



Review Paper

Effect of lock down during COVID-19 prevention program on migrant labours in India

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Abstract

The emerging and uncontrollable pandemic COVID-19 problem has affected each individual of the world in one form or the other in versatile ways. In spite of tremendous efforts of government to provide daily needs and necessary requirements of common man, instability has arisen amongst people of different professions. Present study demonstrates the effect of lock down on migrant labours of India. Various challenges faced by migrant labours, abnormality in lifestyles and role of community in contributing to unstable lifestyle of migrant labours during lock down period are discussed and analyzed. The drastic deterioration of socio-economic and other factors in second phase of lock down in comparison to first lock down phase are also discussed. Measures taken by government of India to tackle migrant labours issues and its further consequences from future aspects are elaborated in the present work.

Keywords: Migrant Labours, lock down, COVID-19, lifestyles, instabilities.

Introduction

The current pandemic COVID-19 situation and efforts for its prevention and transmission has resulted in an imbalance in society. The lockdown and closing businesses were initiated by central government when India reported around 500 cases of COVID-19. It ought government for shutting of industries, public transports, shops, vendor streets, construction works and avoiding of sweepers, cooks and cleaners by community for their household tasks^{1,2}. Therefore, during this pandemic situation, none of the community member is left unscathed and was affected in one way or the other. During first phase of lock down period, the situation was under control and government worked efficiently to prevent further transmission¹. Community also followed strict discipline, obeyed curfew and lockdown rules that helped community prevention from transmission of COVID-19 virus¹. However, with the extension of lock down period various socio-economic problems were found to rise with negative impact on community people belonging to versatile professions. Local authorities imposed restrictions while creating strict containment zones to shut down hotspots that lead to lacking jobs and money amongst migrant workers that further resulted in critical dislocation of migrant population of India^{3,4}. These preventive measures became mandatory due to rapid community transmission of COVID-19 virus.

Researchers of University of British Columbia and Chicago have found that during two months of Delhi lockdown, non-migrant and poor workers of Delhi have observed their working days and incomes drops by at least 73% and 57%, respectively⁵.

In May, 2020 beginning, 9 out of 10 survey respondents stated that significant diminishing of their weekly income to nil⁵.

The Covid-19 crisis has forced India to finally acknowledge the migrant population. In spite of tremendous relaxations in lock down during second and third lock down phases, migrant labours could not get appropriate platform to earn their livelihood and necessary source of income to support their family^{6,7}. This is attributed to instability caused during lock down period with simple lifestyles adopted by people during this critical phase. Therefore, community, including middle, business and working classes, respectively had avoided taking help of servants, labours, maids, cooks and other household workers for their home and workplaces. During first phase of lock down, people showed full cooperation and paid full incomes to their household workers, without seeking their helps. But during extension of lock down period, middle class and business class itself suffered from financial crisis therefore became ignorant towards helping labour class. This lead to turmoil amongst migrant labourers and they were forced to move back to their native places⁵⁻⁸. Although free food services were provided by government to below poverty line people, daily wagers and other migrant workers, but other requirements of labours like supporting their family economically and a feeling of blank future created a fear and uncertainty amongst them. Moreover, maintaining appropriate shelter without financial stability forced them to move back to their home places. This even forced them to trundle across several kilometers on their foot to their native areas.

There are various patterns of migration, on the basis of origin and destination, intra-state and inter-states, respectively⁹.

Therefore, it was not possible for all migrants to reach their home destinations on their foot. Their struggles made government to acknowledge them and help them provide necessary transport facilities to reach their respective areas. On account of this, first special train for migrant labours, during lock down period was run by government on 1st May, 2020 named "Shramik special train" carrying \approx 1200 migrant workers^{10,11}. All passengers underwent proper thermal screening and were guided appropriately for maintaining social distancing and other required precautions, like wearing masks, sanitizing hands from time to time before starting their journeys in trains¹⁰.¹² They were asked to carry their own water bottles and other eatables during journey to avoid further complications¹⁰⁻¹².

