

Reverse Migration Due to Long Lockdown in India- Is it Sustainable?

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ABSTRACT

The ill fate of the migrants and their struggle to return home has been the highlights of media for many days now. The migrants do not want to come back to the cities in the future due to the traumatic experience faced. They are now eager to return to their land and sustain on the bare minimum that can be earned over there. As per the NSSO and Census data, there has been a significant migration to the urban cities from the rural areas; majority of these are of intrastate rural-urban migration nature. But the Census data does not consider the short-term circular migrants who account for a large percentage of the total migrant workforce. As per a survey conducted by NSSO in 2007-08, there had been 12.58 million short term migrant workers residing in rural India. They primarily shift to urban areas due to lack of return from agriculture and lack of opportunities in the rural areas. It has been observed that majority of the short term migrants possess low education level and belong to the low income strata with very meager ownership of assets. These migrants are primarily involved in hazardous low paying jobs in the urban cities without any social security. The ill treatment by the employers and lack of access to the facilities in their city of work is forcing them to return to their villages. In this study we have tried to analyse whether enough jobs can be created to absorb the reverse migrants.

Keywords-- Migrant Labourers, Covid-19 Pandemic, Reverse Migration

I. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic of Covid 19 has brought the entire world into standstill. Covid 19, a pandemic which has affected the entire world. The pandemic has both direct and indirect consequences. The effect of this pandemic will also be felt in the distant future. It is predicted to have far reaching impact on the lives and livelihoods of the people across the world. India is also not an exception. In middle of May, there had been approximately 78000 positive cases and 2550 deaths in India. The virus has exposed the broken economic system in India, the severe income disparity that persists over here, the severe destitute situation of the laborers and the deprived condition of the people in the lower income strata. The pandemic has significantly increased the suffering of the poor and the marginalized, who lack access to the basic amenities in the smart urban

cities. The lockdown to stop the spread of the virus has taken away the source of living from the laborers, primarily the ones who work on casual wage employment. The condition has been worse for the migrant workers, primarily the circular and short-term migrants. The seasonal migrants do not have access even to the basic healthcare services; as in many cases there exist no formal contract they are exploited by the employers. The different plans for urbanization has led to employment generation in the metropolitan areas leading to the influx of migrant workers but all urban planners have missed to take account of the migrant workers as part of the city.

Many are saying that “lockdown” has been able to control the spread of the virus and save lives. Yes but of “whom”. For the migrant workers who are now in the headlines, social distancing is nothing but a myth. They do not have shelter and a small room is even shared by 10-15 people. Frequent washing of hands and sanitization can't be practiced by them as they do not have access to water. The methods suggested for controlling the virus are definitely effective but can that be practiced by all? Who will guarantee the practice of the hygiene measures by the poor and marginalized? The spread is observed to be maximum in the congested places, in the slums; for the people living in these areas shelter is a privilege. Maharashtra is the most affected state with Mumbai having the maximum number of cases. Dharavi, one of the biggest slums in Asia with a population density of 277,136/km² has reported about 1028 cases with 40 deaths (as on May 15 2020). This indicates that lockdown can't be the only remedy for controlling the spread of the virus in a country like India which has huge population density. The extended lockdown can further degrade the living conditions of these people and make them further vulnerable to the disease. The numbers of covid cases are quite high in the metropolitan areas of Mumbai, Delhi, Chennai, Bangalore and Kolkata. These metropolitan areas are the ones with the maximum number of reported cases in the respective states. The metro cities are also the places with maximum number of migrants, particularly from the rural areas within the state. The employment generation due to the urban plans in these cities attracts people from the rural areas leading to population pressure in these cities. The excessive population pressure in these places has led to lack of basic

amenities for the lower income group people. The urban poor lack access to basic sanitation facilities. As per the National Sample Survey Office estimates (NSS 65th round) around 31 per cent of urban households depend on shared/community/public toilets, out of which households with shared toilets account for 24 per cent. The situation of the migrant are worse as compared to the poor inhabitants of these cities as majority of the states do not have proper policies framed to provide security to the migrants.

II. WHY PEOPLE MOVE FROM RURAL TO URBAN

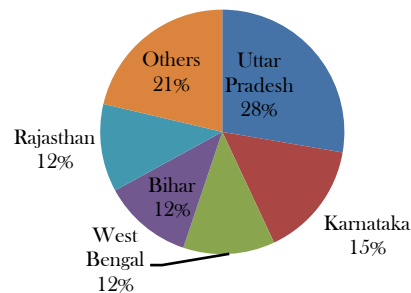
The people migrate to the urban areas both due to pull and push factors.

