

COVID 19 and Social Safety Net: An analysis of the Migrant Workers of Maharashtra

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Introduction

The sudden upsurge of the 3,000 migrant workers at Bandra station in Mumbai on the 14th of April 2020 was not so much a shocking episode as it was a reactionary outburst to the lockdown. Prime Minister Narendra Modi appealed for a lockdown till 3rd May, 2020 of some 1.3 billion people. The appeal is more of hope that this viral pandemic would cease to exist, with the only cure being self-isolation. The fact is that COVID 19 (henceforth C 19) has exposed us to the gravest humanitarian crisis which the world has ever faced, which is truly a war of the world against the virus. Mainly the financial centers of the world have been at the receiving end due to the existence of huge migrant populations.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 has given special assurance in Article 22 that every member of society has a right to social security. Similarly, the International Labour Organization advocates in its fundamental principles for safe working conditions, employment protection, provision of social security, protection of migrant workers etc. As per the guidelines under Migrant Workers (Supplementary Provisions) Convention 1975 (No. 143), it provides for measures to combat clandestine and illegal migration while at the same time sets forth the general obligation to respect the basic human rights of all migrant workers. It also extended the scope of equality between legally residential migrant workers and national workers beyond the provisions of the 1949 Convention to ensure equality

of opportunity and treatment in respect of employment and occupation, social security, etc. Even the latest Report IV, International Labour Conference in the 106th Geneva 2017 Session had special discussions on addressing governance challenges in a changing labour migration landscape.

As per the definition given in the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) glossary the informal sector is broadly characterized as consisting of units engaged in the productions of goods or services with the primary objective of generating employment and incomes with formal guarantees. These units typically operate at a low level of organization, with little or no division between labour and capital as factors of production, and on a small scale. Labour relations where they exist are based mostly on casual employment, kinship or personal and social relations rather than contractual arrangements with formal guarantees.

The area of study of this paper is to identify the challenges and concerns of the informal sector in India. The informal sector or the unorganized labour in India has always been outside the radar for multiple reasons, the primary one being its non-organized nature. The low skilled labourers have somehow withstood the adversity of time so far without getting any due social security measures, but C 19 has nailed them immobile completely.

The most pertinent question this paper tries to raise is why Social Safety Net should be created for the migrant workers. This largely neglected and massively unorganized body is the vital clog in running the machinery of our economy. The social security just provides provisions, but the Security Net will hold on to them when they are at work and offer them required assurance that they are covered in such policy. This policy is practical and viable for two reasons. Firstly, it will bring stability for these migrant workers regarding mobility and secondly in the sectors where they are employed their employers can be made responsible for contributing some amount for their insurance, medical benefits and for any uncertain situations. This will in return fetch them loyalty from the workforce and the government will be able to generate accurate data on their scale of participation in the economy.

Waves of Migration

As per NITI Aayog, India's informal sector has 85% of India's total workforce. As per the reports of the Aayog they contribute 50% of the country's national income. Unfortunately, they are not entitled to the "safety net" which includes healthcare, medical facilities, and pension schemes. In short, we lack a comprehensive policy of Assurance and Security for them. According to the data released by the Ministry of Railways and the mechanism of Cohort Based National Migration Metric along with the Census of 2011 and according to 2007-2008 National Sample Survey, the share of migrant force is 17% to 18% in the category of interstate mobility. It almost comes to the tune of 5-6 million and hence the interstate cross sections for all these years could be approximately 60 million and within the district it could range to around 80 million (Average calculation based on the data of Cohort Based National Sample Survey and National Sample Survey 2007-2008)

The entire estimate for the years 2011-2016 shows that around 9 million people moved between states and primarily the states which provide for substantial employment. The migrant labour force operates more like waves, a phenomenon which is perennial and does not recede soon. It compounds faster and soon a sub-regional center emerges where the migrants move in for temporary settlement. So, in that sense, each phase of migration or influx can be considered as a wave. In continuation to that, when we have some kind of shift they all emerge as one bigger wave to be reconciled with. There are multiple factors that can be witnessed and studied in terms of Push and Pull factors. The phenomenon perplexes us but what needs to be determined is that the trigger point is always uncertain and it leaves the migrant workers at the mercy of the crisis management system. The lack of control over the situation could also be due to the absence of organizational skills and appropriate unionism amongst them.

The state of Maharashtra, and especially Mumbai, leads in being the epicenter of migrant labour for two reasons: one, its easy accessibility and effective transport networking and two, the constant and growing demands of satellite services due to its metropolitan culture.

