

Challenges of Migrant Workers amid Covid-19 Pandemic: A Mapping

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Abstract: Majority of rural labour force move to the urban areas mainly to fetch employment opportunities where they generally engage in informal sector without any social security benefits. Moreover, India has already been facing a grave problem of unemployment and ongoing pandemic Covid-19 has further worsened the existing situation. Hence, ongoing pandemic has generated the scholarly debate regarding the conditions of migrant workers and their challenges in India. On the mentioned background, the current paper mainly highlights the rural labour force migration and their challenges amid Covid-19 Pandemic in India.

Key Words: Labour force, Workforce Participation Rate, Reverse Migration, Pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION :

Migrant workers are backbone of the economic development for their native places as well as for the places where they have migrated for fetching better livelihood opportunities. It has been well theorized that when traditional or less developed sector is exhausted to provide productive employment opportunities to the workers, consequently their marginal productivity falls. Thus, this situation generates an unlimited supply of labour which can be utilised for more development if they migrate from less developed sector to the highly developed sector which may absorb them (Lewis, 1954). Further, it has been well discussed fact that majority of rural labour force move to the urban areas and generally engaged in informal sector and that too without any social security benefits. Moreover, India has already been facing a grave problem of unemployment and ongoing pandemic Covid-19 has further worsened the existing situation. The ongoing pandemic has attracted the scholarly views regarding the conditions of migrant workers in India. On the mentioned background, the current paper mainly focuses on the rural labour force migration and their challenges in the time of Covid-19 Pandemic in India.

This article discusses some of the important challenges regarding the effects of Covid-19 on the migrant population. These impacts are most troubling for low-income households, because of their less earning. As they are already less well positioned to cope with earnings losses during a recession and also they have no alternative earnings as well as no social security benefits available to them. One could argue that a large section of the urban population includes migrants who for a desire for better livelihood leave their rural settlements and come to cities. However, with lack of requisite education, skills and training, they often end up in arduous employment accompanied with low wages, poor living conditions and lack of social protection. Hence to explain hardships faced by migrant workers is another main objective of the current article. A systematic analysis of available data has been made for the fulfilment of the same.

One could see that the lockdown and the subsequent recession are likely to first hit contract workers across many of the industries. Consequently, Covid-19 affects both the demand and the supply sides of the labour market and has huge implications for employment and decent work, pushing many families into poverty, and increasing existing inequalities. Further, the current paper highlights that largest migrant population is engaged in informal sector without any social security measures consequently, ongoing pandemic Covid-19 has vastly affected migrant workers in India. Furthermore, the lacuna in the existing literature of the migrant workers and their hardships due to Covid-19 as affects on male migrant workers have been discussed but female migrant workers and their loss of employment has been ignored. Numerous families are female dominated families and due to ongoing pandemic loss of female migrant workers affected livelihood of many families also. Hence, the losses of female migrant workers have also been discussed in the existing paper. Generally, migrant workers have always been ignored in the policy initiatives of the government. Hence, one could suggest that more focus on the policies for the welfare of the migrant workers has been need of the hour in India.

The present paper is divided into seven sections. After the introduction, the second section provides the summary of literature on the issue of migrant workers. While third section explains existing economic situation of Indian economy and fourth section highlights the economic challenges of migrant workers amid ongoing pandemic Covid-19.

The fifth and sixth sections of the paper explain impacts of Covid-19 on rural women workers and policy initiatives by Indian government respectively. The last section summarises the discussion.

2. Existing literature: a discussion

Existing literature has explained both ‘distress-driven’ as well as ‘demand- driven’ which are also known as ‘push factors as well as pull factors’ as the dominant determinants for migration of rural workers (Chandrasekhar, 1993). When agricultural sector is unable to absorb excess rural labour force, hence non-farm sector has been recognised as the last resort for surplus rural labour force (Vaidyanathan, 1986). Rural labour force usually migrates from rural sectors to the urban sectors and this migration may be inter-state migration, intra-state migration, intra-country migration and inter-country migration. It has been estimated that in the case of India, the migrants are over 450 million, whose movement can be connected to the search for employment¹. Further, existing theories of migration generally suggest that the overall patterns of movement are correlated to economic conditions in places of destination and origin, relationships that connect people between origins and destinations and the accumulated experiences at destinations among individuals and members of their community (Haas, 2012). Whether it is economic recession or an epidemic like Covid-19, migrant workers in large cities are forced either to stay in perilous conditions in the urban areas, or go back to their places of origin i.e. to villages or smaller towns. Moreover, large number of these migrant workers come from the most depressed and backward regions of the country, where there is currently little potential for employment and education (Khanna, 2020).

