



## A Policy Brief

# The COVID-19, Migration and Livelihood in India: Challenges and Strategies

*COVID-19 brought migrant workers and their livelihood at the door step of the government. Although they have built cities and the nation, their rights and entitlements were not recognized in policy and programmes. This paper presents various issues of migrant workers relevant for policy makers.*

The spread of Corona virus from the epicentre of Wuhan in China to worldwide is attributed to migration and mobility of people. In India, the epidemics of the past was hardly concerned with migration and livelihood during the colonial India, although major Indian cities like Kolkata (Calcutta), Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras) and many other urban places hugely suffered from influenza, smallpox, plague, malaria and cholera (Davis, 1951; Banthia and Dyson, 1999; Hill, 2011). Although epidemics in India led to flight of people from cities in the past, the lock down announced on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 in the wake of corona virus outbreak created an unprecedented exodus of migrant workers from various cities of India reminiscent of the mass migration during the time of partition in 1947. Fearing that they may spread infections in the rural areas, authorities prevented their flight but many walked to their destinations. A large number of them lost their livelihood, stranded in the city or on the way living in camps or make-shift shelters provided by the government (BBC, 2020).

The policies and programmes of urban development and planning in India hardly launched any specific programmes for the migrants. Many programmes meant for the poor do not reach migrants due to various reasons especially lack of identity and residential proofs. Failure to recognize migrants as a stakeholder in urban development is one of the biggest mistakes in achieving urban sustainability and realizing the goals of sustainable development in India. Even though migrants are formal citizens, their substantive economic, social and political rights are not fulfilled. The Working Group on Migration (2017) set up by the Ministry of Urban Housing and Poverty Alleviation has examined the plight of the migrant workers in the country and submitted its report in 2017. However, actions on the report are still awaited. In the meantime, sudden eruption of migration crisis resulting from

the out-break of COVID-19 again reminds us the urgency of the matter. This policy paper presents how our understanding of migration and livelihood could be helpful in designing a mitigating strategy of economic and social impact of Coronavirus infection 2019 (COVID-19).

Migrant workers constitute backbone of Indian economy as migration is a livelihood strategy of millions of people in India. Out of 482 million workers in India, about 194 million are permanent and semi-permanent migrant workers as per 2011 Census. In addition, there are about 15 million short-term migrant workers of temporary and circulatory nature. At the state level, in-migration rates are higher in high-income states such as Delhi, Goa, Haryana, Punjab, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Karnataka. Some of them are badly affected by the COVID-19 compared to low-income states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Rajasthan and Odisha with relatively higher rates of out-migration. There are conspicuous migration corridors within the country – Bihar to Delhi, Bihar to Haryana and Punjab, Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Odisha to Gujarat, Odisha to Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan to Gujarat. It is quite likely that the incidence of COVID-19 may also rise sharply in out-migrating poorer states due to return migration.

Among the migrant workers, about 30 percent of them are working as casual workers, and therefore they are quite vulnerable to the vagaries of the labour market and lack social protection. Only 35 percent of migrant workers are employed as regular/salaried workers and the rest are self-employed (NSSO, 2010). Most of the migration for work and employment is directed towards the urban centres in general and mega cities in particular. The respective districts of eight mega cities namely Delhi, Greater Mumbai, Kolkata, Chennai, Bruhat Bangalore, Hyderabad, Ahmedabad, and Pune reported about two-fifth of the total corona virus positive cases in India by the middle of April, 2020 (<https://www.mohfw.gov.in/pdf/DistrictWiseList354.pdf>). The incidence of COVID 19 shows that these metropolitan areas are the centres from where the disease has been spreading to the near as well as far off places.

The Government of India declared COVID-19 as national disaster and imposed complete national lockdown to contain the spread of outbreak and suspended transportation and all economic activities and services. This brought turmoil in the lives of millions who are primarily involved in the informal sector. They lost their livelihood overnight and got stranded in different pockets. As speculated by ILO (2020), India is likely to face the job crisis because of the COVID-19 and subsequent lockdown, and migrant workers and workers in informal sector are likely to be badly hit. It may also impoverish them and affect hugely their food and nutritional intake, access to health care and education of children.

Further to this, India is a leading country of origin of international migrants with about 17 million emigrants according to the latest estimates released by the United Nations (2019). India also continues to be the top remittance (USD 78.6 billion) recipient country as well (World Migration Report, 2020). COVID-19 has brought into sharp focus the international migrants from India and the major migration corridors India shares with the world. Many of the developed countries such as United States of America, Spain, Italy, France, United Kingdom and Germany have witnessed an exponential increase in the number of COVID 19

cases during the past few weeks. Government of India has rescued many emigrants from these affected countries prior to the lockdown in India (First Post, 2020). In some of the Gulf countries, many Indian migrants are locked down in a crowded neighbourhood, raising fears that it will become a coronavirus hotbed while some other countries have asked the migrant workers to stay home, and stopped paying them. The lockdown imposed in many of the gulf countries have dramatically slowed their economies. This loss will not only affect the workers but also the respective state economies (The Indian Express, 2020). Many of the international migrants are likely to return after the lockdown is lifted either due to jobless or to prevent such agonies to happen in future.