We also need to understand that Mumbai witnesses the migration from the arid

regions, low fertile and monsoon dependent districts of Maharashtra and as the statistics suggests migration of this kind contributes to 65% growth in Mumbai. The sectors where prominent migration is witnessed is primarily the daily wage earners in the categories of landless farm workers, the construction sites, the local or civic sites, the industrial sectors and miscellaneous. The other wave of migration which is interstate are seen to be engaged in small time businesses or local hawking or providing supplementary provisions or engaged as daily wage workers both skilled and unskilled

Response to C19

The Government of India immediately announced some aid in kind and cash after the outbreak of C 19, like the Ujjawala Yojana to deliver benefits in kind and Jan Dhan in the form of transferring cash to the account holders who are Below Poverty Line (BPL). Similarly, the monthly transfer of Rs. 500 for three months was also sanctioned for women under BPL across the country. Some states like Kerala operate almost 65% of the active shelter and relief camps of the migrant workers as per the affidavit submitted by the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Response of the Government of Maharashtra

The Maharashtra state government was the first state to initiate complete lockdown which included the lifeline of Mumbai - its local trains. We need to understand that the state's economy is based on the international trade, petroleum, fashion, manufacturing units, Bollywood industry, tourism and various other allied sectors which accelerate its status in the financial ranking. The inherent workforce is limited in the state so there is an acute dependency on the migrant labour force. This labour force also responds to these demands due to the lack of opportunities in their respective regions. So, the industrial and agricultural sectors along with subsidiary sectors are correlated to the migrant's existence.

The C19 fear has injected a sense of insecurity amongst them and out of sheer panic, they started appearing on the streets with the demand to return back to their regions of origin. The region of Pimpri, Chinchwad has majority of workforce from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Jharkhand etc., and a good number of them are stranded, but an equal number somehow moved away before the complete shutdown. This has led to double jeopardy for the industrial sector and the government. The first one being the provision of relief measures to the existing migrant workforce and the prevalence of an uncertainty regarding the resumption of work immediately after the lockdown.

The Chief Minister of Maharashtra constantly engaged and appealed to the people to minimize their social movements. The government also came up with the Five Point Plan and announced it in the press conference by the Chief Minister, Shri Uddhav Thackeray, which covered health, migrant labour, economic, agricultural and administrative matters under the Government Resolution (Maharashtra Government 2020). It announced that it will give Rs. 2,000 each to the workers registered with the Maharashtra Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. The scheme apparently covers some 12 lakh construction workers who constitute the main segment of the migrant workers. The other sectors, since they could not be identified, remain to be covered and it was assured that they would get covered in the due course of time.

The state government regularly collects cess from the developers for permitting them to employ workers on construction sites, and this fund gets deposited in the Board and it is from this pool that an allocation of Rs. 250 crores is made to offer relief.

Apart from this, the State Government of Maharashtra has also set up 4,653 relief camps, sheltering almost 7 lakh migrant workers across the state. Most of these shelter camps are regulated through various Municipal bodies and through parallel government agencies like Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority (MHADA), while in the Metropolitan city of Mumbai the task is under the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC).

The participation of the Corporate sector

A general perception is that the corporate sector would neglect their workforce during such time of crisis. The view of the capitalist class generally is that it squeezes as much as it can from its workforce. But in the situation of C 19, we have some examples to balance out this commonly held view. The deliberate neglect of facts also amounts to the distortion of history and takes it away from objectivity.

The Corporate world responded generously to offer relief measures. Larsen and Toubro Ltd. proffered to take care of almost 1.6 lakh migrant workers by providing them with basic means along with an assurance of wages. The company has managed to generate a corpus of Rs.500 crore per month for this venture. Another construction giant, Shapoorji Pallonji group, is providing relief to its workforce of 1.1 lakh workers as the loyalty bonus for their contribution to the company. It also saves them from reverse migration. Similarly, the SP Group is offering relief measures to almost 1lakh workers pan India while taking care of workers in over 130 sites abroad. Godrej is ensuring regular medical checkups for their workforce in eight cities including Mumbai. The relief includes supply of food and medical assistance.

Many automobile companies like Tata, Bajaj, Mahindra and Mahindra have given the salaries to their workers for the month of March and have assured them of employment security. The local association in Pune, Shramik Ekta Mahasangh, which is a body of 110 small labour unions, has testified that all the automobile companies in Pune and around the region that constitute almost 3-4 lakh temporary or contractual workers and most of the other companies will be offering the workforce a helping hand. Similarly, Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (MMRDA) is providing relief to its 11,000-work force in this shutdown.

