



UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRANT WORKERS AND HOW TO MAKE INDIA 'ATMANIRBHAR' FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

The paper is an attempt to gauge the impact (on the migrant workers) and provides an overview of diverse measures adopted by the government to support the 'migrant workers' as a measure to deal with the pandemic. COVID-19 has caused unprecedented far-reaching impact on social, economic, political and psychological conditions on the people of walks of life in India. With ongoing lockdown, trade and economic activity in the country has slowed down. This has affected even the states, irrespective whether they are the industrialized, less industrialized or with large population. Manufacturing activity has been adversely affected due to absence of 'working labourpower' as labour exodus to their home state was large during lockdown period. Restarting of the economic activity naturally depends on availability of unskilled, skilled and trained labourforce. With forced migration, economic activity came to a standstill as the rule of 'work from home' does not apply to sectors like manufacturing and construction. In this context, skill mappings, enhancement of skills, provision of training are some of the measures followed by business sectors in addition to providing health security to their workers. It may be noted that nature of these measures undertaken and their implementation vary from state to state. It basically depends on the 'preparedness of the state' to deal with the pandemic and formulation as well as quick implementation of related policies, towards sustainable growth via 'atmanirbhar India' Whether it's 'lives or livelihoods'

Keywords: Labour Force, Economic Activity, Migration of Labor, Unskilled Labour, Skill Mapping, Training and 'atmanirbhar'

Introduction

March 2021 marks the completion of a year with COVID 19 pandemic and its ill effects. It remains well written that the COVID-19 pandemic has propelled a paramount effect on the Indian economy (Das & Das, 2020; Nath 2020). The unexpected announcement of lockdown on 24 March 2020 was purely to prevent the unprecedented spread of the virus and thereby avoid the likely health damages of the covid virus. The outcome of this lockdown has caused huge magnitude of disruptions in the socio-economic sectors of the economy. To mention a few - unemployment, shutdown of business, plight of millions of unskilled, semi-skilled, and skilled migrant workers (child labours and pregnant women), engaged in the informal/unorganized sectors of the economy.

Objective

The aim of this research paper is to provide general assessment of the impact of Covid-19 in the Indian context with reference to 'migrant workers. The said paper also provides some insights on the measures that may be taken to minimize the pain of 'migrant' workers in India and help in moving towards sustainable skill development. This will also push the economy towards being 'atmanirbhar'.

Hypothesis

1. The lockdown has caused disruption of livelihood of migrant workers
2. The unemployment among the migrant workers has caused unprecedented hardship

Methodology

This paper is based on data collected from secondary sources. The news articles and reports published, which are related to effects of Covid-19 (in the context of migrant workers in India) in general, has been reviewed for this research paper.

Description

The Coronavirus disease of 2019 better known as COVID – 19 has created the first of the widely spread no-economic crisis across the globe. It has caused unprecedented devastation, loss of human life and disruption worldwide.

Lockdown resulted in migration and affected manufacturing sector

The advent of Novel Coronavirus pandemic is threatening the entire global labour setup. It has affected all the core sectors of the economy and the government. Other than being impeding to human wellbeing, it likewise has had colossal damage on the trade and economic activities across the globe. It is observed that most of the economies have imposed 'lockdown' to curtail the spread of COVID-19. In India, the first case of coronavirus disease was reported in Kerala in January 2020. The disease spread later with the increase in number of reported cases from different parts of the country. Hence, the Government of India took necessary action by



announcing lockdown in every corner of the country in March 2020 and onwards. The metro cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Kolkata, Chennai are densely populated which has experienced a spurt in cases of COVID-19, and these cities are undoubtedly the engines of growth and development for the Indian economy. The pandemic has led to socioeconomic disruption, inhibiting the growth of entire economic environment (Rakshit and Paul, 2020) [1]. India is facing unemployment crisis because of the COVID 19 from another angle -the migrantworkersandworkersinformalsectorarebadlyhit(ILO2020). Corona virus outbreak led to a loss of livelihood for those employed on short termcontracts or without any job contracts. This includes several jobs in differentindustries. To name a few, in tourism industry, suppliers of vegetables and flora n fauna to the hotel industry, local transport, the crisis of Mumbai dabbawallas and so on.A similarpicture can be painted in other industries (like manufacturing and non-manufacturing)due to drastic decline in demand. Large manufacturingindustriessuchascement,plastics,rubber, food products and textiles have taken steps to lay off the workers

