



# IMPACT OF PANDEMIC TOWARDS MIGRATION OF LABORER: THE EMERGENCE OF INVISIBLE INDIA

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## ABSTRACT

*International Organization for Migration (IOM), in a study in 2005 records that around 190 million people i.e., 3 per cent of the world's population, lived in a place different from the one in which they were born. This figure throws light on the colossal amount and complexity of the phenomenon called migration. It is local as well as international. This had been there since time immemorial but given the recent developments i.e., Covid 19 Pandemic, it has reached proportions never seen before. Of late heart rendering pictures of their plight have sent shivers down our spine. The very group that had been contributing towards the development of our country by the sheer sweat of their brow, their labour, are now struggling to get back home alive. Their voices are neither heard by the politicians in the villages they had left behind for "greener pastures" nor by the ones in cities where they spend a large part of their working life. The present paper tries sheds some light on their present state amid this pandemic.*

**KEYWORDS:** Covid-19; pandemic; migration.

## INTRODUCTION

International Organization for Migration (IOM), in a study in 2005 records that around 190 million people i.e., 3 per cent of the world's population, lived in a place different from the one in which they were born. This figure throws light on the colossal amount and complexity of the phenomenon called migration. It is local as well as international. This had been there since time immemorial but given the recent developments i.e., Covid 19 Pandemic, it has reached proportions never seen before. Of late heart rendering pictures of their plight have sent shivers down our spine. The very group that had been contributing towards the development of our country by the sheer sweat of their brow, their labour, are now struggling to get back home alive. Their voices are neither heard by the politicians in the villages they had left behind for „greener pastures“ nor by the ones in cities where they spend a large part of their working life. The present

paper tries sheds some light on their present state amid this pandemic.

What situation was seen in most of European countries can be seen in ours too, with the principal actors being different. The crisis that hit most European countries sometime back was "Refugee crisis" and ours at present is the "Migrant crisis". With an uncertain future these "refugee" and "migrants" undertake a long and tedious journey in search of a future and safety. The translocation here is not of international borders but the boundary of nation-state.

India is still a developing country with the majority of its population still finding it difficult to make ends meet. The World Bank had published a data on India's poverty profile in 2016. Although the data that was under study was of the year 2012, the number quoted as staggering. 270,000,000 (27 crores) Indians are poor which in other words comes down to the fact that 1 in 5 Indians is poor. The seven low-income states together comprise of the 62% of India's poor and these are home to 45% of India's total population.