Methodology

Due to implementation of lock down and following social distancing guidelines, it was difficult to conduct proper physical interview session with migrant workers; therefore source of information was taken from online modes, social media, newspapers and news channels. The objective of this study was to understand the social and mental behaviour of migrant workers. The mental pressure faced by them on account of fear of their future instability and steps taken by them to overcome that pressure. The causes of this burden on mental behavior of migrant workers, role of their bosses and work givers in maintenance and support during these critical phases to them are discussed and analyzed. Online classes of schools had drastically affected the socio-economic situation of working staff, especially of private schools. The nearby migrant workers (near Panjab University, Chandigarh) in neighborhood construction sites were interviewed while maintaining proper social distancing guidelines and wearing of masks during interview.

Results and discussion

Causes of mental pressure on migrant workers: During the first phase of lock down period (from 25th March, 2020 to 14th April 2020), the situation was under control and there was not a turmoil amongst individuals¹. This is because it was an unexpected prolonged pandemic problem by community. In addition, government provided all necessary facilities and daily needs to each individual belonging to versatile community group. During initial stages (first lock down phase), many donations of food, money, proper salaries were given by people belonging to rich community and upper middle class¹. People enjoyed first phase of lock down and managed to complete their home tasks on their own^{13,14}. This was because; it was like a break to all people from their busy, hectic schedule¹. But with prolonged lock down, sitting idle or occupied with excess household work and an unplanned schedule created stress amongst people¹. Moreover, the spread of COVID-19 and prolonged lock down period developed a feeling of panic amongst people of all classes, upper, middle and lower classes. Therefore, each class started developing the habit of saving

money and other luxury items, rather than donating them. This can be inferred from the high amount donations done by popular celebrities like Akshay Kumar, Virat Kohli, Salman Khan and many more during initial lock down period¹⁵. Many corporate industries, ministers and religious places also significantly contributed towards Prime Ministers relief fund to help country during this pandemic stage¹⁵⁻¹⁷. But thereafter, no significant amount was donated by people. Moreover, salaries of government employees were deducted for utilizing them for handling COVID-19 emergency situations. But government gave full cooperation in providing salaries to all government employees and urging other non government and private institutions to support their employees by providing the best possible financial support. In initial stages, it was possible, but after one to two months, companies, industries, private schools also suffered financial losses. This made them uncomfortable to support their working employees because they themselves were dependent on their savings and this made them helpless to help workers. Private schools also suffered financial crisis as they were urged by government not to charge school and transport fees from parents. This made them helpless to pay salaries to their workers. Although free food services were provided by government for daily wagers and other needy people, but the fear of future security and mental pressure of financial instability to support their families living in villages and their homelands created turmoil amongst migratory workers. Although, government gave suitable relaxation to open shopping malls, shops and other work stations, while maintaining World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines and proper social distancing and other precautionary measures, but people themselves didn't prefer to go for shopping and unwanted roaming unnecessarily. Hotels, restaurants and other food courts were allowed to open in third lock down phase, but people avoided taking meals outside. As there were no significant profits to shop owners, hotel staffs and other shopping malls, it was difficult for them to support Labour staff. Therefore, it leads to a challenging situation for daily wagers, especially whose salaries were dependent on profit basis. Moreover, they had realized that COVID-19 pandemic problem would prevail for a longer time; therefore they preferred to return back to their home land and stay with their families. According to World Bank, lock down in India had affected nearly 40 million internal migrants⁸. Approximately 50,000–60,000 migrated from urban centers to rural areas within few days as reported by World Bank on 22nd April, 2020⁸. The internal migration is around two-and-a-half times that of international migration. This is because most of the migrant Labours population belonged to rural section of the society and had migrated to urban section on account of their financial crisis, lack of jobs and to support their families^{20,21}. Lockdowns, loss of employment and social distancing prompted panic and chaotic process of mass return of internal migrants in India⁸.

Steps taken by migrant workers to overcome their mental pressure: Free rations were distributed to migratory workers by various government and non-government institutes¹⁶⁻¹⁹.

