

**Social Security of Migrant Workers in India : A Critical Analysis in the Light of Covid-19
Pandemic**

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ABSTRACT

A pandemic is a health crisis which tests the capability of a nation to effectively safeguard all sections of the population from its impact and to reduce human loss. Protecting the interests and well-being of the labour force is one of the aims of the International Labour Organisation and this is also necessary to achieve sustainable development goal of the United Nations. The Covid-19 pandemic had devastating effect in 2020 in India. Now India is facing second wave of Covid-19 still the issues of migrant workers are somewhat same. In any adverse situation be it pandemic or natural disasters migrant workers and their families suffer miserably. In India, an ample size of people annually migrates for earning in elementary services, sales, constructions and domestic industries. The pandemic have ravaged the migrant workers economically, mentally, emotionally, physically and has created a serious humanitarian crisis. The irresponsibility and neglect of the State towards the living conditions of the migrant labourers gained national and international attention during the lockdown period in 2020. Increase in adequate social security schemes and significant laws to protect the interests of the huge population working in unorganised sectors is the need of the hour. This research paper discusses the issues of migrant workers in India during the first wave and second wave of the pandemic respectively. Social security available in other countries is also discussed. Then the research paper discusses the measures undertaken by Government of India and their loopholes. Finally this paper provides some solutions and scope for further research.

Keywords: Covid-19 pandemic; Sustainable development; Social security; Migrant workers; Unorganised sector.

Introduction

A migrant is a person who travels from one place to another both within and outside the country to find work, to earn livelihood and to provide better educational facilities to the children. Although informal sector always existed in India the economic reforms and consequent trade and financial liberalisation have exaggerated the process of informalisation due to labour market rigidity. A large portion of Indian population who constitute main pillars of Indian economy and contribute significantly to the Gross Domestic Product of India are migrant workers who work in the informal sectors of the economy. According to the Census Report on migrant workers in 2011, migrant workers mostly travel

from rural areas to urban areas in quest of job opportunities specially in metropolitan cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Uttar Pradesh, Kerela etc.

On the onset of the spread of Covid-19 pandemic in India the Central Government of India in order to curb the transmission of the pandemic announced 21 days lockdown all over India on 24th March, 2020. This lockdown was implemented within four hours of its announcement. The Government in a haste to control spread of coronavirus failed to contemplate the plight of migrant workers who are the backbone of Indian economy. Without any predetermined course of action for making necessary arrangement for aiding migrant workers to reach their home safely the Government made a blunder. The migrant workers are vulnerable communities of India, their issues have neglected for years. The privileged class of visible India was not concerned about the interests of the migrant labourers. The pandemic made the privileged class realize the need for advocating the rights of the migrant workers who constitute 45.36 crore or 37 % of the country's population according to 2011 census. In World Bank's Report (2020) it is stated that ‘ “lockdowns, loss of employment, and social distancing prompted a chaotic and painful process of mass return for internal migrants in India and many countries.” ’ Covid-19 has accentuated informality and inequality in the society. According to the “Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18 , more than 70 % of the workers in the non-agricultural sector with a regular salary—most of them migrants—did not have a written job contract, and 50 % did not have any social security benefits (Government of India, 2019).”

The outbreak of any epidemic is not a health crisis it also impact economy and migrant labourers. India has seen mass exodus of people due to epidemic, famines, droughts, environmental factors in past also but this time the exodus of people is from work. This sudden decision of lockdown by the Government kept the migrant workers stranded in their place of work with no source of income. The migrant workers are the worst sufferers of this pandemic. At first to curb the spread of the disease the Central Government did not allow the migrant workers to return to their homes. The social media spread infodemic about the migrant workers that if they are allowed to travel back to their place of origin that will lead to spread of the disease. Later on the State governments were allowed to make necessary quarantine arrangements and food supply for migrant workers so that they can return to their homes. However all these measures were adopted at a much later time although the measures proved inadequate. India witnessed the historical mass exodus of migrant workers from 14th April, 2020 to their home towns when daily wage earners gathered at railway stations and bus terminals with their children. Shramik Special trains and special buses were arranged for the migrant workers . However online booking system was initiated as it was assumed that they have smart phones and that they will be able to book tickets online. Many migrant workers could not book tickets online so they started walking miles after miles to reach their cities. During this journey the health conditions of migrant workers and their children deteriorated. It was reported that one pregnant woman delivered her child in between her journey towards. In another heart wrecking incident, 16 migrant workers died as they felt asleep near railway tracks after walking for miles to reach their destination. In some cases migrant workers returning home faced violence from members of their community. Many died because of heart attack. All these incidents made the privileged class of visible India the agony of migrant workers who are historically disposed of.

