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## Stuck in transit: Migrants trapped by the pandemic

### Abstract

Migration is a human strategy to improve life and it is a natural behavior of human beings and is a phenomenon that shifts space and time. There was a temporary full stop for this migration due to a disease caused by a strain of coronavirus which led to one of the most immediate actions of shutting down the international borders, which had a serious impact on migration and in many cases even brought it to a halt. There was a huge economic crisis in the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. Social distancing, lockdowns, travel bans, have brought world economic activities to face many other challenges in many sectors, such as health and agriculture that depend on the availability of migrant workers. The impacts due to the pandemic are most troubling for the migrant people of low-income households. In India, millions of migrant workers are losing their jobs due to lock down without any choice, trying to return to their respected place where they come from to fight against the pandemic. In this paper, an introduction to migration and the impact of the pandemic on the migrant workers' health and economy in India are discussed.

Keywords: Migration, COVID-19, lockdown, Migration crisis

### Introduction

Nomadism is a way of life in which a community does not live continually in the same place, has no permanent settlement and moves from place to place, usually seasonally and within a defined territory. So, the movement of humans from the Pre Pre-historic period to the modern age is very much common. People migrate temporarily or permanently for work, education, and so on. Employment is one of the most common reasons due to which people migrate. Apart from this reason, better education, globalization, economic distress, natural disasters like flood, drought and sometimes crop failure drives the villagers to migrate to cities.

### Pandemic in history

Throughout human history, there have been a number of worst pandemics such as Spanish flu,

plague, Cholera, Ebola virus, Swine flu and many more. Pandemic is an epidemic of an infectious disease that spreads across multiple continents or worldwide affecting a massive number of people. Around 70 million people have died worldwide and in India, 20 million people died within a few months of 1918, and that is a huge number when compared to the number of people who died in world war I across the world. All that we are talking about today, whether it is lockdowns, curfews, quarantines including migration was talked about even then. Even the law we are using right now to handle the pandemic is called the epidemic diseases act of 1897. Some of the deadly pandemics in history are Cholera (1817-1920) with a death rate of 27 million, Plague (1894-1920) with a death rate of 25 million, Influenza (1918-1920) with a death rate of 60 million worldwide. Presently we have one such horrible infectious disease called Corona virus discovered in the year 2019.

### COVID – 19 The pandemic

In the city of Wuhan, Hubei province in China, on 31 December 2019, a cluster of cases of pneumonia of unknown cause was reported to the World Health Organization. A previously unknown new virus was identified in January 2020, subsequently named the 2019 novel coronavirus, and samples obtained from cases and analysis of the virus, genetics indicated that this was the cause for the outbreak. The novel coronavirus was named Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID19) by WHO in February 2020. The international borders were closed and there was a huge economic crisis and the people faced many challenges worldwide. By the end of December 2020, there have been 67 million confirmed cases, including 1.5 million deaths worldwide reported to WHO. The Covid 19 is having extreme, widespread impacts on migrants, refugees and displaced persons, as well as on migration design at local and global level. In India, the impact due to this pandemic both on health and economy was huge. Economically, the most affected people in India are the migrant workers.

### Migration crisis 2020 - India

Last year, that is in the year 2020 we did not have one crisis but two crises, we had the pandemic crisis and the other was the migration crisis. India was the only country which faced such a big crisis. The migration crisis of 2020 unleashed by the lockdown to contain the Covid-19 crisis in India raised some important questions about migration and health. Looking back to March or April 2020, a few horrifying scenes we all must have noticed on news channels, social media, newspapers, is a scene where the migrant workers carrying their children and a few belongings which they had in the city are going back home.

Lockdowns due to pandemics are a threat to the economy for every country. In India, lockdown majorly resulted in people losing their jobs. The migrant crisis essentially happened because the Indian railways were shut down. One thing we could observe of all the pandemics in the past is that, people have the tendency to leave what they are doing and go back home at the time of pandemic, which is a natural thing to do. All Indian based families who had temporarily migrated wanted to get back home but because of the lockdown it was not possible to have happened. But some people had the opportunity to stay back where they were as long as they could, given that they had the ability to stay in the city for a certain

period of time without any government support, unless they were of lower income group. There were different classes of migrants, there were some migrants who were not able to survive in the city for more than a few days. Higher income group and medium income group people will have financial support but that is not the case with the lower income group migrant workers. The prime minister had expressed his concern for the millions of workers who are dependent on the daily wages. He stated that he requested the business world and high-income group societies to look after the economic interests of all the people who provide them services, at the time of such crisis. There were few provisions given by the government for the people during lockdown. However, despite these measures by the government, not everyone was likely to be benefitted.