The Government of India and state governments along with Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and charitable societies have taken various steps to mitigate the effect of the lockdown on the vulnerable groups including migrant workers. These include providing shelter, relief camps with provision of food, health care and other basic necessities. In a recent report, government has proposed to send trained counsellors and community group leaders belonging to all faiths to the relief camps and shelter homes to deal with any consternation that the migrants might be going through (Press Trust of India, 2020). However, the fear of loss of livelihood sparked into the mass exodus of millions of these migrant labourers in some parts of country, who started on a long 'barefoot' journey with their families, in the absence of the transportation facilities, to their native places. Though the lack of proper guidelines to implement the strategies posed several challenges in front of state governments in form of lack of preparedness, in line with orders given by central government, majority states have also devised their own strategies and taken substantial measures to protect the lives and rights of migrants during this time.

The ongoing lockdown period has been extended up to 3<sup>rd</sup> of May with resumption of selective economic activities from 20<sup>th</sup> of April. There is a huge uncertainty about how long this crisis will last and what damage it would do to the economy, livelihood of people and availability of basic healthcare services. Given its size and spread, management of migrants under lockdown represents a massive logistic challenge. Some of these challenges need to be addressed instantly and some of them in the long term.

The instant challenges are related to stranded migrants:

- a. to provide food and basic amenities at camps/shelters by maintaining better hygiene and sanitation (soap/ water/ toilet/ waste management) to all of them;
- b. to provide the basic income support to migrants and their left behind families who are not registered to the social schemes and depend on daily wages for survival;
- c. to provide basic health care and preventive kits (like mask, sanitisers, and gloves etc.);
- d. to quickly appraise their conditions and do the screening of the possibly infected persons and quarantine them separately;
- e. to maintain the social distancing for the migrants to check the spread of infection;
- f. to provide counselling and psychological support to the migrants under the distress;

g. to transfer migrants safely to their hometown:

There were incidences of mass gathering of migrant labourers, violating the norm of social distancing, in Mumbai, Surat and Delhi after the end of first phase of lockdown, reflects their desperation to go back to their families in villages. If the lockdown is extended beyond 3<sup>rd</sup> of May, it may create mental agony among them. Hence, there is a challenge to transfer these migrants safely to their hometown.

h. to deal with likely economic stress in the destination areas:

With severe disruption in economic activities, the question arises whether reverse migrants will come back to work in towns or stay in their villages. If they don't return, how to deal with likely economic stress in the destination areas is a challenge. At present the villages of Punjab, Haryana and other states are facing difficulties of harvesting of wheat without migrants. In the origin villages, where resources are scarce and opportunities are limited, it would be challenge for the state government to meet the basic requirements of the people.

Some of the strategies which are already adopted by the government and various organizations, and some of the suggested strategies are as follows:

1. Several state governments are running relief/shelter camps in different states. There is no definite estimate available at the moment but not less than 10 million migrant workers are stranded. While their families at the place of origin are being supported through various measures under *Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana* announced on 26th March 2020, the stranded migrant workers are hardly getting anything except food in the camps. It is suggested that each stranded migrant worker in cities should be given Rs 6000 (i.e., minimum rate of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) Rs 202 per day X 30 days) by the Central Government in addition to the financial support by the State Government per month for at least three months. It would be advisable to give monetary support in cash to the stranded migrant workers in camps, designated shelters and other places in cities.

2. The government issued the guideline for the movement of the migrant labourers on 19<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 which allows the movement of intra-state migrant labourers to carry economic activities outside the corona virus hotspot zones, but did not allow the inter-state movement of labourers. However, following the prevention and screening guidelines adopted by the government for intra-state travel, the inter-state migrant labourers may also be transferred. Both the state governments at the place of origin and destination of migrants may coordinate with the central government and plan strategies to provide transportation to these migrants. Migrants may be screened before departure and after reaching the hometown, they should be quarantined for 14 days before sending them to their homes. Further, in order to avoid stigma by the co-villagers, awareness may be provided to villagers with the help of NGOs, Self-Help Groups, health workers and functionaries of the local bodies.

3. There is an urgent need for the development of authentic database for the stranded migrants at destination, in highway camps and return migrants in villages. Data on volume

and characteristics of the migrants (in camps, home quarantine) is needed to transfer the benefits of social welfare schemes at present and for future management needs.

Apart from these immediate measures, some of the following long term strategies may be adopted:

1. Food grain and pulses need to be supplied on weekly basis to meet the food and nutritional needs of migrant workers and their families. Government should use the Public Distribution System (PDS) infrastructure and distribute the food grain lying as buffer stock to the tune of 60 million metric tonnes with Food Corporation of India. It should also mobilise local bodies to ensure the supply of daily needs arising from the Coronavirus disruption. There is a need to remember that lockdown in the West is affordable while people in India cannot bear the lockdown empty stomach for a long time.