Kailash Yadav, from Uttar Pradesh during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic stated that, ‘ “Ab Delhi kabhi nahi jayenge. Yahin khetibaadi karenge, noon-namak khaenge (I will not go to Delhi again. Will pursue farming here, live on salt)” ’.

‘ “R.S. Tripathi, Uttar Pradesh textile worker, has opted not to return to Surat (Gujrat) as when he was travelling by bus with other workers and the police ordered them to go back to Surat from Dahod. He further says that we spent money from our own pockets to reach our native places. Still, we faced humiliation and were sent back. Our crime is that we want to go home. One of his co-workers, Mr G. Mishra, a migrant worker from Bihar mentioned that if this is the treatment we are getting in Gujarat, we will not return. We had a very humiliating experience at Dahod. The (cops) treated us like terrorists.” ’

According to surveys conducted amidst second wave of Covid-19 pandemic, Santoshi Mandal, a domestic worker in the Capital city sometimes survive on puffed rice.

Santoshi said that, ‘ “ I had returned from my hometome three months back.I am sustaining myself from whatever little grains I brought back at that time. The employers have said that they will not pay for the one month that we could not work due to lockdown. If we receive aid from the government, it will ease our problems to a great extent.” ’

Rita from West Bengal who stays in Seemapuri said that, ‘ “ All the three households where she worked have asked her not to come, and only one of them is still paying her salary. My husband works in a small factory, due to which we were able to manage food and daily requirements. But the loss of pay is affecting my children’s needs. I hope they call me back soon. Till the time the virus is here, I don’t feel secure.” ’

Goutam Giri, a resident of Malviya Nagar has been hit by pandemic in several ways. He said , ‘ “ Currently, I am depending on my friends who have graciously agreed to help us. There is no existence of ‘cash’ in my life at this point. My mother was the sole earner in the family, but she succumbed to Covid-19. Now, I do not know how to sustain my family. For the past month, I have not even been able to buy milk for my 18-month-old child. I can not put into words how we are trying to sustain ourselves.” ’

Inspite of such incidents reported during the first wave of Covid-19 in India still now Government have not undertaken necessary measures to uplift the condition of migrant workers. Even after one year when India is facing second wave of Covid-19 the policy makers have not come up with any concrete plan to protect the right to livelihood of migrant workers. The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 has not been implemented yet. Two measures that need immediate implementation are legal governance of the informal sector and a Government record on the number of inter-state migrant workers in India. Although several schemes have been started by both Central and state governments to mitigate the sufferings of the labour class but the main issue is that the labour laws are too employer friendly and the presence of middlemen and contractors in the informal sector have made the situation worse for migrant workers. The first Covid-19 period exposed the collapse of labour administrative system. Inorder to face new challenges in coming days it has become essential to

revive the established body of the Labour Ministers' Conference and to allow the state governments to frame rules under the labour codes.

Methodology

In this descriptive- analytic method of study has been used to describe the situation of migrant workers during pandemic. The causes underlying the sufferings of migrant workers has been analysed to know about the factors behind their economic and social exploitation during pandemic. Doctrinal method of research is used in this article. It is concerned with documents rather than people and society or experience and observations etc. It is concerned with legal propositions and doctrines. Doctrinal research involves a significant amount of background reading so that the researcher can acquaint himself with the area of law being studied. Doctrinal research is the most common and popular form of research where field work is not needed and library reference fulfil the needs of the study. The data used in the research is collected from primary, secondary and tertiary sources. The primary sources of data are statutes and court decisions. The secondary and tertiary sources of data are journals, research papers and articles available online.

