

COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON INTERNAL MIGRATION IN INDIA-AN ANALYSIS OF INTERSTATE SCENARIO

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus the age-old problem of the vulnerability of the migrant population worldwide. The paper analyses the internal migration situation of India emphasising on the interstate scenario. The details of hardship of migrant workers in the COVID-19 situation and the major issues pertaining to migration have been discussed. The pandemic led to loss of employment, starvation, and reverse migration. The responses of central and state governments and philanthropic efforts by individuals and non-government organisations could not prevent the death of migrant workers due to starvation, exhaustion, accidents, and inaccessibility to adequate healthcare/medical facilities. Because internal migration provides better employment opportunities and allows allocation of skilled persons in appropriate activities, it is essential to work for, in an integrated manner, to provide better working and living conditions, decent wages, favourable terms and conditions of work, security, and safety net in the destination areas to the migrant population.

Keywords: Internal migration, COVID-19, Impact, India

1. Introduction

With the spread of coronavirus, fear is looming large across the globe regarding an unprecedented recession. Severe interruption of international supply chain has been observed along with low gross domestic product growth, low capacity

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utilisation, and low working hours. In addition to the low growth phenomenon, the world faces the intertwined problem of reverse migration, the exodus of the most vulnerable section of the workforce to their original homeland. The scenario and plight of migrant workers are almost the same across the developing world. Across the world, in case of COVID-19, frequent flyers, business entrepreneurs, affluent classes, travellers, people studying or working abroad, and reputed professionals have emerged as first carriers of this virus¹. Initially, global leaders thought that coronavirus infection was a little more than the regular flu, however, as soon as a massive number of deaths started occurring by the middle of March 2020, mobility was severely restricted and the problem of exodus of migrant labour became a burning issue in almost all countries around the world. In Bangladesh, where a large proportion of garment workers are migrants, the closure of garment factories and suspension or cancellation of a large number of existing orders left many of these migrants penniless. Thousands of these migrant workers had to go back to their native place without any pay. Even big brands could not offer any financial assistance in case of lay off. Similar lay-offs happened in China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar. In recent months, Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Myanmar are the most affected Asian countries as many migrant workers have been compelled to return to their native places, cut back on food, and borrow money for survival².

Many migrant workers living in camps near highly affected countries such as Europe or America face the threat of a devastating outbreak because of their proximity to these countries, unhealthy living conditions, and inadequate healthcare services. Because of the pandemic, a crisis has emerged at the border between Turkey and Greece. Many migrants have been asked to evacuate from these camps instantly. A similar situation was also observed at a makeshift migrant camp at the US–Mexico border (McAuliffe and Bauouz, 2020).

The plight of migrants is severe not only in makeshift camps but also in many countries that have hosted a large number of displaced persons such as Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Bangladesh. The vulnerability of migrant workers has also alarmingly increased in destination countries such as Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries due to insufficient sanitary conditions in labour camps and pre-existing health issues of migrants (McAuliffe and Bauouz, 2020). Globally, migrants have lost jobs in this COVID-19 disaster as their employers have either closed shops or stopped business activities. Migrants are also driven out of their present shelters as being not able to pay the rent. Their meagre savings cannot support them for long.

1 Badri Narayan, History on Repeat: How the Rich Spread Pandemics like Coronavirus and Poor Get Hit the Hardest, News 18 Opinion, April 02, 2020.

2 Shivani Kumar, Covid-19: Thousands of garment workers lose jobs across Asia, Asian News International, Washington, United States, July 12, 2020.

In India, the onset of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown led to reverse migration across the states. Migrant workers walked down miles after miles with their small belongings and sometimes along with their families to reach their native villages. They faced lots of health issues due to lack of income and inaccessibility to medical facilities as they had to take shelter in transitory camps or temporary shelter homes. COVID-19 had a psychological impact on migrant workers as they wanted to go back to their native places hurriedly but were unable to do so because of barriers at different state boundaries, other lockdown restrictions, and transportation problem.