Some of the most important push factors are; Agriculture in India is largely depends on monsoon. As a result, production of food-grains fluctuates year after year. Due to the growth of population and breakdown of the joint family system, there has occurred continuous sub-division of agricultural land into smaller and smaller plots. At times small farmers are forced to sell a portion of their land to repay their debt. This creates further sub-division of land. The conditions of most agricultural laborers in India are far from satisfactory. There is also the problem of surplus labour or disguised unemployment. This pushes the wage

rates below the subsistence levels. One of the major causes of low income of the Indian farmers is the difficulty in marketing their crops. Due to the small size and scattered nature of agricultural holdings, the productivity per acre is low. The typical Indian farmer is almost always in debt. The farmer is a perennial debtor.

The contribution of agriculture to GDP has declined considerably over the years but this fall was not accompanied by a considerable decline in agricultural employment. Though there is an increasing trend observed in the employment of rural households but still agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for majority. As per the NSSO survey, 49% of the workforce was still employed in agriculture in 2011-12. This shift of workforce from agriculture to the other sectors is commensurate with economic progress. It is usually observed that productivity of labour is higher in manufacturing and services sector as compared to the agricultural sector and hence fetch higher wages. The low return from agriculture and lack of growth opportunities usually lead to migration from rural to urban areas. In India, the shift from agriculture has been substantial and 79% of that has been contributed by Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, West Bengal, Bihar and Rajasthan. Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Rajasthan are also the biggest source states for the migrant workers.

Fig. 1: Reduction in Agricultural Labour Force by States – 2004-05 to 2011-12



Source: NSSO Reports 61st and 68th Rounds, Census of India, KPMG Analysis

A major reason for the shift from agriculture is the low wages in the rural areas and higher wages in non-farm jobs. Though a significant positive impact of the MGNREGA been observed in boosting rural income and incentives but further stimulus to the programme might significantly help in reducing the migration away from agriculture. The rural-urban wage gap has been a major reason behind the migration from rural to urban areas. There has been a rise in real wages in the period of 2004-05 to 2011-12 on account of agricultural growth along with

revision of support prices, implementation of MGNREGA and the growth of the construction sector. Though real wages increased at a higher rate as compared to wages in urban area but in spite of that, daily wages in urban areas remain twice as high as in rural areas. This wage gap and the lack of opportunities lead to rural-urban migration. The surplus labour from agriculture who can't be absorbed in the non-farm jobs in their native place are forced to migrate to urban areas and are forced to live in impoverished situations.

Table 1: Real average daily wages of rural and urban workers

	Real Daily Wages (INR) Base Year 2011-12		
	1993-94	2004-05	2011-12
Rural Workers	86	122	174
Urban Workers	218	282	384

Source: ILO estimates based on NSSO data

For India a prominent impact of this pandemic is the struggle of migrant workers. This problem is extensively faced by the metro cities due to massive influx of migrant workers. More than two-thirds (69 percent) of India’s 1.21 billion people live in rural areas, according to the 2011 Census of India, but the country is rapidly urbanizing. The cities of Mumbai, Delhi, and Kolkata are all among the world’s top ten most populous urban areas, and India has 25 of the 100 fastest-growing cities worldwide. A significant source of this growth is rural-to-urban migration, as an increasing number of people do not find sufficient economic opportunities in rural areas and move instead to towns and cities. Provisional 2011 census data show that for the first time, India’s urban population has grown faster than its rural population since the last census. Thirty-one percent of India’s population is now classified as urban, up from almost 28 percent in 2001. Agriculture Ministry statistics showed that, the proportion of agricultural labor compared to cultivators in the rural economy rose (40.3% in 1991 to 54.9% in 2011). India experienced rapid urbanization between 2001 and 2011, with an estimated 31.8 per cent decadal growth. This is one obvious reason behind the increase in rural-urban migration. India has approximately 175 million internal migrants who move for work in the informal sector and support the lifeline of many State economies. In 2010, 29.8 percent of all Indians lived below the national poverty line, while 33.8 percent of rural Indians lived below the national rural poverty line, according to World Bank data. While wage and education gaps between rural and urban Indians are declining, rural India is still characterized by agrarian distress, a chronic lack of employment, and farmer suicides. Thus, the rural-urban divide has been one of the primary reasons for India’s labor mobility. Fifty-six percent of urban male migrants move in search of employment. The urban cities attract people from the rural areas in search of employment. As per NSS 2007-08 data and 2011 Census, 28.3% of the workers in India are migrants. The migration has primarily happened from the rural to the urban areas which have led to economic and social marginalization of the workers. As per the Census 2011 data, majority of the

migrants have shifted from rural to urban areas within the state in search of employment.

It has been put forward across many papers that the migrants are always eager to move back to their home if provided with employment opportunities. Covid 19 has shown us the vulnerable condition of our migrant laborers.