The Maharashtra Government allowed over 1 lakh sugarcane migrant workers to return back to their villages after adequate medical testing. In almost 38 sugarcane factories, more than 1.30 lakh migrant workers are stranded and eagerly waiting to return back to their hometowns. These workers primarily come from the Beed and Ahmednagar districts.

C 19 and the Judicial Intervention

The Aurangabad High Court, responding to a petition, ordered the state government to build a mechanism of coordination with the District collectors and prepare a data for the provisions of shelter homes. The court also sought for information for provisions made for providing psychological counselling to migrant workers as they are away from home and also under such acute stress. Similarly, the Bombay High Court has also instructed the state government to prepare a practically viable option of sending the migrant workers to their hometowns.

Insecurities of C 19

The C 19 has exposed our vulnerabilities towards combating such a pandemic. The undocumented workers are grappling with the idea of getting layoffs after this lockdown. Many fear for loss of their jobs. The temporary workers have not even received their pending dues from their small-time employers or from the local supervisors of the construction sites. The author of the paper was witness to one such case at Ganesh Nagar, Kandivali West, where 55 construction workers were stranded, and they were not paid dues for almost two months. Most of them do not even have health insurance or the provision of sick leave. They all are still set aside from the social safety net.

Challenges of C 19

The complete shutdown came out more as a reactive measure in the absence of a proactive solution. The absence of scientific data and initial failure in understanding the gravity of the situation has also put the entire government machinery under tremendous pressure. In the initial phase of C 19 most of the states in India were directionless and were taking calls on their own with regards to combating the C19 in their respective regions. The initial announcements from the central government lacked any concrete plans and lockdown appeared as the only major relief against this virus. The panic over sudden non-availability of essential items led to people overlooking the practice of social distancing and stocking up essential provisions.

Moreover, the migrant workers were left to apply their own wisdom and perseverance on this measure. The non-cognizance of their being so far from their hometowns was regarded as an utter failure of responsible action of lockdown. The fair number of migrants who have moved back to their villages and others who are desperately waiting for the curfew to relax will create an acute void in the supply of workforce and the working sites and industries might witness a slowdown. This is a crucial economic impact of the pandemic. This undocumented workforce which is unaccountable to the employers and has no fringe benefits might not come out of its shell soon.

Recommendations

The C 19 should be regarded as an alarming call for us to realize that the security measures of the country may not necessarily lie in procuring weapons of mass destruction, but in developing a strong infrastructure for the medical health care system. The fragmented coordination between various stakeholders needs to be fixed and a centralized system should be developed as a Response Cell for such national crises. A special task force should be prepared to centralize the efforts of the federal governance. The integration of various community leaders, non-governmental units, representatives, local institutions and district level coordinators should constitute a decentralized connecting operational agency.

The various planning agencies should put all the data in public domain, ward-wise and tehsil-wise, so that it would become easy to tab the implication of the relief measures and respond to it. As the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) rightly proposed, there should be a tripartite dialogue between government, workers unions and industries to coordinate health and safety related concerns of the workers. The CII also suggested that the migrant workers could be issued E-passes from the local authorities such as Block Development Officer or the Tehsildar. The data can be recorded in the QR codes. This will facilitate in tracking the details of their actual movements and would also help in communication in such emergencies.

The states must come with a roadmap for cooperation and sharing of details during such situations which would mitigate the stress. The states must also create some kind of social security data for such informal sectors so they get valid identity and any relief under their name could reach the genuine beneficiaries. The pandemic has brought into open the fractures of our national policy towards the unorganized sector. There is lack of granular data and so its magnitude will be difficult to gauge. The impact of C 19 on them will be one long-lasting phenomenon with below the surface damage, which again would be overlooked once we attempt to restore normal life after the pandemic.

Conclusion

While studying the medical and biological significance of the pandemic we need to also elaborate on the spatial dynamics. The highly ignored aspect is the density of population in some clusters which makes us soft targets. It can be regarded as the Curse of the Resources i.e. the Zone of Opportunities can easily be converted into Red Zones during such pandemics. If we see the global phenomenon of the virus, it multiplies very rapidly in close proximity. It appears well adapted to propagate in urban areas, hitting the economically established cities easily, in comparison to the countryside. The repercussion of providing opportunities is in the form of vulnerabilities and collateral damages.

The pandemic has altered the global mobility and exposed to us how ill equipped and under prepared we are in terms of our health care system. The medical emergency response cadre is indeed trying its best under limited resources, but at times it appears as merely patchwork.

We can only do our best and hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel, sooner rather than later.

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