In this background, the present study attempts to (i) assess the trend and pattern of internal migration with special emphasis on interstate migration, (ii) analyse the factors leading to interstate migration, (iii) understand the impact of the pandemic on migrant workers, and (iv) enumerate policy implications for reducing the plight of migrant workers.

The paper enumerates the condition and distress of internal migrants, especially interstate migrants in COVID-19. It highlights the importance of framing specific policies focusing on migrants so as to mitigate their plight in the context of the pandemic.

The paper is divided into six sections. Section 1 depicts introduction, section 2 presents the definition and types of migrant workers, and section 3 deals with factors leading to migration. A review of the existing literature has been done in section 4. Section 5 discusses about internal migration and impact of COVID-19, and the final section presents conclusion and policy implications.

2. Literature Review

Srivastava and Sutradhar (2016) in their study on India, Nepal and Bangladesh mentioned that the contractual employment of the migrant labourers can be categorised as casual employment with no written contract, regular employment with no written contract, regular employment with written contract for less than a year, and regular employment with written contract for more than a year. In India, the percentages of workers in these four categories were 94.7%, 4.7%, 0.7%, and 0%, respectively. The authors found that in India, most workers perceive their housing and living conditions to be worse in destination areas compared with their native places. Only 19% workers felt that their housing conditions were better at destination, and 32% workers reported that their general living conditions were better at destination than at their native places. Most workers across skill status and categories of firms found that their working conditions, remuneration, and availability of employment were better in their destination areas than in their native places.

In Bangladesh, 71% workers reported that their housing conditions at destination were worse compared to their native places, whereas 57% of the

workers felt that other living conditions were worse. In Bangladesh, 80% of workers felt that their present location was better than their native villages in terms of opportunity to get employment. This observation indicated that most of the migrant workers were driven out of their native places because of lack of employment opportunities.

In Nepal too, an overwhelming majority of workers considered that their present destination was better than their native place in terms of employment opportunities and remuneration. Hence, the study indicated that lack of remunerative employment in the native place and expectation of better livelihood led to seasonal/circular migration.

However, the authors mentioned that many workers commented that they had very little voice and entitlement in the destination.

Overall, approximately half the workers reported that the present destination was better than their native place.

Kundu and Mohanan (2017) observed that one of the prime factors for a consistent increase in wage inequality in labour markets and marginalisation of labour in India can be identified as migration and consequent informalisation of labour. The migrated labourers' working hours, wage rates, conditions of work etc. are highly influenced and determined by the recruitment process, which in turn depends on the contractors.

The authors opined that contrary to the findings of Census, The Economic Survey, 2017 had found that there had been an increase in mobility of persons across states in the recent decade. The survey provided new evidence to indicate that Indians were much more mobile than it was generally believed. According to them, the 2011 census, rail traffic data and changes in population in different age categories showed that migration had been much greater than what had been argued on the basis of traditional sources of data such as the National Sample Survey (NSS) and the population census. The authors commented that there seemed to have been an upsurge in interstate mobility for economic reasons in the recent decade.

Srivastava (2019) comments that the segmentation and fragmentation create the basis for capital to acquire low-cost, highly flexible labour. Again, it is worthy to mention that seasonal/circular migrant workers are at the bottom of the ladder of migrant workers.

The factors leading to an improvement in the wages of workers in both formal and informal work are education and experience. However, gender discrimination and a low social status negatively impact wages in the labour market. Workers are also discriminated on the basis of language, religion, ethnicity and region. In addition to these factors, the absence of social security measures for migrant labourers makes their conditions more precarious.