III. CONDITION OF THESE MIGRANT WORKERS

As per Pradhan (2013) over 50% of the increase in urban population was attributed to rural-urban migration and reclassification of rural settlements into urban. The lack of basic amenities for the poor in these urban areas has forced the migrant workers to stay in very unhygienic surroundings. As per the census data majority of the migrants possess education level below matric/secondary level and are engaged in low-paying hazardous jobs. Census fails to capture the short-term flows of migrant workers. As per Census 2011 in manufacturing in urban areas, 38% of the male workforce is composed of migrant workers, with a similar share in modern services. The circular migrants who move to the big cities during the lean harvest season to earn money are not captured by the Census survey. They are not recognized by the government of the cities they move to and live in makeshift shacks, in extreme disadvantaged conditions. The cities though provide employment opportunities in informal sectors but are unable to provide its migrants with decent living conditions. It is observed that people do migrate due to lack of local options. The ones with higher education level might migrate due to pull factors but the ones belonging to the lower strata of the population are usually pushed to migrate. Migration is expected to improve the socioeconomic status of the households and benefit the region they migrate to but the migrant policies are unfriendly in many parts of the country. This results in extreme poor conditions of the migrants. The migrants though contribute to the economic growth of the destination state but do not have access to healthcare and social security.

The condition of the short-term migrants is even worse as compared to other migrant workers. As per the NSSO 2007-08 surveys, there are 12.58 million short term migrants residing in rural India and they constituted about 4% of the rural workforce. Of the 159 million rural households, 76% had only one short-term migrant while 17% had two short term migrants. 46% of the short term migrants are intra-state. As per the study by Agrawal and Chandrasekhar (2015), individuals from agricultural labor households are more likely to be short term migrants than other type of holders. The short term migrants are usually observed to possess low education level and belong to low income strata of the population. As per the NSSO 2007-08 survey 52% were either illiterate or had not even completed primary education and 55.4% were casual workers. Studies by Deshingkar et. al. (2008), Mosse (2005) have observed that the seasonal migrants primarily are engaged in casual urban construction work. Majority of the laborers migrated due to lack of growth in agricultural activities. Individuals working in the agricultural sector are primarily observed to move to construction sector as short term migrants. During the lean harvest season they move to urban cities as

construction workers. The wages of the short term migrants are lower and their rights are not enforced.

IV. REVERSE MIGRATION

Majority of the migrants had gone away from agriculture and are now willing to come back to their land; they want to secure their land and earn a livelihood from the land. The landless workers are also willing to come back since they at least have a shelter in their village. They do not want to go back to these cities for work in the near future due to the traumatic experience faced and the ill treatment by their capitalist employers. But is this reverse migration sustainable? Can enough job opportunities be created in the rural or peri-urban areas to absorb this workforce?

In India, though agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for majority of the rural households an increasing trend is observed in the engagement of rural workers in non-farm activities. In the survey on employment conducted by NSSO, growing importance of non-farm activities is observed.

Table: 2: All-India Share of Non-farm Employment in Rural Workforce (Per Cent) and Distribution of Households and Population with Non-farm as Major Source of Income (Rural) (Per Cent) (1993–94, 1999–2000, 2004–05 and 2009–10)

	1993–94	1999–2000	2004–05	2009–10
Share of non-farm employment in rural workforce	21.6	23.7	27.3	32.1
Distribution of households with non-farm as major source of income	31.9	35.1	38.3	42.5
Distribution of population with non-farm as major source of income	30.1	32.9	36.1	40.6

Sources: NSS: *Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India, Report Nos. 425 (50th Round, 1993-94), 469 (55th Round, 1999-2000), 516 (61st Round, 2004-05) & 543 (66th Round, 2009-10)*

As per a study conducted by Basant (1993) in Gujarat, nearly three-fourth of the sample households had reported more than one source of income. Individuals are specializing in occupations like band-playing, boring tube wells and construction related activities (Saith and Tankha, 1992). Non-farm sector is becoming a major source of income for rural household. Lack of agricultural growth, in many cases, is observed to move the people to non-farm activities. The non-farm sector can help in generating employment for the reverse migrants. The role of non-farm sector should be explored. It is observed from the NSSO surveys of 1999-2000 and 2011-12 that over a period of 12 years the rural non-farm employment increased by 12% points (considering the workers over the age of 15 and

employed for at least half of the reference year). As per the NSSO surveys, there has been a significant increase in the share of the construction sector in rural employment. Construction employment was primarily of the nature of casual wage employment while service sector was of self-employment and salaried employment type. The ones involved in the construction sector possess very low education level, even below the primary level and work without any formal agreement or security benefit. Amid the Covid 19 pandemic the construction sector will also take time to revive and hence there is need for generating different employment opportunities to absorb the reverse migrants. Agrawal and Chandrasekhar (2015) observed in their study that the odds of an individual being short term

migrant is greater than 1 if the individual reside in a district with concentration of workers in the construction sector. The surplus labor force who possess low education level, have negligible ownership of assets are forced to migrate and get employed in the low-paying, hazardous and informal market jobs in key sectors in urban destinations,

such as construction, hotel, textile, manufacturing, transportation, services, domestic work etc. The exodus of these workers from the urban cities will increase the labor supply in the rural areas and hence there is need for developing the rural areas and the adjacent small cities.