As a result of any health or economic crises at the destination also increase return migration to origin communities like what we have seen in current time. Migrant workers during the Covid-19 lockdown have faced many hardships because economic activities were almost at the halting stage due to the lockdown in India on 24th March, 2020 consequently about four crores of workers went jobless (Alok, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic has prompted numerous academic debates about its impact on health and the economy and on possible post-pandemic scenarios across the globe.

3. Existing economic situation of Indian economy :

Indian rural economy has already been suffering with acute problem of unemployment (Table 1) and ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has worsened the same. The biggest challenge facing India on this front is that of unemployment. While the problem is not new for the country, the impact of Covid-19 pandemic has further accentuated.

Table1. Unemployment rate (in percent) among the youth (15 to 29 years) in usual status (PS + SS) at the all-India level

Category of persons	Period (NSS round)				
	2004-05 (61 st)	2009-10 (66 th)	2011-12 (68 th)	2017-18 (PLFS)	2018-19 (PLFS)
Rural male	3.9	4.7	5.0	17.4	16.6
Rural female	4.2	4.6	4.8	13.6	13.8
Urban male	8.8	7.5	8.1	18.7	18.7
Urban female	14.9	14.3	13.1	27.2	25.7

Source: Period Labour Force Surveys (PLFS, 2017-18 & 2018-19), Government of India.

According to Ranjan et al (2020) more than 90 percent Indian workers are supported by informal sector activities (Table 2)

Table 2: Employment in informal sector

Category of workers	NSS 66 th round (2009-10)	NSS 68 th round (2011-12)	PLFS (2017-18)	PLFS (2018-19)
	Rural			
Male	74.2	76.2	74.4	76.5
Female	74.4	72.7	59.2	58.5
Person	74.2	75.2	72.1	73.6

Source: Period Labour Force Surveys (PLFS, 2017-18 & 2018-19), Government of India.

Contextually, social security measures are essential for the welfare of the migrant workers as Article 41 of Indian constitution under the Directive Principles of State Policy has also a provision for the same. However, majority of workers are working in informal sector and that too without social security measures (Table 3).

Table 3: Conditions of workers in informal sector (in percent)

¹ <https://www.bloomberquint.com/coronavirus-outbreak/a-policy-framework-for-indias-covid-19-migration> (last visited on 31st March, 2021)

Category of regular wage/salaried employees	Percentage of regular wage/salaried employees who had no written job contract					Percentage of regular wage/salaried employees not eligible for paid leave					Percentage of regular wage/salaried employees not eligible for any social security benefit				
	2004-05 (61 st round)	2009-10 (66 th Round)	2011-12 (68 th Round)	2017-18 (PLF S)	2018-19 (PLF S)	2004-05 (61 st round)	2009-10 (66 th Round)	2011-12 (68 th Round)	2017-18 (PLF S)	2018-19 (PLF S)	2004-05 (61 st round)	2009-10 (66 th Round)	2011-12 (68 th Round)	2017-18 (PLF S)	2018-19 (PLF S)
Rural															
Male	59.4	61.1	65.4	71.7	70.4	47.3	50.2	57.1	58.1	58.6	55.5	55.8	56.8	51.9	55.4
Female	56.8	55.3	61.9	58.5	58.2	48.7	47.6	48.1	47.9	49.5	60.8	61.5	63.4	55.1	57.7
Person	58.9	60.0	64.7	69.2	67.8	47.6	49.7	51.0	56.2	56.7	56.5	56.9	58.0	52.5	55.9

Source: Period Labour Force Surveys (PLFS, 2017-18 & 2018-19), Government of India.