But this did not satisfy the economic problem of migrants, as they had to support their families living in their native lands by providing them financial support. On 18th April, 2020 there were rumors of starting special Shramik trains for migrant workers. Many migrant workers started assembling near Mumbai city railway station, violating social distancing norms and making others at risk²². At the same time, in western state of Gujarat large number of textile workers protested in Surat city to provide clear passage for their hometowns²². A day later, a large crowd of poor labours on the banks of Yamuna river in Delhi were found²⁰. Living in shelters, sleeping under flyovers or footpaths, the migrants were restless and waiting for restrictions relaxations so that they can reach their homeland^{21,22}. Most of migrants started walking on their foot to reach their home with their families with only tea and biscuits as daily meals for surviving their livelihood. Rickshaw pullers, auto rickshaw drivers took help of their own vehicles to reach their hometown. COVID-19 pandemic finally forced government to acknowledge migratory workers and help them to reach their homes²³.

Efforts done by government to help migrant workers to reach their native places: Central government started mapping migrant workers in relief camps to collect suitable database to ascertain whether the migrant labours acquire bank accounts or accounts opened under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan scheme²². Proper planned program to provide benefits to people (belonging to below poverty line having appropriate Aadhaar cards) like making free gas cylinders for cooking easily accessible to them under the Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana scheme²³⁻²⁵. This was done so as to help most affected section of migrant workers and provide the necessary help to them on priority basis^{24,25}. Labour and Union home ministries instructed state governments to coordinate with the chief labour commissioner's (CLC's) office and provide comprehensive data relevant to migrant labours by April 11²⁵. The data was collected from three sources primarily: District wise relief camps, from employers whose labours are in-situ at workplace, and migrant workers localities where they reside in clusters. The data was collected from various relief camps operated under several non-government organizations (NGOs)²⁵. The data was segregated on the basis of occupation and professions of migrant workers. The list of occupations include rickshaw pullers, agriculture, security guards, domestic workers, automobile workers, work at brick kilns, food processing and workers at construction sites. The information sources were extracted through district administrations of different states. The labour commissioners worked in coordination to extract details of migrant workers. To help migrants to reach their homeland, the government planned to execute a total of 100 trains. The first train ran from Hyderabad to Jharkhand's Hatia with over 1,200 migrant workers incubated²⁶. According to Railway Board Chairman, V.K. Yadav, till 1st May, 2020 around 60 lakh migrant workers took 4450 special trains run for Shramiks at an average ticket price of Rs. 600²⁷. The Railways also agreed to facilitate the utilization of their train coaches for pandemic care

centers during emergency situations. For Delhi, Mr. Yadav mentioned the already usage of 50 coaches with 800 beds and further accessibility of 500 coaches when the Delhi government identifies more locations²⁷. Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced several measures for migrant workers²⁸. Providing free rations, even without a ratio and cards, running as many Indian railway trains as possible, providing facilities to migrant workers to get them registered for travelling through special Shramik trains, so that they should reach safely to their native places^{28,29}. The railways declared that responsibility for food, health scanning, security and providing tickets to the stranded will be with the state from which the train is originating. However, it had taken the responsibility of providing one complementary meal to passengers whose journey will be of 12 hours or more^{27,30}. Indian Railways had operated 1,074 Shramik Special trains since May 1, 2020³⁰. Over 2 lakh persons per day were transported in first three days of Shramik special trains²⁵. Maximum trains terminated were from migratory workers belonging to Uttar Pradesh (387)³⁰. An approval of 526, 269 and 81 trains have been given by Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, respectively²⁸⁻³⁰. Moreover, Railway Minister Piyush Goyal also mentioned the approvals made for Jharkhand, Odisha, Rajasthan and West Bengal by running 50, 52, 23 and 9 special trains, respectively for these Shramik workers³⁰.

Conclusion

The extension of lock down period to prevent community spread of COVID-19 virus has affected poor and daily wagers to maximum extent, who do not have any savings to survive upon. Moreover, their financial instabilities and family responsibilities staying in their native places, created a panic and mental pressure amongst them. In addition, there was emergence of future panic on migrant workers due to this pandemic emergency situation that has made instable lifestyle of mankind. As it was expected to be a long COVID-19 fight, migrant workers expected a blank future for them that created turmoil amongst them. This made them desperate to return back to their homelands. Government tried to help them by providing facilities. However, it was difficult to maintain a balance between social distancing norms and supporting huge migratory population during this pandemic emergency situation. Although significant support was provided by government to help them, a turmoil situation still prevailed. Moreover controversies by political parties added another challenge to government to handle the situations.

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