Table: 3: All-India Shares of All Sectors in Rural Employment for Males, Females and Persons (Per Cent) (1993–94, 1999–2000, 2004–05 and 2009–10)

	1993–94	1999–2000	2004–05	2009–10
Share of agriculture in rural employment	78.4	76.3	72.7	67.9
Share of manufacturing in rural employment	7	7.4	8.1	7.2
Share of construction in rural employment	2.4	3.3	4.9	9.4
Share of trade, hotel & restaurant in rural employment	4.3	5.1	6.1	6.4
Share of transport, etc. in rural employment	1.4	2.1	2.5	2.9
Share of other services in rural employment	5.7	5.2	5	5.4
Share of mining & quarrying in rural employment	0.6	0.5	0.5	0.6
Share of electricity, etc. in rural employment	0.2	0.2	0.2	0.2

Sources: NSS: Employment and Unemployment Situation among Social Groups in India, Report Nos. 425 (50th Round, 1993-94), 469 (55th Round, 1999-2000), 516 (61st Round, 2004-05) & 543 (66th Round, 2009-10)

Majority of the migrants coming back are likely to belong to the group with low education level and insignificant ownership of assets. But these migrants possess some specific skill sets which they have gathered during the period of their stay in the urban cities. Other than construction work, they are observed to work as electricians, plumbers, drivers and also employed in the hospitality sector. Formal education is not a requirement for non-farm sector but it requires different skill sets. The government, in consultation with the panchayats in the rural areas, can do a skill mapping of the workers and try to generate employment opportunities related to that. The local governance need to generate more employment under the MGNREGA. During the period of 2011-12 MGNREGA starved of funds due to excess demand. There is need for more infusion of funds under this scheme. As per many experts, the current stimulus of Rs. 40,000 crore might not be enough. With migrants coming back, households might require more than 100 days of work. The reverse migration should be considered as an opportunity as skill is coming back; the skill needs to be utilized to develop the rural areas and the adjacent small cities. There is need to develop the agricultural sector by improving the agricultural marketing which can then absorb a part of the workforce coming back. The lack of infrastructural facilities and extensive chain of middlemen in the agricultural sector

leads to the distressed situation of the farmers and they eventually shift to the other sector for employment. Development of agricultural marketing techniques and supply chain can improve the returns to the farmers which in turn might lead to increased rural demand. The increased demand can in turn lead to development of other sectors and employment generation. The small cities lack proper infrastructural amenities like public transport, the development of urban facilities in these areas can help in generating significant employment opportunities. The infrastructural development in the small cities will attract investments in these areas which will lead to further employment generation.

V. CONCLUSION

Traumatic experience faced by the migrants during this lockdown period has forced them to go back to their native place and currently they are not willing to return to these urban cities for job. But the question is, will it be possible for these workers to make a living in their villages and not return to their earlier place of work. That is highly questionable. Employment generation in the rural and adjacent semi-urban area is expected to take time. Will it be possible for the laborers to stay back till then? The pandemic has shown us the need to develop the rural and

adjacent semi-urban areas. Till date, all economic activities are concentrated around the urban cities, leading to immense population pressure in these areas. This eventually leads to inferior working condition and standard of living of the urban poor. The more vulnerable are the migrants. Hence, it is imperative to develop plans for the semi-urban areas which might help in generating significant non-farm jobs. But this will need time to get implemented.

The urban-rural wage gap is another reason which might force the reverse migrants to return to the urban cities. Will it be possible for them to accept the wage gap and stay back in the villages? Can enough jobs be created and will the wage gap be accepted by the migrants can't be predicted right now. The outburst of the migrants can't be considered as their ultimate decision as they are in a traumatized state now. It is imperative for the state governments and the employers to understand the role of migrants in the growth of the state. Hence it is important for the respective states to frame policies to protect the migrants. It needs to be understood by the respective states that migrants play an important role in the economic development of the states and hence proper security and benefits needs to be provided to them. The states need to keep proper record of all migrants including the circular and short-term migrants and frame policies to secure these people who are the backbone of the economic growth.

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