Issues faced by migrant workers during Covid-19 pandemic in India

- **Inadequacy of resources-** Migrant workers are the weakest section of our society. The rash decision of the Government to announce nation-wide lockdown played havoc on migrant workers specially women migrant workers. Women migrant workers are highly over-represented in the informal sector and often remain unpaid or inadequately paid. Seasonal workers specially those who are from tribal communities suffered a lot. The sudden lockdown left the migrant workers jobless and with little amount of money with which surviving in big cities became impossible for them. Although Government asked the landlords to grant relaxation and exempt payment of rents still many landlords pressed for payment of rents. Maximum of the migrant workers reported that they did not receive ration from government agencies at their place of work. In urban areas the migrant workers lacked the means to self-isolate themselves. So, the migrant workers were left with no option and decided to left the cities and set towards their villages. They began the herculean task of walking towards their village this made the health conditions of women and children worse.
- **Violation of fundamental rights:** Migrant workers' fundamental rights, such as their right to livelihood, right to employment, and right to health, were violated as a result of the socioeconomic system's inherent inequity. People's fundamental rights, according to Article 21 of the Indian Constitution, are not limited to mere survival, but also include the right to livelihood, housing, dignity, liberty, and civic health. The privileged class of India conceptualize fundamental rights as belonging to themselves and not others. The conception of fundamental rights as 'mere survival' for underprivileged class is a root cause behind migrant workers living in drudgery and without being recognised by the upper class. However, in reality, fundamental rights belong to everyone as it is essential to live a quality life otherwise life will become a mere animal like existence. So in a civic society these fundamental rights must be extended to the marginalised sections of the society also. Another factor contributing to migrant workers' ignorance of their rights is their lack of participation in the electoral process. They leave their home for work, and their contractors or employers do not want them to go back and vote. As a result the identity of migrant workers have trickled down to that of refugees in their own country. They had to stand in long queues for getting food and the volunteers

were interested in clicking their pictures which is no doubt an inhumane behaviour. They have an equal right to live with dignity like other citizens of India. Police brutalities against the migrant workers added more trouble. They faced violence from police for not being able to adhere to Covid-19 guidelines. After reaching home also some workers faced violence from family members and villagers as they were viewed with suspicion as to carrier of disease. Not only they lost their means also but also the cooperation and sympathy of the community.

- **Faulty socio-political system:** The migrant workers don't have faith in the existing socio-political system which is flawed. They are of the notion that whatever privileged class do they do for their own benefit, good for all concept is missing from the contemporary society. They felt their own powerlessness and oppression of the upper class in the existing social order. Politicians also remain silent on the issues of migrant workers. Migrant workers feel a sense of injustice where the system instead of working for their benefit have worked against them. They feel as they are poor nobody will listen to them.
- **Lack of awareness:** Migrant workers may be unaware of existing programmes accessible to them, such as employment injury or unemployment compensation, due to a lack of knowledge and language hurdles. Administrative processes' inherent complications may hinder them from receiving social security payments. "Social protection responses should build resilience, reduce poverty, facilitate economic reintegration into the labour market, tackle inequalities and foster social cohesion (ILO 2017) and particular attention should be paid to migrant workers in vulnerable situations (ILO 2020a)". Most of the migrant workers can not enjoy the benefit of the schemes that are available to them as they lack identity proof like ration card, adhaar card. So, it is mandatory to have some identity proof and enrollment under any government schemes to reap the benefit of the schemes. Consequently, unregistered migrant workers without any valid proof of identity will remain deprived of the benefits of the schemes. However, contractors most of the time don't take initiatives to enroll the migrant workers officially under the schemes. The Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979 (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) provide benefits like minimum wages and monetary assistance to go back home to inter-state migrant workers however this Act does not extend protection to those migrants who have set towards home on their own.
- **Insufficient measures:** Measures that were adopted to tackle the problems of migrant workers were inadequate. A critical gap existed in providing standard relief (provision for fooding, water, sanitation and shelter). State governments were asked to provide for temporary shelter homes at destination areas. However the living conditions and sanitation was not up to the mark in the shelter homes. Many families did not receive ration properly. The compensation under the Disaster Management Act, 2005 for loss of lives and livelihood is also inadequate. Similar is the situation with regard to benefits under the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board (BOCWWB). According to the statute, one must have worked for 90 days in the previous year to be eligible for registration. Furthermore, the majority of states do not register migrants, and registration is non-transferable. Furthermore, the total number of BOCWWB-registered workers in the country is only 35 million (The Economic Times, 2020, March 27). Delhi food rights group in a letter addressed to Delhi's CM amidst the second wave of Covid-19 pandemic points that, Nazia Khatun, a domestic help in Delhi city said that, "I have a family of six to feed. At present, we can eat only one one meal a day. I am also required to pay 5000/- rupees as rent. Where am I supposed to get the money from? What has the government done in this entire lockdown period for the poor?" The Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyaan (DRRAA) was

concerned about 69 lakh people who did not possess ration cards and registered themselves under government scheme for food. The DRRAA in its letter to the Chief Minister said, ‘ “The guidelines state that in the initial phase of distribution, grains will be provided to two lakh beneficiaries and later as per demand and need assessment from the field, up to the maximum of 20 lakh beneficiaries. This is grossly inadequate.” ’ The primary cause of concern of DRRAA is that no date has been provided as to when the scheme will be rolled out.