2. Migrants cannot be neglected as a stakeholder in development for a long time. Integration of migrants with development is the need of the hour. Government should seriously look into the recommendations UNESCO-UNICEF and the Working Group on Migration and implement them at the earliest (Bhagat, 2012; Working Group on Migration, 2017).

3. Public health system particularly at the primary and secondary care needs to be strengthened, investment should be increased, drug supply and equipments need to be made available at massive scale, and most importantly human resources of the public health system need to be augmented a spectacular level.

4. India is a vast country with a population of about 1.3 billion. The approach of one size fits is not likely to work. There is need to accept decentralisation as a basic strategy of providing health services. Apart from decentralisation, convergence of various services related to food and nutritional programmes, water and sanitation programmes, employment and livelihood programmes must be made effective. It is high time to establish synergy and coordination between the central and state government. Other agencies need to be mobilised to fight COVID 19 by taking help of village Panchayat and Self Help Groups, and other stakeholders of society like NGOs and corporates.

5. Starting of health insurance scheme for internal migrants may be helpful for the state government as well as migrants at the destination especially during any epidemic or pandemic. For instance, in Kerala, a health insurance scheme known as *Awaz Health Insurance Scheme*, is offered to support migrants. This scheme is also helpful to provide valid documents to migrants, and helps the government to have record of migrants.

6. There may be large number of international migrants who might lose jobs due to COVID-19 pandemic and forced to return. Therefore, there is a requirement for the government to help those return migrants by providing them guidance, training and financial support to those who wish to set up business in order to successfully reintegrate them in the place of origin. For example, in Kerala, there is a scheme by Norka Department for Return Migrants which offers return migrants, who wish to set up a business in Kerala, a capital subsidy and interest subsidy for their investment.

7. There is a need to strengthen the database on migration and migrant households through Census, National Sample Survey (NSS), NFHS and Migration Surveys. The available data are very old and also not available on time. As migration has affected the households in almost all dimensions in both rural and urban areas, an effective inclusion of migrants in our official statistics and access will be helpful in formulating robust and inclusive policy and programmes in the country.

**NOTE:** The full paper can be downloaded from [https://iipsindia.ac.in/sites/default/files/iips\\_covid19\\_mlli.pdf](https://iipsindia.ac.in/sites/default/files/iips_covid19_mlli.pdf)

**CITATION:** R.B. Bhagat, Reshmi R.S., Harihar Sahoo, Archana K. Roy and Dipti Govil, 'A Policy Brief on The COVID-19, Migration and Livelihood in India: Challenges and Strategies', International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai, April 26, 2020.

## **References**

1. Banthia, Jayant and Dyson, Tim (1999) "Smallpox in Nineteenth Century India", *Population and Development Review*, Vol 25, No. 4. Pp. 649-680.
2. BBC (2020) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52086274> accessed on 6th April 2020.
3. Bhagat, R.B. (2012) 'Summary Report and Recommendations', *Compendium on Workshop Report on Internal Migration in India*, Vol. 1, UNESCO and UNICEF, Delhi, 2012.
4. Davis, K. (1951) *The Population of India and Pakistan*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.
5. First Post (2020) Return migration and COVID-19: Data suggests Kerala, TN, Punjab, UP, Bihar may be future red zones for contagion risk, Apr 03, 2020, Available at : <https://www.firstpost.com/health/coronavirus-outbreak-return-migration-and-covid-19-inindia-data-suggests-kerala-tamil-nadu-punjab-up-bihar-may-be-future-red-zones-forcontagion-risk-8221531.html>.
6. Hill, Kenneth (2011) "Influenza in India 1918: excess mortality reassessed", *Genus* , Vol. 67, No. 2, pp. 9-29.
7. International Labour Organization (2020) ILO Monitor 2nd edition: COVID-19 and the world of work, Available at: <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/impacts-and-responses>
8. International Organization for Migration (2019) World Migration Report 2020, IOM, Geneva.

9. Ministry of Housing and Poverty Alleviation (2017) *Report of the Working Group on Migration, Govt of India*, New Delhi.
10. NSSO (2010) *Migration in India 2007-08*, Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Govt. of India, New Delhi.
11. Press Trust of India (2020). Take actions for redressal of migrant labourers' grievances during lockdown: Health Secretary to states. Deccan Herald, Apr 01 2020. Available at <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/take-actions-for-redressal-of-migrant-laburers-grievances-during-lockdown-health-secretary-to-states-820164.html>, accessed on April 5 2020.
12. The Indian Express (2020) Coronavirus deepens struggles for migrant workers in Gulf countries, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2020, Available at: <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/coronavirus-deepens-struggles-for-migrants-in-persian-gulf-6361636/>
13. United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2019) *International Migrant Stock 2019* (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/stock/Rev2019).