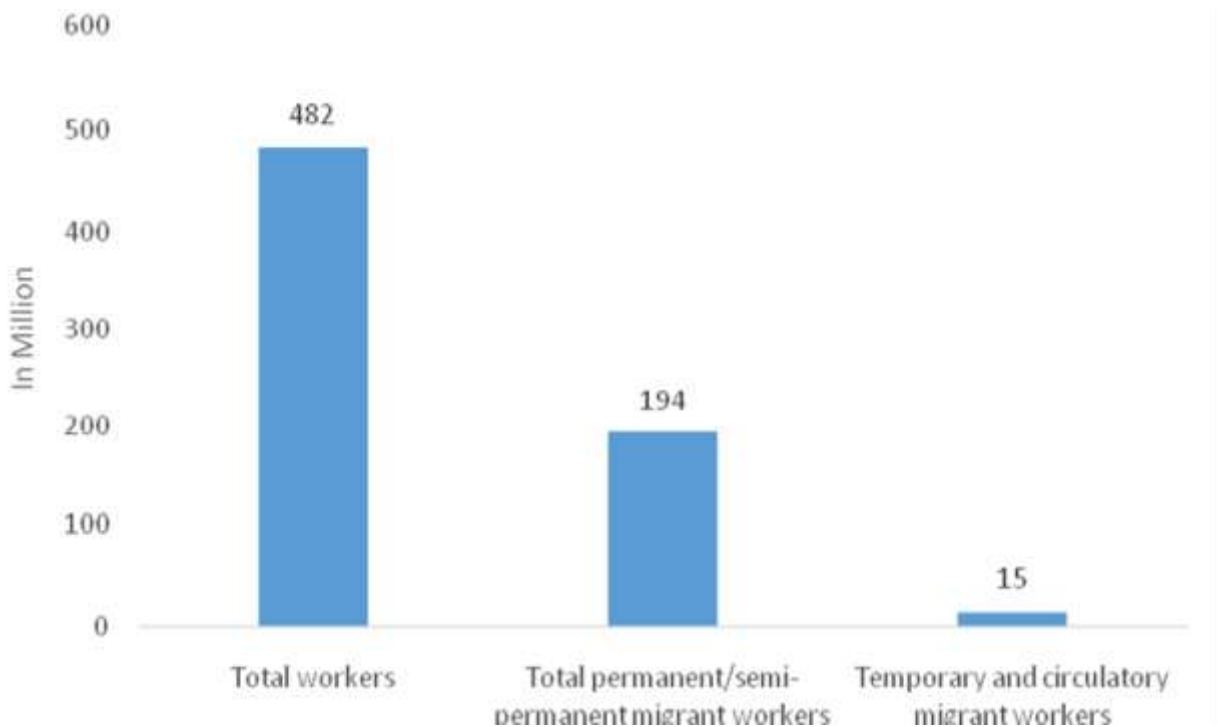


State	Number of poor (In millions)
Uttar Pradesh	60
Bihar	36
Madhya Pradesh	24
Odisha	14
Jharkhand	13
Rajasthan	10
Chhattisgarh	10

Source: WB <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/infographic/2016/05/27/india-s-poverty-profile>

The Indian economy is heavily dependent on migrant workers. It (migration) is a sort of a livelihood strategy for millions of people. As per 2011 Census there are around 194 million are permanent and semi-permanent migrant workers out of 482 million workers in India. Add to it another 15 million short-term migrant workers of temporary and circulatory nature. These migrant labourers are spread all across the country with their visibility more in high income states like Delhi, Goa, Maharashtra, Gujarat, Haryana, Punjab and Karnataka. These states are among the worst affected by Covid-19 as compared to the low-income

states like Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and Rajasthan where there are higher rates of out migration. What one needs to be aware is the fact that the sudden rise of Covid cases in out migrating poorer states may also be the result from this migration. For example, there are migration corridors within the country – Bihar to Haryana and Punjab, Bihar to Delhi, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra and Delhi, Odisha to Gujarat and Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan to Gujarat. Now with full lockdown being imposed, the positive cases are gradually on the rise in out migrating poorer states due to return migration.



Stock of Migrant Workers (in million), India, Census 2011

On 24th of March 2020, the Government of India went ahead with a full National lockdown sealing its



international borders and forcing a series of strict containment measures. With a barely four notice before the lockdown and no announcement on any kind of relief packages, this lockdown came as a thunderbolt to many. Millions of people, especially the informal sector workers and migrants were immediately left jobless with this announcement. With a little saving to feed themselves on for a week or two and with many of them with no ration cards, they were prompted for a mass exodus fleeing cities to go back to their villages on foot, travelling hundreds of kilometre with the heat hitting them hard with almost 40 degree centigrade. Many more were still trapped in cities with the inter-state buses and trains coming to a halt. The lockdown in India has led to a sudden job loss for more than 12 crore people, with the migrant workers being the worst hit. With more than 4 crore staring at an uncertain future, the state of politics in India is slowly taking a turn. A survey conducted by SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network) throws light on some horrifying data. More than 78 per cent of them have not been paid salary since the day lockdown was imposed. Eighty-two per cent have not got any ration from the government after all the tall claims issued by the government. Lack of knowledge and Rights add to the misery of these migrant labourers too. About 30 percent of them work as casual labourers, being exposed to the vagaries of the labour market and lack social protection. Around 35 percent of migrant workers are employed as regular/salaried workers and the rest are self-employed (NSSO, 2010). Under these life threatening conditions they undertake a journey to a „home“.

The poor migrant is stranded between two varied notions of home. They walk back from a less secure

place to a one which at one point of time was their home but lacked any opportunity. It is therefore difficult to postulate that this homelessness will eventually create more radical forms of politics of which these migrant labours would be central players.

This “walking back” can be also viewed as a form of resistance. With all forms of livelihood being shut and no hope of any monetary help, things looked very grim for them. News of starvation, death and hunger started flooding the social media and mainstream news channels. The state and central agencies sprung into action and started heaping promises and welfare schemes of shelter and food, all from the state and central exchequer. Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna (PMGKY) was swiftly introduced to deal with the least fortunate among the poor but the successful execution of this package represents a major test as well as huge task for the governments (state and central). The MoF (Ministry of Finance) had stated on the official website that 42 crore poor people have received financial assistance of 65,454 crore under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojna as on 20 June, 2020. Free food grains and monetary help to women and poor senior citizens and farmers were announced. And for the migrants, free food grains supply and chana for two months was quickly declared. Other schemes were too brought into effect such as MGNREGA, Jan Dhan etc. The Central Government directed the state governments to use Building and Construction Workers Welfare Fund to provide relief to Construction Workers through direct benefit transfer (DBT).

Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package: Total Direct Benefit Transfer till 19/06/2020

Scheme	Number of Beneficiaries	Amount
Support to PMJDY women account holders	1st Ins - 20.65 Cr (100%) 2ndIns -20.63 Cr 3rd Ins -20.62 (100%)	1stIns -10,325 Cr 2ndIns - 10,315 Cr 3rd Ins - 10,312 Cr
Support to NSAP (Aged widows, Divyang, Senior citizen)	2.81 Cr (100%)	2814 Cr
Front-loaded payments to farmers under PM-KISAN	8.94 Cr	17891 Cr
Support to Building & Other Construction workers	2.3 Cr	17891 Cr
24% contribution to EPFO	66 Cr	996 Cr
Ujjwala	1st Ins - 7.48 2nd Ins - 4.48	8488 Cr
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>42.84 Cr</b>	<b>65,454 Cr</b>

Source: Ministry of Finance, GOI, Press Release <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1632863>



These welfare schemes and the effort behind them were commendable but the ground realities had a different story to narrate. Jan Sahas, an Indian non-profit organisation conducted a survey, “Voices of the Invisible Citizens,” about the effect of lockdown on migrant workers. They had about 3,196 migrant construction workers from northern and central India for interview. The findings were astonishing: “62 percent of workers did not have any information about emergency welfare measures provided by the government and 37 percent did not know how to access the existing schemes.” The fear of loss of livelihood and the looming danger of this new pandemic saw the mass exodus of millions of these migrant labourers. The only possible and safe option left for them was their “home”, their villages. This massive migration led to a chaotic situation on national highways, bus stops and railway stations resulting in misunderstandings between states. Strict orders were issued not to allow anyone to travel. Any kind of social gathering was to be dealt with strongly. With desperation soaring high and with rumours of train services starting once again, hundreds of workers gathered near Mumbai railway station defying rules of social distancing, putting themselves and others at risk. They demanded that authorities arrange transport to send them back to their hometowns and villages so they could be with their families. The police, instead, used sticks to disperse them. Around the same time it was also witnessed in the western state of Gujarat, where hundreds of textile workers had gathered and protested in Surat city, demanding passage home. A day later there were outage in the National capital, Delhi were news of several hundred migrants were discovered living under a bridge along the Yamuna river. The river here resembles a sewer and the bank is full with garbage. The people living there were unwashed and had not eaten anything in three days. These are but a few incidents that have managed to capture the lens of the national news channels, with many more such incidents of sufferings still being left unnoticed. What these incidents have done is that they have shone a spotlight on the plight of millions of poor Indians who migrate from villages to cities in search of livelihood - and how the lockdown has left them stranded far away from home, with no jobs or money. With no hope to get any support from the state and central agencies, the migrant labours now started walking hundreds of kilometres. This sudden mass movement took the authorities by surprise. Clearly, no policy maker had anticipated such a reaction, and no detailed contingency plans seemed to be in place.

“Reverse migration” a term apt for the present scenario, it is the phenomenon of the migrants “walking back home” from urban and industrial centres. This has allowed them to script themselves back into the narrative of the nation and become politically relevant. This at the same time reminds us of the stark inequality that remain buried deep in our society. There were rescue missions being undertaken in India and abroad, missions like Vande Mataram, tourists being evacuated in Uttarakhand, pilgrims stranded in Varanasi being evacuated, middle-class students studying in Kota being evacuated, but when it came to migrant workers all became mute. This neglectful treatment is not something that should raise eyebrows in political corridors. Migrant workers had never seemed to be much of a consideration for politicians. These episodes are only some of many examples of this fact. These workers, despite their numbers, have no political clout. Many are registered to vote in their village. But when Election Day comes, they are usually in the city where they work and are unable to cast a ballot. Statistically speaking they are almost invisible. Because they consistently move between villages and cities, and among work sites, capturing their number is almost difficult. The government’s 2017 economic survey pointed out that if the share of migrants in the workforce is estimated to be even 20 percent, the size of the migrant workforce can be estimated to be over 100 million. That is a huge number to ignore.

But with these times, where the migrants as a class have been hit, and hit severely hard, one can only imagine the where they would vent out their anger. They are all together in this suffering and pain. With Legislative Assembly elections to be held in the states of Bihar, Jammu and Kashmir and West Bengal soon, the political parties would now be at pains to woo them.

We see them everywhere. Yet, we never imagined migrant workers as a group big enough to be taken seriously. A lockdown, no matter how necessary, is always going to be unbearably difficult for those without a social and economic buffer. We have so far underestimated the role migrants played in the Indian economy. We have failed to recognize their contribution. We knew they existed but never acknowledged their quantum. The new coronavirus has given them a sudden visibility in the national discourse. But the acuteness of their plight today is a result of the fact that India had been ignoring them during normal times.

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