### Effects on migrant workers – 2020 Lockdown

Most important point is that, for most of the migrant workers in India, 'city' is the source of economic security and the village is a site of social security, which is not only their family but the state's provisioning, which denotes, they have the access to ration, subsidized education, health and most importantly access to the welfare state in the source region typically tied to their birth place. The moment they are in different city or state, the access to the welfare state is tremendously reduced. There was no communication in the national lockdown speech for migrant workers. In particular,



Migrant worker carrying his child  
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the communication was all about "Please don't go anywhere, stay at home". But the fact is that for most of the workers in India home is not the city but village. That is the reason when the lockdown was announced they started leaving the city and there were many other reasons too. One of the major reasons is the lack of credibility of how long the lockdown would proceed. We all know, initially it was three weeks lockdown and it kept extending for other few weeks. There were migrants who could live in the city for two or three weeks, but then realized after a point of time that the lockdown didn't seem to be getting over at any time soon and then the holding capacity of these migrants were definitely not more than one month. All the welfare services began late, the state governments started food camps. There were around twenty thousand migrant camps set up in India, along with several other services which were actually unnecessary. For the benefit of the migrants, the government could have actually worked out a plan similar to the one followed with international travelers around the world, who got one week notice period prior and with the students in the United Kingdom who also got one week notice period to get back home before announcing the lockdown. Railways being the lifeline of India's migrant workers, it shutting down, also had a massive psychological impact because people really did not know what to do without them. As per the statistics from the year 2011-2012, in India's labor market there were around 400 million people out of which more than half were self-employed and 121 million were casual workers which means they had irregular work and were only paid as per the number of days they worked. As soon as the lockdown was announced surveys like the CMIE (Centre of monitoring Indian Economy) unemployment surveys track that one in four Indians were out of their job and India's unemployment rate rises to 27.1% in the peak month of April, May of 2020 and so on. Definitely the rise had fallen down later, but not back to the pre-pandemic levels. This clearly shows how important that particular lockdown spike in the year 2020 due to the pandemic was for an employee.

#### Lockdown 2021

Even before we could bounce back from the initial hit of the pandemic, the second wave of corona virus had already hit India. Had the situation improved for the migrant workers in the COVID-19 second wave? The answer would definitely be a clear no. People from many states were worried about the week-long lock down. During the first lockdown, migrant workers and their families were in a more vulnerable situation and they faced difficulties regarding health and economy. Same situation is taking place even in this year's lockdown. Memories of last March 2020 lockdown

are still raw in the minds of migrant workers when the sudden lockdown left them with no jobs, no food and no means to go home.

As the country was on the edge of a humanitarian crisis and increase in the number of covid cases and thousands of death rate each day, lockdowns and curfews again came back to picture. Cities like Bangalore, started registering a sudden increase in the number of cases and social media sites began filling with requests for medication, oxygen cylinders and queries regarding hospital beds. Now there are strict lockdowns imposed in 17 states in India. Before the lockdown was announced this year, migrant workers across Indian cities were in a fear because of the rising covid cases and increasing restrictions such as partial lockdowns and night curfews. More than the fear of virus, it is the fear of economic uncertainty that worries them. Images of returning migrants, crowding transport terminals in large cities like Delhi and Mumbai have returned to our television screens. This 2021 lockdown will be worse than the lockdown in 2019. For several reasons, it is worse in many senses for the working class.

How do we protect migrant workers in case of another lockdown ?

It is difficult to judge how long and to what extent the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will be on the lives of migrant labors and economy of the country. In time of such pandemics, some of the ways India could avoid the mass migration of workers is by giving a 5-to-7-day prior notice to a lockdown just like other countries such as Singapore, UK and New Zealand, so that they would make some arrangements to reach homes, like they do on major Indian festivals every year. Also like the other countries, if India announces a guarantee for minimum sum of money, say 5000 rupees or so, most workers would be free from the fear of economic uncertainty and avoid going back home, as they would at least have some money for their daily needs, till the lockdown ends. There could be an arrangement of transport facility for the stranded migrants, before shutting down of transport system by the government. All these steps could relieve the migrant crisis which India is facing due to the pandemic and could help reduce the panic faced by migrant laborers across the country.

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