Measures adopted by India to mitigate this crisis

Provision for food distribution- Under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), 392.7 million people approximately received free food grains, and under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana 26.6 million LPG cylinders were distributed. However, ‘ “an assessment by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows that overall support by the central and state governments through various cash and kind transfers and other measures, such as healthcare infrastructure, testing facilities and tax relief, was only about 0.2 per cent of India’s GDP (IMF Policy Tracker).” ’

Government Schemes- Approximately 350 schemes has been adopted by the Central Government of India during the first wave of Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 for providing relief to the migrant workers. These schemes included making arrangements for special trains and buses so that migrant workers could reach their destinations, provision of temporary shelter homes, food, clean drinking water, and other medical facilities for those who opted to travel by foot. Standing instructions were given to the employers not to deduct wages of workers during the period they are not working. Further welfare funds worth 31,000 crores were announced to support the registered building and construction workers. Government of India launched Migrant Workers Return Registration scheme to count the number of daily workers struck in other cities in order to make quarantine arrangements.

Under a special livelihood intervention plan package, the Odisha government has proposed a Rs. 17,000 crore package to create job and income creation options for migratory workers and farmers. Agriculture, fisheries, and animal resource development will all benefit from the initiative, which will create jobs.

Judicial responses

The Supreme Court ordered the Government during the first wave of coronavirus pandemic in 2020 to provide free transportation, shelter, food and water to the migrant workers until they reach home. The Supreme Court directed the railway companies to ensure proper arrangement for trains so that labourers could travel back to their villages within fifteen days. According to UN independent human rights experts, ‘ “The Indian Government must urgently comply with a Supreme Court order to ensure the wellbeing of more than 100 million migrant workers, after coronavirus measures left them jobless, forcing them to travel long distances home.” ’

A Supreme Court bench of Justices Ashok Bhushan, S.K. Kaul and M.R. Shah took cognizance on a suo moto migrant workers case whereby the Supreme Court directed that all cases registered under the National Disaster Management Act, 2005 regarding lockdown violations against the migrant workers should be withdrawn. The apex court, which conducted court sessions through video

conferencing, noted that returning workers must be registered with the right authorities in order to receive welfare benefits, which include job chances in their home states. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) had proposed both short- and long-term mitigation measures for the Supreme Court to consider in order to improve migrant workers' conditions and protect their basic human rights. Some short term measures of NHRC was, ‘ “In order to estimate the in-flow of migrant workers, states should collect the data of migrant workers at the point of departure in the originating state as well on arrival in the destination states. This will help states to effectively plan quarantine and relief measures for the migrant workers. For the purpose of securing journey allowance of the migrant workers the NHRC sought a direction for implementation of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. NHRC further suggested that women migrant workers should be provided menstrual products across the country. One of the measures suggested was that each state must be directed to ensure proper functioning of shelter homes and that special care needs to be taken for the accommodation of pregnant women, feeding mothers, children, and elderly persons. Another noteworthy suggestion was that states must identify the industries where migrant workers are present and required medical facilities and nutritious food should be provided in shelter homes.”

Justice M.R. Shah of the Supreme Court stated on May 24th, 2021 that, ‘ “Whether it was the national lockdown in 2020 or mini lockdowns in 2021, psychologically the attitude of migrant workers remains the same — they would want to go home.” ’ The Bench of Justices Ashok Bhushan and Shah which was hearing migrant labourers case was not satisfied with the submissions filed by affidavit by the Government regarding dry ration. According to Justice Bhushan the affidavit mentioned mainly those people who are covered under the Food Security Act i.e people having ration cards. The apex court stated that migrant workers roaming from one city to another city can not be expected to have ration cards. The court ordered the Centre to give details in an affidavit about what steps the Government has undertaken under the Atmanirbhar scheme to provide dry rations to migrant workers .

In April 2021, the Delhi High Court ordered the Government of the National Capital Territory of Delhi to ensure that migrant laborers and daily wagers in the region do not endure the same hardships they did during the lockdown in 2020.

The Supreme Court of India on 29th June, 2021 directed that all states must execute ‘one nation, one ration card’ scheme which by 31st July so that migrant workers can avail the benefits of ration from any corner of the country. The Supreme Court directed the Central Government

‘ “to develop the Portal in consultation with National Informatics Centre (NIC) for registration of the unorganised labourers. The Central Government having undertaken to distribute additional quantity of foodgrains as demanded by the States/Union Territories for distribution to migrant labourers under some Scheme framed by the States, we direct the Central Government, Department of Food and Public Distribution (Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food and Public Distribution) to allocate and distribute foodgrains as per demand of additional food-grains from the States for disbursement of dry foodgrains to migrant labourers. We direct all the States/Union Territories to register all establishments and license all contractors under the The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation Of Employment And Conditions Of Service) Act, 1979 and ensure that statutory duty imposed on the contractors to give particulars of migrant workers is fully complied with. The State/Union Territories are directed to run community kitchens at prominent places where large number of migrant labourers are found for

feeding those migrant labourers who does not have sufficient means to procure two meals a day. The running of the community kitchen should be continued atleast till Covid-19 pandemic continues.” ’

