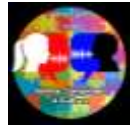
### **Methodology:**

The methodology followed in this article is a combination of historical, descriptive and analytical approaches. This article is based on both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources included the Indian census report, and the National Sampling Survey Report, while secondary sources included numerous books, articles published in various journals, newspapers, and websites.

### **What is Migration?**

Before delving into the issues confronting India's internal migrant workers, it is necessary to define migration. Migration is the movement of people from one location to another. The term 'migration' is derived from the Latin word 'Migratio,' means to change one's residence. Migration is the movement of people from one location to another. 'Migration is a geographic mobility that involves a change of usual residence between defined political or statistical areas or between residential areas of different types,' according to the International Encyclopedia. In general, the term migration refers to a relatively permanent change<sup>i</sup>. Migration, according to the Encyclopedia Americana, is the "coordinated voluntary movement of a significant number of people from an accustomed habitat to a new one."<sup>ii</sup> The possibility of gaining a foothold in the region entered determines the outcome of migration.

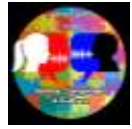
Several factors contribute to labour displacement within our country. Generally, people migrate to improve their economic situation by finding a better job; however, better job opportunities are not available in rural areas, so they migrate to urban areas. This is



frequently referred to as the migration pull factor. Lack of government initiative to implement various developmental projects, corruption, and a lack of good educational and healthcare services acted as push factors for people who were unable to access these services in their home country and thus decided to migrate to areas where these services are available in an adequate manner. Another important factor in migration is demography. Differences in fertility and life expectancy rates across regions create labour supply and demand imbalances. Surplus labour availability in backward regions, combined with higher growth in developed regions, results in a flow of labour from surplus areas to labour shortage areas. Environmental hazards also compelled people to relocate from one location to another. Several environmental issues, such as climate change, earthquakes, major industrial accidents, floods, soil erosion, and droughts, are some of the factors that force people to relocate.

In India, there is no reliable data on internal migrants. Internal migration data in India is primarily derived from two sources: the Indian Census report and migration surveys conducted by the National Sample Survey Office. A migrant is defined as “a person residing in a place other than his/her place of birth (place of birth definition) or one who has changed his/her usual place of residence to another place” by the census. The most recent available data on migration was collected during the 2011 census and was released in 2019 after a nine-year hiatus. The figure for internal migration in 2011 was 455 million, which we only learned about in 2019, with a net addition of 141 million migrants in the country between 2001 and 2011. Out of total migrants, 54.26 million are interstate migrants, with more than 12.5 million migrating for work/employment reasons, and this was in 2011, not 2020<sup>iii</sup>. The sheer volume of interstate work-related migration necessitates a more thorough examination and up-to-date data.

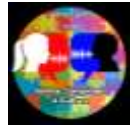
According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS), migrant labour accounts for approximately 92 percent of India's workforce with informal employment<sup>iv</sup>. Many migrant workers and workers in the informal sector are barely scraping by on subsistence wages. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation Report 2019, the average wage earnings per day by casual labour engaged in non-public works in urban areas ranged between Rs. 314 and Rs. 335 for males and nearly Rs. 186 to Rs. 201 for females during 2017-18<sup>v</sup>. Most migrant workers live in deplorable conditions, and they are sometimes forced to return to their home country due to pressure from local workers who believe that migrant workers have taken their jobs.



The declaration of a 21-day lockdown due to COVID-19 on the evening of March 24, 2020<sup>vi</sup> wreaked havoc on migrant labourers across the country. They were mostly migrant workers from unorganised sectors. They were the migrant daily wage earners, the ‘invisible population,’ the ‘nowhere people’ in our society. In their book “Good Economy for Hard Times,” Nobel laureates Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee and Esther Duflo stated unequivocally that migrants have become visible in the time of the Corona pandemic. But their voice is not being heard, it is still muted<sup>vii</sup>. However, as a result of the lockdown, migrant workers not only lost their jobs, but their lives also became uncertain and dangerous. According to the Indian Express, “Of the lakhs of migrants who throng the metropolises, 500,000-600,000, as per the central government's affidavit to the Supreme Court on Tuesday (31 March 2020), have walked back to their villages in a hurried and haphazard exodus.”<sup>viii</sup>

Due to poor planning by the central government and state governments, as well as the lack of any policy to assist them, thousands upon thousands of people were evicted from their temporary shelters and desperately attempted to return home from wherever they were working. According to some reports, workers must walk 500 kilometers to get home. Along with the physical exertion, these workers had to defend themselves against constant police assault. The migrant workers' precarious situation drew the attention of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet, who urged the Indian government in a statement to treat them with respect because they are already in a vulnerable position due to their social standing. “The lockdown in India represents a massive logistical and implementation challenge given the population size and its density and we all hope the spread of the virus can be checked,” Bachelet said while emphasising on the inhumane treatment meted out by the police to the migrant labourers. He further mentioned that “We understand the strains on police services at this time, but officers must show restraint and abide by international standards on the use of force and humane treatment in their efforts to respond to this pandemic”<sup>ix</sup>.

This crisis received little attention from both the Central and state governments. The lack of coordination between the federal and state governments became abundantly clear. Even when the situation spiraled out of control due to a mass exodus of labour migrants, the blame game between the state and the centre persisted. While the migrant crisis was unfolding, several state governments issued directives advising that state borders are sealed and migrants are barred from entering. During the pandemic, migrant workers were reduced to mere biological bodies as a result of being forced to take chemical baths as a disinfectant. According to

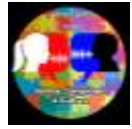


sources, the chemical used in this spraying was a combination of sodium hypochlorite and water, but district officials explained that it was simply a chlorine and water solution.