Understanding the ‘Migration’ and its magnitude

Migration is relocation of labour. This may be due to many reasons such as change in jobs, marriage, and better living conditions at the other place and so on. This relocation could either internal (within country) or international (across countries) borders. Census 2011 provides some information about migration. India had approx. 456 million migrants in 2011 (about 38% of the population) as compared to 315 million migrants in 2001 (31% of the population), as per the Census 2011 data. Almost all of the total migration was internal migration. During the period, from 2001 and 2011, the migrant population increased by 45%, whereas the total population growth is 18% (Census, 2011) [2].

According to the data provided by the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are at the receiving end as ‘net outflow of the people’ whereas Maharashtra and Delhi are at the receiving end as ‘net inflow of the people’ due to their industrialized nature as compared to other states. (See Exhibit 1) (News1, 2020) [3].

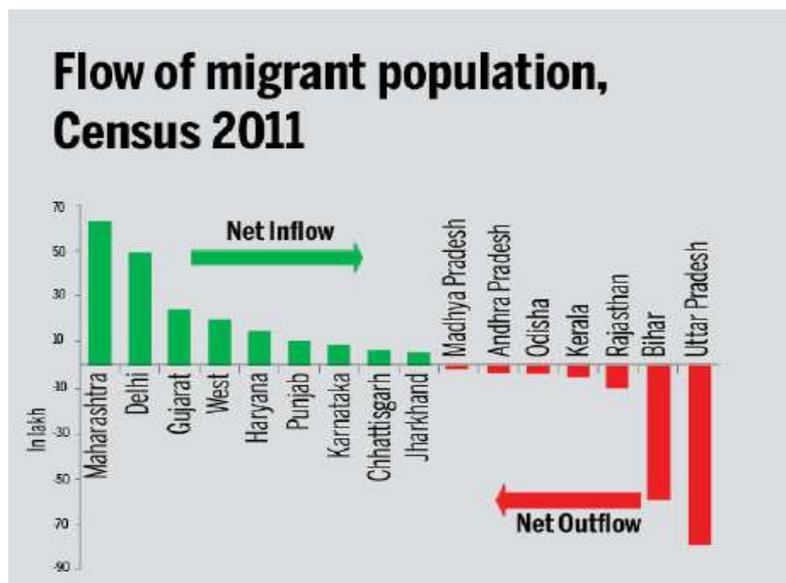


Exhibit 1: Flow of Migrants as per Census 2011 (News1, 2020) [3]

According to the 2011 Census, India has 450 million migrants of all types (such as inter-state, intra-state, inter-district, and intra-district). As per the RBI statistics, it is estimated that nearly 40 million inter-state migrants were required to leave their working place and go back to their hometown. It may be noted that the labour force actually works on the site whether is production plant or construction site and the ‘work from home’ arrangement is not applicable to them and hence the sectors such as construction and manufacturing were the ‘most affected ones’ (News1, 2020) [3].

Addressing the problem of migration

Indiaisaleadingcountryoforiginofinternationalmigrantswithabout17millionmigrantsaccording to the latest estimates released by the United Nations (2019). A considerableproportionoftheemigrantsfromIndiaare skilled and semi-skilled workers migrating to Gulf countries. Kerala tops theemigration rate among major Indian states. With variations or uncertainties in demand and not much opportunistic scenario due to lockdown imposed, people lost their existing jobs and are left without work for several months. To further add to the disaster, the news about second wave of the pandemic has created fear in the minds of the people. As a



result of the migration, the states have to handle ‘more than expected’ cases. In this situation today, availability of the working people has become an important aspect for restarting of the economic activities.

There is severe dearth information available on the migrant labour in the informal sector and it seems that they are even faceless today. It may be noted that this migrant labour population in the unskilled labour category is on the move constantly and helping our cities and industries grow with their labour. With no concrete availability of the data about them, it is creating a challenge for the authorities to resolve their problems (Narain and Janank, 2021) [4]. It is estimated that informal labour constitutes almost 90% of the total workforce in India. The ongoing pandemic has affected this segment to a larger extent. It has made this migrant population visible, and highlighted two challenges: absence of correct data pertaining to the informal sector in India and two, lack of facts on the scenarios shaping the behaviour of stakeholders in the informal economy. In view of this it is required that migrant workforce may be included in the social policy formulations. In this context, use of behavioural economics in policy formulation and economic decision-making could help authorities better understand various approaches to inclusive and sustainable development.