Jha (2020) illustrated the difficulties of migrants and the possible effect on development in their place of work. He also presented the kind of development that have resulted in increased migration. The author commented that the growth of the economy in the recent period has been uneven, leading to widening gap between agricultural and non-agricultural sectors, and rural and urban areas of the country. According to the author, the growth has also been concentrated in some pockets of India. He also cited evidence of city-centric growth in our economy. He further commented that farmers' income in prosperous states like Punjab is five times more than that of poor states. The author stated that besides disparity of growth in agriculture, the individual size of farm holdings is important for migration. The author felt that because of the non-viable holding size, farmers had to depend on other opportunities (farm or non-farm) for their livelihood. Hence, in addition to landless labourers, many landholders resort to migration. The possibilities for improvement in the conditions of migrants and elements of migration-mitigating development have also been discussed in the study. Several studies are there in the existing literature which have discussed about internal migration and migrant workers. However, this study has been undertaken to focus on the impact of an extraordinarily disastrous situation because of the onset of the pandemic on migrant workers. The study endeavours to make a value addition to the current literature highlighting policy implications for protection of the interests of migrants, especially in the COVID-19 situation.

3. Internal Migration: Trends and Pattern

Internal migration is understood as migration within a country. Internal migration in our country usually occurs for the purpose of education, employment, marriage, or shifting of family. It may also occur because of a natural disaster or civil disturbance. In case of internal migration, people generally move from rural to urban areas. Internal migration results in a more efficient allocation and better utilisation of human resources across sectors and regions of a country.

According to the 2011 census data, the number of internal migrants in India was 450 million, whereas the corresponding figure for the 2001 census was 309 million. Thus, an increase of 45% in internal migrants was observed over the decade. Of the total number of persons registered as migrants in the 2011 census, only 11.91% had moved to one state from another, while the rest had moved within their states.

Migrant workers can be categorised as (1) long term (permanent), (2) long-term circular (semi-permanent), and (3) short-term circular/seasonal. Categories 2 and 3 are most vulnerable of all migrants to any national/international catastrophic situation. In the Census and NSS enumeration, labourers who migrate to other states for a period of less than 6 months, for short-term circular migration mainly for work in construction, agriculture, and

manufacture sectors, are not taken into account. In the traditional enumeration of migrant labourers, only long-term circular migrants who mostly move from rural to urban areas and work in formal sectors or at high levels of the informal economy are considered.

Table 1: Internal Migrants

Year	Persons(Million)	% Decadal Change
2001	309	
2011	450	45

Source: Census of India, 2001, 2011.

3.1 Interstate Migration

Interstate migration provides the source of livelihood and improves living standards of individuals. It also benefits both the states- the source and destination states. Still interstate migration in India is quite lower than that in other countries, which are at the same level of economic development. Low interstate migration also adversely affects the rate of urbanisation, which is 31% in India as per the 2011 census data.

Labourers' decisions to migrate are influenced by their contractors, family members, and friends/relatives. The recruitment of workers is largely facilitated by contactors/organisers. Usually, these contractors or middlemen belong to the native villages of the migrant workers. Labourers recruited through contractors get an advance payment from their contractors to make themselves a little comfortable in the workplaces but lose their freedom to make individual contract.

The nature of jobs of these migrant labourers is mostly informal, casual, and seasonal. Labour market conditions largely affect the wellbeing of these workers. Labour market in the destination areas through its various dimensions such as working conditions, wage, bargaining power and social security measures influences the welfare of migrant workers.

Many a times, because of inadequate income or employment opportunity, distress migration/forced migration takes place with an expectation of better source of livelihood. It may be mentioned here that at the national level, 69% of the agricultural holdings are less than 1hectare (marginal). The state-wise variation in holdings is even wider. Many studies have suggested that as holdings of these sizes are not viable, rural communities have to depend on other opportunities (farm or non-farm) for their livelihood. Disparity of growth in agriculture is widespread across the states of the country. This uneven growth of agriculture across the states and marginal landholdings lead to migration with an expectation of better livelihood. Jha (2020) comments that as the sizes of holdings reduce, the share of non-farm business in farmers' income should

increase. The Situation Assessment Survey of Farmers conducted by the NSS Office reports, however, that the share of non-farm business in farmer's income has declined from 11% to 8% over 2003–2013.

