



Preparedness & Impact of Covid-19 on Migrant Workers in India

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has breakdown the health, the social and economic structure of the entire world. Covid-19 pandemic is one of the worst happening in the history of mankind. Government of every country trying to control the pandemic by imposing several measures, including lockdown and discipline of social distancing.

In India, because of the diversified population, different income groups, and social habits of people, the extended lockdown has made a severe impact on the lifestyle. Daily wage earners, migrant workers are the severe sufferers. Extended lockdown lead to exhaust their handful savings forcing them to start their journey to hometown. Struggling for daily bread and butter, the unavailability of transport facilities worsens their journey. This review highlights the issues related to health, economic, and social challenges faced by migrant workers during the extended lockdown, strategies adopted by Central and State Governments.

Keywords: Covid-19; Migrant workers; India.

Introduction

Today, world is under burden of Covid-19 pandemic. Almost all countries are facing this challenge leading to breakdown of health, social and economic structure. It is said, Covid-19 pandemic is one of the worst happening in the history of mankind. 4.3 Million Cases of infection and 0.2 Million deaths till May 2020 were reported around the globe [1].

Every Government is trying their best to control the health, social and economic breakdown in their respective countries. Healthcare professionals are now Corona Warriors who are fighting against this pandemic risking their lives. Researchers and Pharmaceutical companies are toiling hard to develop a suitable medication to control the Covid-19 spread.

In India, because of its diversified population, income parity, social habits problems related with Covid-19 pandemic are different. Government had to implement lockdown as only tool to control the spreading of infection. Imposition of lockdown and discipline of social distancing was advocated by World Health Organisation as only measure to fight against spreading of Covid-19 [2].

Extended phases of lockdown stopped almost all economic activities leading to unemployment of huge population. Survival during lockdown was not a big problem for higher middle class or middle class of society. Lower income class and daily wages earners are main sufferers of this pandemic. There was a question before them – Shall we die from Covid-19 or hunger?

Workers who migrated from different states for job, mainly from northern part of India were serious sufferers. Daily wage earners who worked on construction sites, contractual helpers, carpenters, electricians, drivers, domestic helps failed to retain their employment during lockdown. They survived for few days with the short savings in hands. It was assumed that lockdown would not be extended more than one month; therefore they tried to reside without leaving for their hometown.

In order to control the situation, Government had to extend lockdown. This had made difficulties for survival of migrant workers. Unemployment, loss of savings, and uncertainty forced them to leave for their hometown. Millions of migrant workers started their journey to hometown. Unavailability of transport facilities worsens their condition.

Most of the migrant workers were from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar who were working in metro cities in India. Challenge was accepted by them to start their journey to hometown on their foot. Those who contributed in construction of roads are now walking on the road barefooted. Those who build the beautiful luxurious mansions are now walking unprotected under intense heat of sun.

It might be very disturbing picture of century where a group of migrant workers walking hundreds of Kms with their hungry children, helpless women, starving elders. It was unfortunate to report until May 11, more than 29 have died of exhaustion and 83 have died in accidents on the road. Many of died in accidents on road. It was very shocking that in Aurangabad, train tracks have turned red with blood of migrant workers who were on their way to home town. These tired migrant labors took rest on rail-track assuming train services are stopped. The people felt the elevation of the track could protect them from wild animals but were cut down by goods train.

Challenges for migrant workers

As India crossed around 500 cases of Covid-19, The Central Government imposed the lockdown. As it was sudden decision, people did not get enough time to prepare themselves for the uncertainty. Lockdown had forced small and big business to shut down making the workers jobless. Local authorities adopted stringent measures such as creating strict containment zones to close off hotspots, which left millions of migrant workers stranded. Administration's rapid response to lockdown slowed down the spreading of Covid-19 cases. But it raised concerns about worsening situation of migrant labors, existing inequalities and their vulnerabilities.

During first phase of twenty one days lockdown which began March 25, reverse migration of migrant workers was started for their hometown. They could not afford paying house rent or spending for basic needs as financial savings were exhausting day by day. This was biggest challenge.