The role of the Indian Supreme Court, like that of the governments, did not press worthy. Though they directed the authorities to treat the migrants humanely, on April 3, it rejected a request that stranded migrants be housed in hotels and resorts. A video-conference bench of Justices L Nageswara Rao and Deepak Gupta attended the plea hearing and observed that millions of people will come up with millions of ideas, and the court cannot compel the government to listen to all of them<sup>x</sup>. However, on May 26, 2020, the Supreme Court took suo-moto cognizance of the migrant labour issues and directed the Centre and the State to immediately provide adequate food, shelter, and transportation to stranded migrant workers<sup>xi</sup>.

The majority of state governments and communities saw migrant workers as a potential source of COVID-19 infection. Migrants were also met with a hostile reception in their communities. Many of those who were able to reach their local village before the complete lockdown was announced had to face an aggressive response there as well. According to numerous reports, villages of returned migrants complained to police after the migrants returned home. These complaints arose as a result of the migrants' fear of becoming infected. Furthermore, migrant workers were kept in various isolation centres outside the village for a set period before being allowed to return to their homes. These isolation centres were ill-equipped, and even the workers were undernourished.

As previously stated, neither government placed a high value on this issue. With the media and civil society raising their voices, the central government and state governments launched a several initiatives to address the issue. The central government announced that for the next three months, 80 crore people in the country will receive free rations of 5 kg of rice or wheat and 1 kg of pulses of their choice<sup>xii</sup>. The central government directed the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF), which has been allocated INR 29,000 crore, to provide workers with food and shelter. As announced by the Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs, Punya Salila Srivastava, it has also instructed state governments to set up camps and conduct mandatory health check-ups for returnee migrant workers.<sup>xiii</sup> Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced packages under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana for people who have been severely impacted by the lockdown. The package's total cost is INR 1.7 lakh crore, and it is intended to help migrant workers, sanitation workers, health activists, and the urban and rural poor. Workers' regular wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment



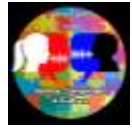
Guarantee Scheme have been raised from INR 182 to INR 202 per day. According to the government, this increase will result in an additional income of INR 2,000 per worker<sup>xiv</sup>.

Following the Central Government's announcement of various welfare programmes, several state governments announced various projects for the welfare of migrant workers. The Kerala government, on the other hand, has promised free milk to all migrant worker camps. This will address the issue of excess milk production while also providing migrant workers with a portion of their dietary needs<sup>xv</sup>. The Delhi government had asked migrant workers who were leaving for home to stay because school buildings would be used as night shelters. The Delhi Chief Minister, Arvind Kejriwal, stated that the government has provided food and shelter for migrants because returning home would defeat the purpose of the lockdown<sup>xvi</sup>. West Bengal has also announced that 8.5 crore people will receive free rations for the next six months, beginning on April 1. West Bengal also organised bus services to transport workers from stations to their destinations, provided food, and set up quarantine centres in various schools and colleges. The West Bengal government has already formed a high-level committee comprised of eminent specialists such as Nobel laureate Abhijit Banerjee, public health experts, medical experts, and others to deal with the ongoing crisis and to design policies to deal with the fallout of the Corona pandemic<sup>xvii</sup>. West Bengal Chief Minister's letters to the Chief Ministers of eighteen (18) states urging them to look after Bengal's migrants and her assurance to protect migrant workers from other states are examples<sup>xviii</sup>. This is done to prevent migrants from marching in their home states without medical tests because they are thought to be potential carriers of the virus.

Apart from government officials, civil society and activists have begun to assist migrant workers by providing information, distributing soaps and hand sanitizers, and opening community kitchens. Many people who are unable to physically assist the workers have sent financial assistance. On social media platforms such as Facebook, groups have been formed to provide information about migrant workers. For example, a group called Gana-Tadaroki Udyog<sup>xix</sup>, founded by progressive activists in Kolkata, regularly posts news about Bengali migrant workers stranded in other states, pleading for financial or ration assistance.

### **Conclusion**

We can conclude that the recent events involving migrant workers during the lockdown period demonstrated that we were not providing proper treatment to our migrants in either the destination or their home place. These events also demonstrated that we did not value our



poor and migrant workers as human beings. We see them as filthy, dirty, and unclean, and each of them is a potential pandemic suspect. However, it is worth noting that the money earned by these migrants through their hard work reaches their homes and helps to strengthen the state economy. However, under pressure from social media and the Supreme Court, both the Central and State governments have adopted a collaborative approach to address the problems of migrant workers, abandoning their initial strategy of blaming each other. This issue has created exceptional policy challenges, necessitating systematic and sincere cooperation and coordination both between the Centre and the States, as well as among the States. It is possible to argue that the recent pandemic and subsequent migrant worker problems have resulted in a new type of cooperative federalism, rather than central tendencies. This is a positive sign for Indian democracy. To deal with the current situation, the Central Government and State Governments should try to improve their cooperation through existing institutional mechanisms such as the Inter-State Council, Nity Ayog, and so on. Governments at both levels should consider a long-term strategy for dealing with migrants. They should be proactive in gathering the necessary information on migrant workers, without which no development projects can be initiated. Above all, sincere and immediate rejection of political sleaze and opportunism by all stakeholders will be critical in mitigating the recent pandemic and subsequent migrant worker issues.

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