Table 2: Interstate Migrants

Year	Number (Millions)
1991	27.3
2001	42.3
2011	54.3

Source: Census of India, 1991, 2001, 2011.

The census figures show an increase of 12 million interstate migrants during 2001–2011. The corresponding figure for the increase in interstate migrants remained almost the same at 15 million during 1991–2001.

Table 3: Top Destination of Migrants from Selected Zones

Source	Destination	Share of Migrants from Source States (%)
North & East		
UP	Maharashtra	23.00
Bihar	Jharkhand	17.60
WB	Jharkhand	19.80
South		
Karnataka	Maharashtra	56.80
TN	Karnataka	36.90
Andhra Pradesh	Karnataka	43.50
Kerala	TN	36.90
West		
Maharashtra	Gujarat	32.70
MP	Maharashtra	28.20
Gujarat	Maharashtra	66.60
Rajasthan	Gujarat	20.40

Source: Census of India, 2011

The 2011 census data show that among the states, Maharashtra reports the highest inter-state migration from southern, eastern, northern, and western zones. Among the states from north and east, approximately 23% of Maharashtra's interstate migrants are from Uttar Pradesh. Among the southern states, more than 56% of the interstate migrants in Maharashtra are from Karnataka. Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan, among the Western states, comprise the major share of interstate migrants in Maharashtra.

Table 4 shows the data of migrants in some major states and of the country as a whole. According to the census data of 2011, Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab hold the top three ranks in terms of interstate migrant population having more than 90, 40 and 39 lakhs interstate migrants, respectively.

Table 4: Migrants in Some Major States

States	Population (Lakhs)
Maharashtra	90.87
Uttar Pradesh	40.62
West Bengal	23.81
Gujarat	39.16
Kerala	6.54
Punjab	24.88
India	543

Source: Census of India, 2011

An analysis of the 2011 census data revealed that of the 90.87 lakh interstate migrants in Maharashtra, 30.32% were from Uttar Pradesh whereas 6.25% migrants reported that their last place of residence was Bihar. However, the number of intrastate migrants within Maharashtra was 4.79 crore, which is a major share of migrants.

Migrants from Bihar constitute more than 26% of the 40.62 lakh interstate migrants hosted by Uttar Pradesh, followed by those from Madhya Pradesh who constitute more than 16% of the total. Among the 24.88 lakh interstate migrants in Punjab, 26.13% were from Uttar Pradesh whereas 14.19% of the total reported their last residence as Bihar.

Table 5: Migration to Selected States

(1) States	(2) Total Migrants(lakhs)	Migrants to Other States (Columns 3–9 are % to Column 2)						
		(3) Uttar Pradesh	(4) Bihar	(5) Rajasthan	(6) Odisha	(7) West Bengal	(8) Madhya Pradesh	(9) Punjab
Maharashtra	90.87	30.32	6.25	5.69	1.36	3.41	9.07	0.80
Uttar Pradesh	40.62		26.42	6.99	0.86	5.76	16.45	3.50
West Bengal	23.81	10.04	46.37	2.39	5.96	-	0.67	0.76
Gujarat	39.16	23.72	9.22	19.08	4.49	2.27	7.02	0.69
Kerala	6.54	1.83	1.38	1.38	1.83	4.59	1.22	0.46

