

Covid-19 Pandemic and Internal Migrants in Maharashtra: Implications and Responses

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As on June 1st, the Covid-19 has infected more than 1.9 lakh and killed 5598 people in India since it was first reported in China in December 2019. According to the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, the highest numbers of confirmed cases are in the State of Maharashtra, followed by Tamil Nadu, Delhi and Gujarat (MoHFW website). The first cases in Maharashtra were reported on March 9th in Pune when a couple who returned from Dubai were tested positive for the novel coronavirus (Shelar 2020). Currently, the total confirmed cases in the State are 70013, and the death toll stands at 2362 (as on June 1st). The State's mortality rate is higher than the national rate. Cities like Mumbai and Pune are hotspots.

The disease has affected all sections of society. However, amidst the nationwide lockdown, the semi/unskilled migrant labourers employed in the formal and informal sectors of the urban and rural economic centres of Maharashtra are the most affected. Many are still stranded due to the lockdown; they face an uncertain future and an inherent fear about the disease. The Maharashtra government has taken several proactive relief measures for the benefit of migrants who have been rendered jobless and homeless owing to the ongoing crisis. Nevertheless, interim measures are not adequate to address the hardships faced by the migrants in complex emergencies like the current one or in times of normalcy.

Internal Migrant Labourers in Maharashtra

Maharashtra has a long history of internal migration. Since the post-independent era, the State has attracted skilled and unskilled labourers from the districts within the State as well as from the rest of the country to the cotton textile industries in Mumbai and its allied sectors. In-migration has contributed to the economic growth, demographic transition, governance, social fabric as well as the politics of the State, over time. Over a quarter of the total internal migrants in the State are from within (both inter-district and intra-district) and the rest are from outside the State (GoM 2010). They are dispersed throughout the State, with the largest concentration in Mumbai. Major streams of inter-state migration are from Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh, and West Bengal.

Interstate Migrants and their Problems

Other than the peculiar hardships interstate migrants face during emergencies, they have to deal with several challenges and barriers that negatively affect their integration and wellbeing. They do not easily get employment opportunities in the government sector due to the support for the 'sons of the soil' policy. However, they do get a livelihood in urban centres; in the construction, domestic help, textile and brick-kilns, transportation and security services sector. Labour laws guaranteeing the protection and rights of migrant workers, including the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act (1979), are ineffective due to their inherent gaps such as entrusting the responsibility of migrant labour registration solely on the contractor as well as implementation lapses at the state level. When the lockdown was imposed, migrant labourers with no work and savings were forced to depend on the goodwill of their contractors for sustenance. Besides, the limited accessibility to the social entitlements, the prolonged physical separation and the constant worry about the wellbeing of the left-behind family in their home contexts have impacted their mental and physical health, which continue to be unaddressed in policy discourses (Balan 2020).

Government Responses to the Covid-19 Crisis

As the migrating population is a highly vulnerable segment in terms of precarious economic and health conditions, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought renewed public attention to the internal migrants in the country.

As an immediate response to the crisis,

- The Maharashtra COVID-19 Regulations, 2020 was passed on March 14th, under Section 2 of the Epidemic Act, 1897 for the prevention and containment of Covid-19 (GoM 2020).
- The State imposed a partial lockdown on March 20th, four days before the nationwide lockdown.

This allowed several interstate and intrastate migrants to leave the State before the national lockdown, in anticipation of its adverse effects. As Maharashtra is a traditionally migrant-receiving society, the existing social and entrepreneurship networks among the prominent migrant communities provided some support and security at this critical time. Some of the CSR foundations as well as the civil society organisations too pitched in to provide relief material – food and stay, to the migrant workers (Upadhyay, Panday and Laskar 2020).

Several measures have been taken at the Government level. These are;

- About 944 camps for over six lakh migrant labourers were set up.
- Through the District Mental Health Programme, counselling was provided to the distressed workers in camps (Pathak 2020).
- Shiv Bhojan, the subsidised meal scheme of the Maharashtra Government, is extended to offer migrants a thali at mere five rupees.
- Provisions for the distribution of food and dry ration, masks, soaps and sanitisers as well as medical care in the camps were initiated.

- Treatment of infected migrants under the Mahatma Phule Public Health Scheme was announced.
- The Labour Department has set up control rooms and helpline numbers to assist the stranded workers. It has taken steps to allocate about Rs 250 crore from the Labour Welfare Fund to provide financial aid of Rs 2000 each to 12 lakh plus registered construction workers (Jog 2020).
- Maharashtra has received 483 Shramik Special trains on request and also runs free bus services to the state borders for migrant workers.

Yet, these daily wage labourers are finding it difficult to sustain themselves without work and income and as these relief measures are barely adequate and unsettling. Many of them are finding it difficult even to secure a seat in the Shramik Special. The likelihood of a lockdown extension in parts of Maharashtra, closure of establishments, social distancing and deplorable living conditions in overcrowded worksites and temporary shelters with inadequate infrastructural support, have amplified their sufferings.

Post-Pandemic Migration Management: A Way Forward

The challenges surrounding migration governance were daunting pre-Covid-19 and have become critical post-pandemic. The challenge for the Maha Vikas Aghadi, the three-party coalition government of Maharashtra, is the facilitation of fast-track coordination for relief measures for the migrants, especially in the absence of a database on the internal migrants in the State. Migrants are scattered across the State, and locating them has been a tough task. Not all contractors register their workers with the labour department. Similarly, there is a huge data gap on migrant workers employed in the unorganised sectors, including agriculture and domestic work. The situation gets further complicated as the government mechanisms have to function based on speculative numbers and unspecific details. Several scholars argue that the Census of India and the

National Sample Surveys do not really capture the magnitude and trends in internal migration as the actual numbers are underestimated, and the surveys are about a decade old. Accurate official data is crucial for formulating and implementing evidence-based long-term migration policies, in case of future emergencies. The way forward for the state government could be to conduct comprehensive surveys and update the database on internal migration, with the support of the local bodies and public and/or private academic institutions.

Accurate data is quintessential for the allocation of proactive measures that provide access to; habitable low-cost housing, sanitation, food and clean water, portability of social welfare schemes like Public Distribution System, affordable and quality health and safety facilities, education of their children and socio-political participation in their destination. Further, improved coordination of all the relevant state ministries, including the labour and health departments, panchayat raj institutions as well as trade unions and civil society organisations has to be ensured for governing internal migration into the State. Covid-19 is a complex crisis; however, it opens up opportunities for the Government and policymakers to see the gaps in the institutional structures and policy formulation of a critical but invisible segment of the population constituency. It is an opportunity to factor into policymaking this very helpful stratum of society, that is the backbone of several essential services in the state- the lack of which was highly evident during the Covid- 19 crisis, and streamline migration management in the State.

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