In India, due to paucity of employment opportunities a large proportion of the rural workers migrated to towns and cities to work in non-agricultural activities which are casual as well as of low quality jobs such as construction labour, loading/unloading in mandis, shop assistants, mechanics, hawkers, as well as salaried workers. Moreover, it has been well argued that in the lower per capita monthly expenditure quintiles seasonal migrations are dominant in the informal sectors (Table 4) such as construction, manufacturing, transportation and the hotel industry, that too with less quality of healthcare due to nature of their work.²

Table 4: Temporary and seasonal migration rates by area and quintile levels, (2007-08)

Per capita monthly expenditure quintiles	Rural	Urban	Total
Lowest	44.8	8.3	40.6
Lower	32.1	6.2	25.6
Medium	23.8	4.6	17.0
Higher	17.3	5.0	10.2
Highest	11.4	2.3	5.8
Total	26.4	5.5	20.5

Source: Kesari and Bhaghat, 2013

Further, on the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) front, it can be argued that India has been experiencing slower economic growth and rising unemployment problems which further are severely worsened by the ongoing pandemic. It has been argued by Devi (2021) that in April, 2020 economic growth of India was only 1.9 percent which was 4.2 percent during 2019.

4. Economic challenges of migrant workers and Covid-19 pandemic :

One could argue that rural work participation rate has fallen in case of both male and females (PLFS, 2018-19), consequently rural workforce has been moving towards cities for better opportunities of livelihood as both farm as well as non-farm sector has been unable to absorb excess rural labour force in India as it has been well depicted by Table 5

Table 5: Work Participation rate for rural workforce aged 15 to 59 years, 2011-12 and 2017-18 (percent)

Category of workers	2011-12	2017-18
Rural men	82	75
Rural women	37	22

Source: Rawal and Kumar (2020)

Further, it has been estimated that around 40 crore migrant workers live in different parts of the country and majority of them migrated from the Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa. However, as far as destination states are concerned Maharashtra accounts for almost 52 percent of the total migrant workers of India followed by Gujarat, Delhi and the Punjab (Alok, 2020)³. As far as female migration is concerned both in rural and urban areas in India, female migrants have a higher percentage in comparison to the male

² <http://www.columbiapublicpolicyreview.org/2020/08/migrant-workers-work-for-india-will-the-indian-government-now-work-for-them/> (last visited on 31st March, 2021)

³ Alok A. Impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers: issues and challenges. International Journal of Research and Review. 2020; 7(7): 143-152

counterpart. The main reason behind this high percentage of female migration is marriage or associated reasons (Rajan et al., 2020)

These migrant workers are out of work either temporarily or permanently due to the pandemic induced lockdown conditions. As a result of lack of social security measures and the relatively higher cost of living in urban centres migrant workers (Srivastava, 2020) have migrated to their villages, their plight during lockdown made international headlines⁴. The said pandemic induced reverse migration to the rural areas has severely impacted demography, society and economy of rural India as reverse migration proved a big threat on people to fall into severe poverty due to increase in unemployment. In 2020 unemployment rate in the country has increased from 8.7 percent in March, 2020 to a disturbing level of 23 percent in April, 2020 (Vyas, 2020).

Nonetheless, rural labour market in India suffered worse than that of urban areas due to ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. With regard to this, CMIE⁵ reported that the urban labour force increased by 4.8 million (out of 4.8 million workers only 3.4 million got jobs and remaining 1.4 million were left unemployed) in the month August 2020. Whereas during the mentioned period, in rural India employment decreased by 3.6 million which resulted in an increase of unemployment in rural areas by 2.8 million and the remaining rural workforce has left the labour market, which caused shrinkage of rural labour force by 0.8 million (which has been reported as a sign of growing stress in the hinterland). Likewise, the fall in employment in rural India has been a combination of fall in employment across farming by 0.5 million (due to a fall in kharif-sowing related employment) and a decrease in non-farming activities related employment which declined by 3.2 million (due to a fall in MGNREGS employment) particularly in the month of August 2020. Further, labour markets in India have shown signs of stress as Labour Force Participation had reached 42 percent in June 2020 during its recovery from the decline in April and May 2020 but this level could not be maintained as it fluctuated between 40.4 percent and 42.2 percent during mid-June through late August 2020. Then, it declined during September and October to between 40 percent and 41.4 percent (Devi, 2021)

5. Effects of Covid-19 on female workers :

As far as women paid workers are concerned India recorded a decline in women's participation in paid labour force as compared to men paid workforce. It has been recorded that the number of men who reported themselves as employed declined by 29 percent between March 2019-20 and April 2020, whereas for women the change was much higher at 39.5 percent during the same period. Contextually, one could argue that even from an already low base, four out of every ten working women during the last year lost their jobs during the lockdown. However, women and Dalits suffered the greatest declines in employment in April 2020 by 43 percent and 36 percent respectively in India⁶.

