

CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT WORKERS: IMPACT OF COVID 19

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ABSTRACT

The effects of the pandemic on our economy evidently projected its impact on the migrant workers and brought into light the existing problems and mistreatment of these workers. This economic crisis led to a high rate of unemployment, as when the prices of oil decrease, the repatriation of the workers from Gulf countries increases. India is reported to have up to 20 million migrant workers, majority migrating to the Gulf countries but we still lack to support these migrant workers. Even the International Labour Organisation noted India's lack of commitment towards the international standards of treatment. The lack of government support is clearly portrayed by recent comments by the "Ministry of Labour and Employment" indicating their intention to not provide compensation to the families of the migrant workers who passed away on their way back home. Due to the lack of availability of credible data. This note focuses on the Indian external migrants and helps in understanding the problems faced by these workers such as their exclusion from various schemes, also to understand the impact of technological advancements on this section of workers. It aims to carefully analyse the impact of COVID 19 on migrant workers and understand the opportunities they have which will navigate the wave of migration.

INTRODUCTION

This pandemic affected our lives and businesses in different ways but a significant impact on our economy led to a change in the pattern of global migration. India has high rate contribution of the international migrants from which majority belong to Gulf countries such as Qatar, UAE, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Due to the decline in trade, these countries hit all-time low prices on oil and changes in their domestic policy reforms led to a high level of unemployment of the international migrants. Our present schemes in India such as PMGKY and “home delivery of cash and pension” usually exclude migrant workers due to its domicile restrictions and mobility issues.

We need to capitalise on the opportunities we have as, even though countries such as the US have been hostile towards India there are other opportunities such as Europe where its allocating “Blue Cards” to Indians with special skills in mathematics and computer science. Many intellectuals including the FutureMaps founder, a data-driven company believe that there is a high probability that repatriation will not last once the vaccine comes out. This will stem a new wave of migration increasing the rate for international migration in search of better healthcare and opportunities due to the hit on our global economy. This pandemic led to many restrictive border policies which make it further difficult from migrants from India to find employment even post-pandemic. India is neglecting its migrant workers both internal and external.

WHAT IS INDIA DOING WRONG?

The constituents of the “International Labour Organisation” which includes government workers, businessmen & other employers and the migrant workers themselves. They have advocated for “Fair Migration Agenda” which promotes decent work opportunities and protection of fundamental rights of these workers. It acknowledges their skills and also their vulnerabilities. This was stemmed out due to the discourse of the International labour migration. Out of the twelve central trade unions, ten of them suspended and tweaked our labour laws with the international body via a letter issued in May. This led to the intervention of ILO where it expressed its concerns with the unions to the Prime Minister of India. It also asked Mr Narendra Modi to ensure that the Central and State governments adhere to the

international commitments made by India through several conventions. The intensity of this issue attracted the attention of the Director-General of ILO itself as it undermines the labour legislation and international labour standards.

On one hand, various NGOs are helping the migrant workers to provide them with a better livelihood and migrant visibility, to improve the same collection and compilation of creditable data is crucial. The government is lacking to do the bare minimum as recently when questioned by the parliament regarding the deaths of migrant workers, the “Ministry of Labour and Employment” responded that they do not have adequate data due to the lockdowns. It is important to note that the inclusion and development of migrants is a significant part to revive and stabilise our economy. Another problem faced by many is that the cash received and which is in the bank is not accessible by them. Many local authorities placed bans and restriction on movement and the households of migrant workers are prevented to access the money sent. This is a huge problem considering the that most of such households belong to rural areas and solely depend on this income to survive. ⁱ

What we also need to take into consideration is the fact that due to repatriation of the Indian (external) migrant workers, the workforce in India is increasing which adds to the existing labour force of India. This will not only strain our countries resources about also increases the unemployment rate. The most affected state is Kerala due to it’s high migration population, the Chief Minister of Kerala also wrote a letter to the central for help after it received funds, the problem being none of the states did the same. India needs to review whether our labour laws are flexible to the current changes, as this pandemic brings in significant changes. In an attempt to position India on the global market we need rapid technological advancements to improve our domestic production. This might lead to disruption of the labour markets as we do not have a regulatory framework which ensures a balance between equitable distribution, workers safety nets and technological improvements.

EXCLUSION FROM SCHEMES

In the light of the current events Government of India came up with schemes in the form of relief packages to help the people. Some stated came up with creative ideas such as home delivery of cash and pensions via postal services. But due to the Migrants Unique

Characteristics, they do not qualify. Many social security schemes started by the states have domicile restrictions. In other freak schemes such as PMGKY which are universal also exclude migrant workers due to the reasons such as mobility issues, absence from associations' rosters and participation in informal sectors.

The “Jan-Dhan Adhar Mobile (JAM) Trinity” and “Aadhar-enabled Payment System (AePS)” these schemes present significant operational issues to the government and the financial sector. In spite the fact that there are 1.1 billion operational banks, there are only 500 million which are Adhar-seeded. The approach by the DBT in JAM reliant services has a problem in its design as it fails to serve the sector it needs to focus on. As many migrants and their households might not have a bank account. Even if they do have access to the same it doesn't confirm their usage. Another crucial factor which has to be considered is that a very less amount of people can understand digital payment methods this could lead to exclusion of the whole section of migrant workers and their households. ⁱⁱ

CONCLUSION

COVID 19 has been declared as a pandemic by the World Health Organisation. Majority of the world population are battling this virus while doctors, health care professionals and scientists are working relentlessly towards discovering a cure. The pandemic has a huge impact on all the major industries and the world has come to a halt with the announcement of lockdowns and curfews by domestic governments to curb the fast-spreading virus.

The migrants play an important role on the front lines in the current times. In this process, the shutdown of businesses, the downfall of the economy and closure of borders increases uncertainty. Though it is crucial to do so in the lieu of health securitisation, it is important to not to take opportunities of this situation to implement restrictive border policies by the governments pursuing the hard-line migrant policies. Policymakers along with playing an essential role of stabilising and faction our economies need to shift their focus to the underprivileged. On the positive note, this pandemic shed light on the existing issues in this sector which are faced by the barely educated and highly skilled workers. Being aware of such injustice and questioning the policymakers to carve our way to the future is currently our only option.

This new wave in migration will have long-term implications concerning socio cohesion and socio-economic inclusion. Measures taken such as the limitation on movement will make it difficult for them to access protection which might exacerbate exploitation. As these measures are the need-of-the-hour government should initiate schemes and reform policies supporting the migrant workers and their households. Though it is unlikely to predict anything accurately now, let us hope the end of the pandemic will land us in a better place.

ENDNOTES

ⁱ Shabarinath Nair & Divya Verma, A Policy Framework for India's COVID 19 Migration, Bloomberg Quint Opinion (May 2020)

ⁱⁱ Kapur Devesh, Ideas and Economic Reforms in India: The Role of International Migration and the Indian Diaspora, Indian Review

