

## **Impact of COVID-19 on India's migrant workers**

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**Abstract:** The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic is an unusual tremor to the Indian economy. On 24 March, the Government of India under Prime Minister Narendra Modi ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, limiting movement of the entire 1.3 billion population of India as a preventive measure against the 2020 coronavirus pandemic in India. The Economic Survey of India 2017 estimates that inter-state migration in India was close to 9 million annually between 2011 and 2016, while the 2011 census pegged the total number of internal migrants in the country staggering 139 million, according to a report by the World Economic Forum. Considering the large percentage of the population trapped in the informal net, providing legal and economic protection will be a massive undertaking during this pandemic. From losing income to leaving for home in a rush to facing police brutality, these workers are facing various uncertainty. This paper purpose is to identify the problem faced by the migrant workers and the measurement taken by the government towards them. The collection of data has been considered from various online sources. This paper concludes the multiple solutions which can be applied by the government for the workers so they can be coping this epidemic during the lockdown.

**Keywords:** Migrants Labourers, Lockdown, Covid-19

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### **Introduction**

The epidemic of Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19) due to SARS-CoV-2 has become a global health emergency due to its severity, deaths reported and potential to spread all over the world (WHO, 2020). Almost the whole world got affected by this pandemic. India, a nation with over 1.3 billion people, is among those most affected by the pandemic (MOHFW, 2020). Prime Minister Narendra Modi on March 24 instructed all Indians to stay at home for three weeks in order to control the spread of the novel coronavirus. However, the short four-hour notice for the closure essentially stranded the 470 million migrant workers in no-man's land. The Prime Minister declared the first lockdown on 24 March and continued till 15 April. The second round of lockdown, slated to completion on May 3, began on April 15. The ongoing lockdown to control coronavirus spread has been extended by another two weeks, which will continue until 17 May. The Centre on May 17 extended the lockdown for two more weeks till May 31 (Sanghera, 2020). Government announced Lockdown extension in containment zones till June 30. All the sectors have been affected like education, hotel, tourism, aviation, construction (Joshi et al., 2020; Joshi & Bhaskar, 2020). Migrant laborers are among the most vulnerable parts of the "informal sector," which make up 80 percent of India's workforce. Internal migrants make up around 20 percent of the workforce, according to the 2016-17 Economic Survey by the Indian government. And, according to the UN Educational, Science and Cultural Association, they contribute an estimated 10 percent of India's economic production. The economy of the country is founded upon these workers' heads. They construct malls, multiplexes, hospitals, apartment blocks, hotels. They work as hands on the factory, delivery boys, loaders, cooks, painters, rickshaw pullers. They stand by the side of the road during the day selling fruit and vegetables, and tea and flowers. Such challenges are dwarfed even by the struggles and misery faced by millions of migrant workers and everyday workers with no economic support or a safety net for welfare. Some have questioned the lockdown (Frayer and Sushmita, 2020). "The lockdown was timely. In such circumstances, any delay could have resulted in a spike of the cases. The lockout has certainly been expensive in terms of increasing hunger and rural deprivation, but the benefits are substantial in terms of a smaller projected epidemic rate," says Ramanan Laxminarayan, Director of Disease Dynamics, Economics and Policy.

### **Migration of Workers**

Pervasive problems persist for hundreds of thousands of migrant workers in India whose lives have been disrupted by the country's sudden shutdown in response to the coronavirus pandemic threat, said the UN human rights chief. Many of India's migrant workers, estimated to be at least 120 million, may now try to walk return to their hometowns, hundreds or thousands of miles from the urban areas for which they migrated for work. India's finance minister, Nirmala Sitharaman, declared more than \$22 billion in coronavirus relief money.

The top priority of the country, Sitharaman told reporters, is "to reach food to the poorest of the poor, to get money in the hands of those who need it immediately." Indeed, India has the battlefield with an economy that has slowed down for several quarters (Express News Service, 2020). Despite rising fiscal deficits and low tax revenues, the program is a combination of food security and direct cash transfers focused on the poor—struggling migrant workers and day-to-day wage earners (Joshi, et al., 2020). According to the Union home ministry, states and union territories provide food for 25 lakh migrant workers and accommodation for 6.75 lakh (Chatterjee, 2020). Assam health minister Himanta Biswa Sarma said that the state will provide to people stranded outside due to the lockdown. "We have been receiving a distress call. The state is creating a database of migrant workers stranded outside the state, where they can provide financial assistance.

### **Challenges**

While the authorities and NGOs have made arrangement for their shelter, most of them want to go back to their native places to avoid the hardships caused by the sweeping obstacles. The concern is that these migrants would transmit coronavirus from urban areas where they served to rural areas where there are not enough hospitals (Kapur, 2020). With a fraction of the hospital beds and ventilators per capita in developed countries, Indian doctors and public health experts fear that an epidemic of coronavirus cases could overtake their hospitals on a larger scale than what is happening of Italy and the United States — and lead to millions of deaths. Field studies have consistently stated that short-term labor mobility in India is important. In the past week, these arguments have been confirmed as roads throughout the country have been pedestrianized. In its grim hurry, the Union Government, when it declared the lockdown, did not think about how migrants, caught unawares, at the wrong location, at the wrong time, would respond. We know that all. Several migrant workers in western India protested in the streets demanding a wage and permission to return to their villages. The situation can only escalate when they switch between the fear of contracting the virus and the fear of zero income. Local governments in Delhi and some other states have set up shelters for migrant workers who cannot work and could not return home (Gupta, et al., 2020). Non-profit groups are still trying to help. But India is a patchwork quilt, not every state is adequately equipped. Jan Sahas, a non-profit Indian, recently published a survey, "Voices of Invisible Citizens", on the effect of the lockdown on migrant workers. Interviewed 3,196 migrant construction workers from northern and central India. The findings paint a dismal picture: "62% of workers did not have any information about the government's emergency healthcare programs and 37% did not know how to access the current systems (Malini, et al., 2020). The novel coronavirus brought migrants a sudden prominence in the national discourse. But the acuteness of their situation today is due to the fact that India has overlooked them during usual times.

### **Conclusion**

Migrant workers, daily wagers, low-income group families have become shelter-less and lost their livelihoods as a consequence of a complete lockdown announcement. With no-access to livelihood and nutritional needs, these groups have no other option but to move out of their current dwelling units in the cities/towns and proceed to their native villages, which are located in faraway places. Throughout the meantime, thousands of people gathered on highways, exit points, transit areas and boundaries, railway stations, etc. This has resulted in a chaotic situation, and these groups have faced severe hardships for food, water, and shelter. Unfortunately, if some individuals who are infected with COVID-19 are among these groups, then there is an enormous possibility of exposure to the virus. Such groups would also need to be closely managed at the source, transit and destination points. Containment and 4 mitigation efforts need to be taken on a high priority. The possible interventions to handle this situation can be:

- Responding to staff in need as a result of lockdown through the Labour Helpline (1-800-1-800-999)
- Engaging civil society stakeholders in migrant programs (many of which are part of the NACO initiative for identified regional regions)
- Preparing a kit of COVID-19 impact reduction tools and distribution processes
- Access the website or information available about the migrant populations
- Reach out to the migrants at source, transit, and destination points [9]
- • Track operations closely through a supervisory process and promote cooperation between states / districts, etc.
- Provide counselling services as required.

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