Brief overview of social protection schemes:International perspective

In 2019, France ranked top in the world for its dedication to social benefits, with the government spending about a third of its GDP on social services. Scandinavian countries tend to be around the top of the list, with Denmark, Sweden, and Norway all spending above 25%.The Southern African Development Community (SADC) has agreed on a Social Code that addresses migrant rights; it encourages members to protect their immigrants, provide them with equal access to the social security system, and provide illegal migrants with at least minimum protection.The National Insurance Scheme (NIS) provides financial payments for sickness, unemployment, death of a partner, retirement, and other reasons in the United Kingdom. Everyone above the age of 16 years is usually automatically assigned a national insurance number.Federal Old-Age (Retirement), Survivors, and Disability Insurance, OASDI,Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, TANF,Health Insurance for Aged and Disabled,Grants to States for Medical Assistance Programs for low income citizens are some of the noteworthy social security schemes in the U.S. Unemployed people in Norway are entitled to daily cash compensation to compensate for their loss of income as a result of their unemployment. When compared to previous working hours, working hours must have been cut by at least 50%. Income from work and income from daily cash benefits during unemployment, sickness, maternity, and adoption are used to determine daily cash benefits.Unemployment benefits are normally roughly two-thirds of previous earnings.

Suggestions

1. Compulsory registration of migrant workers when they arrive in another state and issuance of universally valid shramik card/ number to the migrant workers will ensure them the promised benefits under Government schemes. This will also enable the Government to keep a record on the number of internal migrant workers present in a state at a time.
2. Eradication of segregation of labour markets into formal and informal labour markets should be given priority. It is generally seen that workers in the informal sector are more vulnerable to exploitation so unitary in labour market must be given preference.
3. In times of crisis migrant workers and other vulnerable sections of the society must be shown sympathetic attitude by police and health workers. The brutal treatment meted by police authorities became a source a mental agony for the migrant workers. They were already emotionally and financially drained they just wanted to go back to their homes for which they cried for help and faced several hardships. Time and again it has been seen that the migrant workers has always faced this same situation during past pandemics in India. So, government must in the face of any natural calamities before passing any order must make proper arrangements for the vulnerable groups.
4. Renewed attention must be given to agrarian economy and small scale industries to support returning migrant workers and their families.
- 5.According to National Sample Survey estimates, over 39 lakh persons are employed as domestic workers by private houses, with around 26 lakh of them being female domestic workers (Statsitics-2011-2012). Now the number of domestic workers have increased specially in mega-cities.The Ministry of Labor and Employment is working on a National Policy on Domestic

Workers, which is currently in the planning stages. Domestic workers will be included in the current legislations as a result of this National Policy on Domestic Workers. Domestic workers will be allowed to register as unorganized workers in order to receive benefits and rights. They will also have the freedom to their own associations/unions. Under this policy domestic workers shall have the right to minimum wages and social security. This policy will also guarantee protection of domestic workers from abuse and exploitation. Further they will also have access to tribunals and courts for grievance redressal. Implementation of this policy is necessary as it is seen that in view of lack of protection of domestic workers they have been exploited by their employers. Many are still without any work since last year as they are not called back to work by the private households.

6. The state government must appoint appropriate authority to inspect the living, sanitation and medical facilities at shelter homes.

Conclusion

For the first time, the COVID-19 situation has brought "invisible" migrants and the phenomena of migration to the forefront of policy concerns about social protection. The need for social policy consolidation is being emphasized by the pandemic lockdown. The current migrant catastrophe obscures a main scenario: enormous unemployment and precarious, unsafe work that has characterised labour in recent years. Based on the existing policy framework, workplaces must provide improved protection and decent labour standards for informal employees after COVID 19. Governments must also acknowledge that rural employment is significant to millions of people's survival. Rural social protection systems, such as The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, should be spread to urban areas, and other welfare measures, such as maternity and child protection should be made more widely available. The Indian government's pandemic plan has serious flaws, and it is critical that those flaws be rectified and a new pandemic policy introduced that is more humane, adaptable, and inclusive. Internal migration should be prioritised in policy making. In addition, there is a need to improve viewpoint of Indian society towards internal migrants.

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