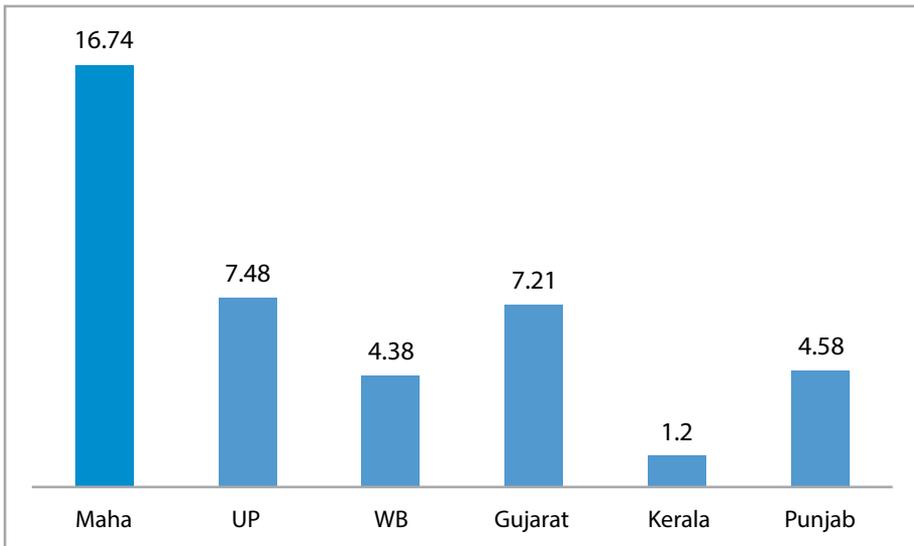
Punjab	24.88	26.13	14.19	8.12	0.48	1.89	1.33	--
Assam	4.96	7.06	29.64	5.44	1.01	19.15	0.40	0.81

Source: Census of India, 2011

The 2011 census data exhibited that Maharashtra accounts for 17% of India’s total 5.43 crore interstate migrants, holding the top rank as the destination state. Uttar Pradesh and Gujarat are the next major states where people from other states migrate to.

The corresponding share of the states did not change much over the decade, as revealed from the 2001 census data. In 2001, Maharashtra was at the top of the ladder as the destination state, with Gujarat being the second and Uttar Pradesh the third. The other favoured destination states were Punjab, West Bengal and Kerala. Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, West Bengal, Gujarat, Kerala, and Punjab account for 42% of interstate migrants in India, as per the 2011 census.

Figure 1: Share of Major Destination States (%)



Source: Census of India, 2011

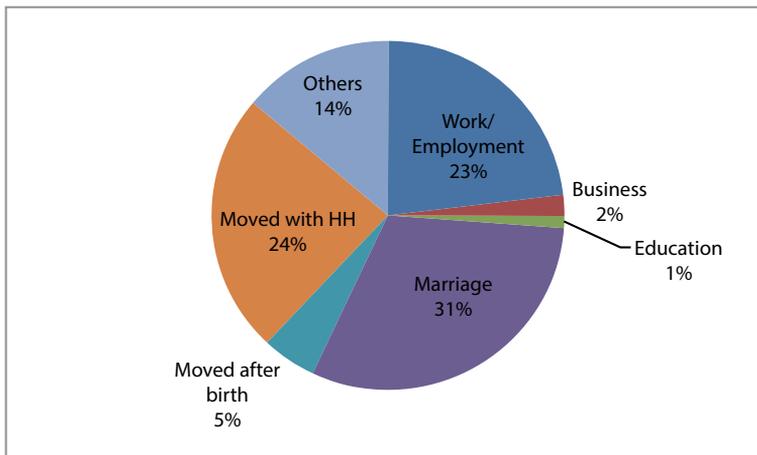
3.2 Reasons for Interstate Migration

Reasons for migration are different for males and females. The major factor among the males, for interstate migration is work/employment, whereas that for females is marriage. Approximately 47.5% of total males migrate outside their states for work/employment, while around 54% of total females move outside the state because of marriage.

Table 6: Reasons for Interstate Migration

Reasons	Migrants (Millions)
Work/employment	12.55
Business	0.87
Education	0.74
Marriage	16.89
Moved after birth	2.51
Moved with households	13.05
Others	7.64
Total	54.26

Source: Census of India, 2011

Figure 2: Reasons for Migration (%)

3.3 Seasonal/Circular Migration

To prevent the exploitation of interstate migrant workers by contractors, the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979, has been enacted. The idea behind the enactment of the Act was to ensure fair and decent conditions of employment in addition to prevent exploitation of migrant workers.

