

Chapter 7

Impact of COVID–19 on Indian Migrant Workers and the Informal Sector: Policy Imperatives

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ABSTRACT

The Indian and the international media presented the Indian migrant workforce's troubles during the COVID-19 crisis. The unprecedented circumstances opened a Pandora's box of years of neglect and sidelining of the welfare and wellness of the migrant workers of the informal sector. The literature was sourced from the workforce migration literature of India, newspapers, government and private agency reports, population census of 2011, and research papers published during the period. This exploratory research has the objective to explore the informal sector's background and the migrant workers of India before the pandemic to understand the immediate short-term implications and the long-term impact of the pandemic across all sections of the informal workers. Finally, the research concludes with a discussion on the policy imperatives deemed to have a beneficial effect on the migrant workers in future years, once the COVID-19 crisis is over.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is profound and has been creating upheavals that have ravaged economies across the globe. This is the worst of times people have faced in many years, and suddenly there is a paused reality that lies between the intersecting existences of a sophisticated global world and a de-globalized world too. The severe debacle has prevailed in the supply chain systems worldwide, the travel, tourism and hospitality industries, aviation and retail sectors, not to mention the following effect on other sectors, not only in India but also in all the countries encompassing the different continents. To

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-3374-4.ch007

date, the COVID-19 pandemic has been the most devastating world global health crisis that has loomed out from nowhere suddenly and has been the most severe attack on humanity, probably after the World Wars or the past pandemic experiences mankind has experienced. Nevertheless, amidst the onslaught of foreign media and the human rights agencies and forums, India has taken appreciative control and charges with the 21-day lockdown to prevent the grave situations as some countries across the globe experienced (Gupta & Madgavkar 2020: McKinsey Report). The response of the Indian government in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic had been immediate, but there were also criticisms of strategic planning and action issues. The irony lies in the fact that the seasonal workers, migrant workers, and all other types of workers have been roughly hit by the sudden declaration of the unexpected lockdown. The announcement of the lockdown and a time limit of four hours to leave resulted in a huge outflow of migrant workers to their native villages and a sense of chaotic hustle (Dandekar & Ghai 2020; Singh et al., 2020). This reverse migration population of these migrant workers was not a small one (includes short-term seasonal, circular, and long-term employment) and was around 12.8 crores (Vasudevan, et al., 2020).

This workforce's tireless and stranded journeys towards their hometowns amid the public transportation lockdown have raised humanity-related questions. Migrant workers represent one of the marginalized and overlooked sections of the society (Parth, 2020) that the capitalist forces of the country have oppressed. The pandemic has ripped apart the existing perils of these workers and worsened their situations as the employers and the middlemen had virtually abandoned them. There have been instances when the migrant workers have been unfairly pointed as the carriers of the spread of the disease (Lau et al. 2020). Such shocks have adverse consequences as economic unsettlement, interruptions in livelihoods, occupations, and even psycho-social displacement. Many migrants lost lives due to lack of food, suicides, physical exhaustion, accidents, and lack of medical assistance (Guha et al., 2020). Still, they need empathy and concern as a sidelined section of the labor segment (Hargreaves et al., 2019).

An in-depth examination reveals that most of India's internal migrants belong to the intra-district workforce category and the percentage of interstate migrants is less in number. Kone et al., 2017 reveal that such migration has been mainly due to the immobile nature of the social security advantages and the scarcity of livelihood options at the residence regions. Many migrant workers are essentially temporary or seasonal (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012). Furthermore, a segment of the migrant workforce is working in the informal sector. This is a weak and susceptible segment because these workers are not under the coverage of the minimum workplace entitlements and social security aspects (Government of India, 2017). Overall, there is a lack of sequenced, updated data on the mobility and the workplaces of the migrant, which is a challenge, making formulating policies difficult.

LITERATURE: THE MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Over the years, there has been a reduction in the formal workforce and the informal sector's rapid growth—the latter does not come under the legal framework of secure wages or social benefits. This vast segment of the informal workforce is poverty-ridden, and marginal and scanty information is found about them (Agarwala, 2006). The most succinct definition of the informal sector has been given by Portes et al., 1989 that can be precisely stated that this sector participates in the production of goods legally. However, they are associated with activities not under the monitoring process or the directives of workers' legal framework, health and welfare, and related laws. In this context, informal workers are said to be self-employed with some employees under them, and the casual workers—the latter work through

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