6. Policy initiatives by the Government :

Supreme Court of India instructed centre as well as to state governments to immediately provide food, shelter and transport to the migrant workers during lockdown period⁷ as a policy measure to combat hardships of migrant workers.

As it has been argued by Dreze (2020) that reverse migration due to pandemic will affect different states differently, hence one could argue that government should have different policy frame work depending on the needs of the state in particular.

Numerous studies confirmed that employment opportunities available at locality level even at low wages could help in reduction of seasonal migration which is popularly known as distress migration (Imbert and Papp, 2018). Thus, it could be argued that the pressure on the government to create income generation opportunities for migrants at the source will be enormous in India. Likewise, between April 1 and May 20, 3.5 million workers registered for work under MGNREGA scheme between the months April 2020 to May 2020, which hinted an increase in rural employment⁸. In this regard Sharma (2021) argued that owing to the pandemic induced reverse migration around 11 crore rural workers joined rural job scheme (MGNREGA) during the year 2020-21, which is a record highest data since year 2006-07 (year of inception of MGNREGA). He further commented that during 2020-21 rural employment in MGNREGA has been recorded higher by 41.75 percent as compared to year 2019-20 (rural employment in MGNREGA was only 7.88 crore). It has also been confirmed by Sharma that during 2020-21, the number of households that completed 100-day employment also reached an all-time high of 68.58 lakh, an increase of 68.91 per cent from 40.60 lakh in 2019-20.

⁴ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/markets/stocks/news/indias-real-economic-dynamo-a-silent-force-that-brings-in-2-of-gdp/articleshow/68886500.cms> (last accessed on 31st March, 2021)

⁵ <https://www.cmie.com/kommon/bin/sr.php?kall=warticle&dt=2020-09-03%2012:56:40&msec=336>. (last accessed on 31st March, 2021)

⁶ [How covid-19 locked out women from jobs \(livemint.com\)](https://www.livemint.com/how-covid-19-locked-out-women-from-jobs) (last accessed on 31st March, 2021)

⁷ <https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/breaking-adequate-food-shelter-and-transport-to-be-immediately-provided-by-centre-states-free-of-costs-to-migrant-workers-sc-takes-suo-motu-cognisance-of-migrant-issues-157342?infinitescroll=1> (last accessed on 31st March, 2021)

⁸ 3.5 million new enrolments under MGNREGA, as 'distressed' workers return to villages | Hindustan Times (last accessed on 31st March, 2021)

7. CONCLUSION :

On the basis of above discussed one could argue that the entire world today has been severely affected by the covid-19 pandemic and in this era India is no exception and due to this crisis the most-affected has been the labour class especially migrant workers. The plight of the migrant labour class has shaken the country. Recently, the second wave of the ongoing pandemic again created the situation of reverse migration from metropolitan cities. Undoubtedly, the government has tried several steps with regards to combat adverse effects on the migrant labourers during the first wave of the pandemic. Among these initiatives government has initiated steps like cash transfers, public distribution of ration to migrant workers, arrangement of transportation to them and other forms of short-term assistance in order to reduce the suffering of migrants. Moreover, migrant workers neither had savings, nor access to welfare schemes in the cities which led reverse migration to their native places. One could argue by seeing the ongoing situation that due to increasing demand in coming future it would be essential for the government to generate more employment opportunities for migrant labourers back in their native places to ensure sustainability of their livelihood through substantial public investments by the government. Along with supply side, one could suggest that demand aspect should never be ignored hence, it is highly essential for the government to generate additional demand by pump-priming activities so that additional demand could be generated to have balanced growth in Indian economy. One could also understand that Indian economy will face more challenging situation even after eradication of Covid-19 pandemic, hence one could suggest that ensuring adequate job opportunities must be an essential step as we had also experienced that only growth will never ensure jobs. Hence, one could suggest that more investment should be desired especially in labour intensive sectors⁹.

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⁹ https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/labour-in-post-pandemic-india/articleshow/81524902.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=

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