Among the inter-state migrants, as has already been mentioned in a number of studies, the short duration seasonal/circular migrants are most vulnerable sections for obvious reasons. These migrants are mostly from those groups which are socio-economically deprived. They have low levels of education, low income and land resources. They migrate in many occasions for poverty and inadequate income in their source areas and are engaged in casual works in the destination areas. Most of the time, they are exploited by the terms and

conditions of the middlemen/contractors and have no voice to represent their concern. Because of the casual nature of jobs, they are totally beyond the purview of social security and safety net.

However, the importance of circular migration in the context of skill appropriation and resultant increased productivity have been recognised globally. According to the Task force of UNO (2016), 'Circular migration is often seen as a win-win-win proposition, providing gains to countries of both origin and destination, as well as to the migrants themselves. In countries of destination, it can alleviate labour needs and increase economic production. In countries of origin, it can provide unemployment relief and both financial and human capital (in terms of skills and resources brought back to the country), as well as counteract population loss due to emigration. Individual migrants also often benefit via increased income, greater work experience, and the development of their man capital.' Seasonal/circulatory migrant labourers are involved in various activities in unorganised industries as casual labourers or self-employed labourers.

In a webinar organised by Institute of Human Development, Srivastava (2020) said that there were only a few estimates on circular migrants such as the NSS of 2007–2008, which estimated 15.2 million short-term migrants in the country. These short-term migrants are the most vulnerable and are subject to socioeconomic exploitation and discrimination. According to him, these seasonal short-term migrants have a weak foothold in the urban space and in their native places because they have least physical endowment, educational resources, and social background. They enter into unwritten contracts with labour contractors and take advance payment, adding to their vulnerability. They are also isolated from local people (in areas) where they work and are discriminated (against).

3.4 Internal Migrants by Movement Type

Evidence suggests that on the one hand, remittances of the migrants help advancement of development in the source states. On the other hand, migration propels the economy of the destination states through utilisation of skills of the migrant population. However, interstate movement in India is much lower than intrastate and interdistrict movement of migrants. Low income and asset base, low level of networking, as well as prohibitive costs of long distance migration may be the probable causes of low interstate mobility. Short-term seasonal/circular migrants are somehow underestimated due to conceptual and measurement problems. Usually, interstate migrants shift to urban areas and intrastate migrants shift to other rural or semi-urban areas of the same state.

The interstate movement of migrants constituted 13% of total migrants in 2001, which remained almost unchanged in 2011 at 12%. The percentage share of interdistrict migrants was 24% in 2001, which increased slightly to 26% in 2011. The data show that more than 60% migration is caused by intradistrict

migration. The distribution of internal migrants by type of movement is presented in the following table:

Table 7: Distribution of Internal Migrants by Movement Type (%)

Year	Intradistrict	Interdistrict	Interstate
2001	61.46	24.85	13.69
2011	60.56	26.93	12.91

Source: Census of India, 2001, 2011

3.5 Interstate Migration in Delhi

The case of Delhi, as the destination state, needs to be discussed separately as it has the second highest population of interstate migrants in India, preceded by Maharashtra. Kawoosa (2019) quoted in Hindustan Times that more than 63 lakh people in Delhi, approximately 40% of its population, are interstate migrants. Among the states of India, Delhi has the highest share of interstate migrants in its total population. Reasons for this huge drive for interstate migration are marriage, work/business and education, particularly for people from northeastern states. However, a decline was observed in the share of people who migrated for the reasons of work/business during 2001–2011. A sharp increase in the influx of interstate migrant workers in Delhi from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and Jharkhand was observed during 1991–2011.