Health was major concern because children, women, elderly persons started their journey towards hometown on foot. Extreme heat

of average temperature 40 degree celcius makes their journey vulnerable. Children, women, elderly persons were starving but still kept walking. Hygiene and social distancing was difficult to practice for these migrants during journey. Un-availability of health services during their journey led to death of many vulnerable migrants.

Number of workers who walked on foot to villages after lockdown	5,00,000-6,00,000
Persons in relief camps or shelter homes	1.03 mn
Workers given shelter or food by employers	1.5 mn
Those given food by govt and NGOs	8.4 mn
Number of shelter homes: kerala accounts for around 70% of them.	22,257
Source: Government of India's submission to petitions in the Supreme Court	

Table1: Table of Facts.

Government of India has begun a challenging task to map migrant workers scattered across the country. According to official estimates, 5-6 lakh workers walked on foot to their hometown on foot after lockdown. More than 1.03 million workers took shelter in relief camp or shelter homes. 1.5 million migrant workers given shelter or food by employers. 8.4 million workers were given food by Government and NGOs. 22,257 shelter homes were provided by Government.

Role of central and state governments

Mapping of scattered migrant workers was challenging task, the Government of India created database of millions of such workers to ensure relief packages. This database is being used to make transport arrangements for workers to their homes from their respective relief camps. Government has already admitted that 5,00,000-6,00,000 migrant workers had to walk back home on foot because transport was not facilitated them [3].

It is evident that provisions of labor laws are found to be diluted leading to the crucial shift in the way of plight of the migrant workers in India. It reveals the fact that chief distinctive feature of migrants is the sharp dissociation between the site of their work; mostly they are from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Odisha. Central Government along with States and Union Territories are working on schemes to extend jobs for workers in plantations, horticulture, livestock related work.

Co-relation with Economic breakdown and state policies

In India, Covid-19 pandemic exposed the limitations of public health and loopholes in execution of labour law. It is estimated that, more than 100 million workers have reportedly lost their employment during lockdown. Of the total workforce of India, around 90-92% (about 450 million) is informal, which means they work without social and employment security. It was observed that 'Vande Bharat Mission' was not adopted effectively for them.

As the economy collapsed because of extended lockdown, burden was shared between Central and State Government. Several relief packages were announced to ease life of migrant workers. Scheme of free ration for stranded workers, expansion of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) are

good examples which provided relief for workers. It had helped migrant workers to occupy themselves in these schemes at their hometown [4]. Center has started working on 'One Nation One Ration Card' scheme to be accelerated by August 2020 [5,6].

Conclusion

Covid-19 pandemic was a sudden episode, it was dynamic. The government didn't get enough time to prepare because it was anticipated. Data given by China and WHO on Covid-19 was not enough to expect any such sudden happening in India. The imposing lockdown was the only measure with the Government of India to control spreading of infection. In such dynamic cases, a great deal of anticipatory analysis was needed. The administration would have planned on a cluster of the population likely to suffer more.

We could have prepared better considering the vulnerable group of people. So that they would be able to access the essentials. Although, it was a tough situation to plan the Government of India took rapid decisions that were equally supported by states and administration. The execution of lockdown was inevitable. The Lockdown exit strategy was not framed. Extended lockdown shut down the companies, manufacturing, construction activities leading to unemployment of daily wage earners, contractual workers. Uncertainty and loss of a handful of savings forced them to start their journey on foot to hometown raising many concerns of health, economy, and social aspects to Government.

The government needs a comprehensive plan to ensure the safety, health, and economic stability of these migrant workers who will move to the city for a job. The pricing of livelihood is expected to increase. Now, it is a challenge before Government authorities to ensure safe health, hygienic living conditions. Hygiene, social distancing if not practiced properly, may lead to the high spreading of Covid-19 again.

This was a transitory shock to Government, public health communication, asymptomatic transfer of infection, sustainability, ensuring the safety of the considerable size of the population is a major challenge to Government.

Extraordinary time needs extraordinary measures. In today's era, substantial economical safety, sustainability, countermeasures to reduced fiscal capacity, are required actions to repair the damaged

social, health, and economic fabric of India. Central Government along with State capacities shall overcome this dynamic situation very fast.

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