As per the figures available from the ‘Shramik train passengers,’ it was found that most of the migrant workers are from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar with the largest share of returning migrants. According to the survey of migrants in six states, it was found that about one third of the respondents said that they will not go back to the cities and resume their work (News1, 2020) [3]. This certainly calls for establishment of ‘better working infrastructure’ at their hometown in terms of ‘development of industry sector’.

In this context, it may be advised to have priority in developing industry and related infrastructure in lesser developed areas. This may call for formulating the policy that puts emphasis on decentralization of the cities, development of far-flung areas. This will not only create employment, but also help in addressing problems of the migrant workers (News2, 2020) [5]. This situation can be used as an opportunity to create suitable employment conditions.

Conclusion, Challenges and the path ahead for sustainability

As cited by Shikha Srivastava, this lockdown has highlighted the presence of the migrant population, but there is a long way to go (Srivastava, 2021) [6]. It is required to formulate specific schemes and delivery models for migrants, both at the source and the destination regions. Some of the major source states such as Odisha, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh are addressing this issue by establishing the ‘Apna SevaKendras’. These are the centers set up in high migration prone areas to advice or support a migrant, or potential migrant about the schemes they are eligible for, and provided further assistance with the documentation process right till they get access to the benefits.

The spread of the COVID-19, and subsequent nationwidelockdown churned a turmoil in the lives of millions involved in the informal sector. To alleviate the effect of the lockdown on thevulnerablegroups, GovernmentofIndiaannouncedpackages in three slots which included concentration under the Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, MGNREGA workers, economicallyvulnerablemen, women, elderly, andunorganised-sector. Theschemeentailed distribution of wheat, riceandpulses every month to 80 crore beneficiaries till the end of November 2020. Central Governmentalso gave an order to the state governments to utilize the Building and Construction Workers WelfareFund of to provide relief to Construction. TheRBIalsojoinedlaterwithasharp cut of interest rate along with a series of unconventional measures.

The loss of livelihood ignited mass exodus of millions of migrant labourers across various states, who started on a long ‘barefoot’ journey with theirfamilies, in the absence of the transportation facilities due to sealing of state borders. The tragic scene resulted in the state governments to take action of providing food and shelter to protect the lives.

Skill enhancement is a way towards becoming ‘Atmanirbhar’ and sustainable

Addressing the problem of migration needs development of industrial regions across the country and an assurance of ‘employment opportunity’ to both skilled and unskilled workers. Another way is ‘industry mapping’ to be done by the state authorities. This is required to identify major industries therein and the present and future manpower needs of the same. Accordingly, training and skill enhancement of the existing manpower can be undertaken. This will ensure ready availability of the ‘required skilled people’ to the industries in the region. It may be noted that nature of these measures undertaken and their implementation vary from state to state.

Skilled manpower is vital to begin economic activities. In this context, just look at the statement by A M Naik, L & T Group Chairman and Chairman of NSDC- National Skill Development Council – “Skilled talent is must to develop the economy. Large industry can take care of training needs of their manpower. The real problem is nearly three fourth or more of the workforce are employed in the medium and small-scale sectors. They are the people who needs skill enhancement as they cannot afford to have training camp for 40 to 50 people. This is what the NSDC or the ITI needs to target.” (News3, 2021) [7]



This speaks the truth and underlines the importance of training, skill enhancement in the context of resolving problems faced by the migrant workers.

It is necessary for the manufacturing industry to become 'atmanirbhar' by utilizing quality raw material which is nothing but the trained and skilled manpower. As people find better working environment and social facilities in their native state, they will not think about relocation. This will help in becoming states more independent as well as more responsible towards meeting social and development related outcomes. In turn, as each state of India becomes 'atmanirbhar' in meeting their needs, it creates a positive scenario for the economy as well as for the society. With assurance of employment opportunities and better social facilities available within each state, there will be less compelling reason to relocate and a greater chance towards inclusive growth and development.

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As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 4
Number of Words: 2,523 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 14,385 (approx.)