4. Impact on Migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into focus again the age-old agony and misery of migrant labourers. The pandemic has resulted in 3-fold adverse outcome—loss of employment, starvation and reverse migration. Because of the closure of factories and workplaces due to the lockdown, migrant workers faced loss of income, shortages of food and dwindling on their little reserved money. As a result of severe loss of income/nil income, eviction by the owner from their shelters, hunger and the fear of the Corona virus infection thousands of migrants started walking back home, with no means of transport due to the lockdown. In spite of responses by the governments—central and state and philanthropic efforts by some individuals and non-government organisations, many migrants died due to starvation, exhaustion, accidents, and inaccessibility to adequate healthcare/medical facilities.

Although government schemes are present to ensure additional rations due to the lockdown, the distribution system has not been very effective in allocating ration. Nepotism and corrupt practices at many places have hampered the smooth working of the distribution machinery. Migrants, especially short-term migrant workers, the most vulnerable section of the workforce, had to face starvation.

The absence of income and food and the threat of the virus forced majority of the migrants to walk down long distances to their native places. Adhering to the COVID-19 guideline and maintaining social distancing had not been possible in most cases of this exodus because the migrants travelled together in a truck or van as they wanted to go back to their own villages rather than struggle in the city. They had to face many hardships and hindrances at interstate borders. Many migrant workers died because of exhaustion and accidents during the process of reverse migration. Arrangements were made by the government to provide shelter and food to these migrants. Later, special trains such as the ‘Shramik Special’ were started to provide transport facilities to the migrants.

It is needless to mention here that the COVID-19 situation had a devastating impact on different sectors and in different regions of the economy. Some industry-specific and region-specific surveys have been conducted to capture the impact. In Assam, the COVID-19 pandemic turned out to be the final blow to the handloom sector (Das and Sutradhar, 2020). An in-depth examination of the Sualkuchi weaving cluster in the state presented the challenges faced by handloom weavers. The condition is exceptionally precarious for migrant weavers. Usually these migrant weavers stay in rented rooms and use common toilets. A group of 5–10 of them work together in a common shed which is provided by the master weaver. They cannot even use a fan as it spoils the yarn. These migrant workers do not have access to government programmes such as the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) and ration cards and so they are deprived of food rations and other basic minimum entitlements available to the local people. The norm of maintaining social distancing is very difficult to follow by them as their working and living conditions are very congested. Majority of these migrant workers have no money as they have not been assigned any work by the master weaver. They are compelled to rely on credit from the master weaver or from other sources of informal credit leading to their increasing indebtedness. Because of lack of money or any other support like ration cards and other entitlements which are available to local people, the migrants are either taking one meal a day or even starve. Das and Sutradhar (2020) mention in their study that 55-year old Sontara says, I want to go back to my village and will work in the field although it remains under water for more than 6 months in a year. But even after the lockdown gets over, I can’t go back without settling the debt’.

A cross-sectional survey by Kumar et al. (2020) evaluated the mental health status of the migrants who have been kept in shelter homes after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown. The study found that approximately three-fourth (73.5%) of the participants screened, were positive for either depression or anxiety. Furthermore, the migrants who screened positive for anxiety also screened positive for depression, suggesting high co-morbidity. About one-fifth of the participants were screened positive for only depression.

The study noted that a significant proportion of the participants reported a marked increase in negative emotions and feelings such as loneliness, tension, frustration, low mood, irritability, fear, fear of death, and social isolation on the self –designed questionnaire.

Although the Government of India and state governments have been making efforts to address migrant laborers' issues by arranging shelter homes and providing food, many a times the facilities provided by the Government could not reach the migrant workers. Several media agencies have reported incidents of migrant workers travelling to their native places far off from their current location by walking or by cycling (Staff, 2020).

COVID-19 situation has far reaching impact on health of migrant workers. Migrant workers are the most susceptible ones in this pandemic situation. Most of these workers earn wages almost at the subsistence level and cannot protect themselves at the onset of a disaster. Khanna (2020) observes that the relationship between migration and health is multidimensional. The structure of urban and rural populations in India and the dynamic component of migration are likely to exacerbate the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The government has undertaken several measures to facilitate the return of migrant workers to their homes. One of these measures is Migrant Workers Return Registration. This scheme's intention is to count the number of daily labourers and migrant workers who got stuck in other states. The scheme also tries to provide them with 14 days of quarantine facilities and arrangements after they reach their hometowns. State governments have also launched their portals and accumulated the data of daily labourers and migrant workers so that they could be shifted to their hometowns easily. However, in many cases, the measures taken by the government could not produce the expected outcome as many of the migrants had been compelled to leave the cities because of their lack of income to sustain themselves and fear of the disease. It has been also observed in many states, that the exodus of people resulted in negative externalities on other uninfected people.

5. Conclusion and Policy Implications

The states from which people majorly migrate in India are Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Rajasthan, and Orissa. The important destination states are Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Kerala, Punjab, Haryana, Jammu and Kashmir, NCT of Delhi, Maharashtra, and Gujarat. The migrants get jobs in establishments related to brick kilns, carpet manufacturing units, construction units, handlooms, handicrafts, powerlooms and other textile manufacturing units, leather manufacturing units, quartz cutting and polishing units, etc.

The landlessness of the rural population is a major contributing factor for distress migration. Thus, allotting cultivable land or providing strong security in tenural arrangements along with provision of inputs for productive cultivation like seeds, fertilisers and pesticides can address the issues of distress migration. A homestead land can go a long way in mitigating the problem of poor farmers/ agricultural labourers and resolve the problem of forced migration.

Internal migration may be beneficial in providing better employment opportunities and allocation of skilled persons in appropriate activities. It is essential to work for, in an integrated manner, to provide better working and living conditions, decent wages, favourable terms and conditions of work, security, and safety net in destination areas to the migrant population.

Creation of self-employment opportunities in the source and destination states is another crucial channel to mitigate the problem of poor people. It can limit the process of distress migration in source areas. Even if people migrate, provision of self-employment opportunities in destination areas can be an alternative source of livelihood in the absence of wage employment. More jobs and employment opportunities can also be generated through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and more funds can be allocated in the budget for the scheme.

Most internal migrant workers do not have identity proofs that establish their work status. An Aadhaar-linked non-transferable UWIN (unorganised workers identity card) can be formulated. Such cards can be beneficial for all migrant workers, and the government could easily deliver benefits during a crisis. A 'single portable card for workers' in the informal sector could smoothen the functions of both the government and people.

A well-conceived social security mechanism should be introduced for the poor and vulnerable migrant workers. Addressing the health issues of migrant workers and providing them a healthy and hygienic living environment are the needs of the day. Provision of medical facilities at a reasonable cost is one of the most important prerequisites for ensuring a safe and healthy life to migrant workers whose skills are vastly used to build modern India. In addition to healthcare facilities, safety net may include direct income transfer and a universal food grains distribution system without any state barriers. A universal registration system for the migrant workers is also very much necessary. Cash benefits of approximately INR 3,000 crore have been given by the government to 2 crore registered construction workers. However, a large number of construction workers are not registered, and therefore unable to get this benefit. A mechanism of 'self-declaration' for all unorganised sector workers can be formulated by which workers can register themselves easily. However, it needs to be proceeded with caution. A provision for strict punishments can be made in case of false declaration.

Migration policies need to be evaluated to accommodate and provide assistance and protection to migrants in the event of serious health crisis. Healthy and hygienic shelters, an efficient food distribution system, and reasonable medical facilities can reduce the pressure of exodus of migrant workers in a pandemic such as COVID-19. A coordinated effort is required during planning and implementation to combat the pervasive crisis faced by the migrant population who are instrumental for propelling the engine of growth.

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