



Review Paper

Covid-19 Crisis in India - A Study of Migrant Labourers

Ganeswar Nayak

Dept of History, F.M Autonomous College, Balasore, Orissa, India
ganeswar_63@rediffmail.com

Available online at: www.isca.in, www.isca.me

Received 25th October 2020, revised 26th November 2021, accepted 5th April 2022

Abstract

India plunged in too deep crisis when Covid-19 invaded India. Covid -19 means corona virus disease. 19 -is used, since it started in 2019. On November 17 in China's Wuhan province the first case of novel corona virus was reported. The initial case of Covid-19 in India was informed on 30 January 2020. It is one of the malicious diseases which affected India. In order to contain the disease, Govt of India imposed complete shut down from 23 March 2020. When workplaces and factories were shut down, millions of labourers had to face loss of wages, food shortages and doubt about their future. The International Labour Organization (ILO) calculated that due to the virulent disease and lockdown about 400 million employees would be affected. Nearly all labourers in the country originated from, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. Although, government policy guarantees that the poor would get supplementary rations due to lockdown, the distribution system unsuccessful as the ration cards are region specific and fair price shops were not accessible. Many labourers travelled thousands of kilometers to reach their destinations without food and sleep. Police atrocities continued during lockdown. The lockdown had been virtually a death sentence for the disadvantaged of the country.

Keywords: Covid-19, Lockdown, Shot down, Stranded Workers Action Network, Shramik Special Trains, Supreme Court.

Introduction

The paper discusses the advent of Corona Virus disease and its implication on migrant labourer in India. The occurrence of Corona virus disease 2019 (Covid-19) has created a worldwide health predicament that impacted on the life and economy of entire world. In India it trigger crises when government clamped Lock down Phase-1 (from 25 March-14 April), Lock down-2 (from 15 April-3 May), Lockdown Phase -3 (4 May -17 May). With the launching of lock down, they became unemployed because industries and factories were closed down. There was no alternative source of employment for migrants. The central argument of this paper is that, both central and state government, failed to visualizes the problem of migrant workers when lock down clamped in the country. It is further argued that lack of planning and coordination between state and central government, the migrants crisis precipitated in the country. The author further argue that with proper planning before lock down, death, destruction and colossal human crisis could have properly avoided.

The Covid-19 crises impacted migrant labourers in a very hard hitting way. When lock down started in the country, industries, factories and work places closed. In the after math of the shut down millions of labourers faced unemployment, loss of income, and severe shortage of food. These social crises also affected their families and children. In order to save from this situation, many unemployment laborers wanted to return their home. Since no transport facilities was available, many of them

tried to return by walking¹. The precarious condition of women walking hundred kilometers with their child in their lap or sometimes women dragging their famished child published in the news papers². Many laborers died due to exhaustion, lack of food, rail and road mishap, police brutalities and timely medical help.

According to statistics, there are probable 139 million migrants in the country³. International Labour organization informs that due to virulent disease and lockdown about 400 million workers would be scarcity stricken. The migrants mainly started off from the state where unemployment is acute. These are; Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. The migrant labourers travelled to the cities where Employment prospect is bright. These cities are Mumbai, Delhi, Hyderabad, Surat, Kolkatta and Vizakpatnam⁴. Migrant workers consisted of day by day wage laborers working in the industrialized and building industries. There is no central pool of migrant workers, despite the existence of the Inter- State Migrant Workman Act of 1979⁵. Since many of them work in informal sector, they are often deprived of adequate health care, nutrition, sanitation and housing. They are mostly from the informal sector. These labourers came from rural area but live in cities for work for many years. Many labourers have no savings and lived in factories dormitories, which were closed due to lock down. All these factors aggravated the problem of migrant laborers.

The State of Maharastra became the focal point of crises. It had largest number of migrant labourers, according to the Census of

2011 India. The state government suddenly clamped a lockdown on 20 March in Pune, Pimpri Chinchwad, the Mumbai Metropolitan Region and Nagpur, leaving the migrant workers with no work. So thousand of laborers hurried to railway station and bus stations, looking for transport to go to their home town. But due to lockdown all over the country all transports were closed. This resulted complete chaos in the railway and bus stand.

Acute shortage of Food

Due to shutting down of factory and industries, thousand of laborers faced severe shortage of food. But the government introduced One Nation, One Ration card, system, in the Mid April 2020⁶. This system permitted migrant employees to receive food grains for without charge anywhere across the country but hardly was it known to them. In addition to this, the new scheme also required biometric endorsement. But this was suspended due to fear of diffusion the virus through frequent fingerprint. Due to all these problems, migrants did not get food and money during lock down. Due to all these tribulations, the migrants faced acute shortage food⁷.

Crisis in haulage System

Crises in transport system further aggravated the tribulations of migrant workers .Due to lock down public transport system came to a standstill. So, migrant workers were spotted walking or going by bicycle hundreds of kilometer returning to their own villages with their children and sometimes with their baby⁸. During their long journey, no government provided food and water. So many migrant travelled in hungry without provision of water. Some migrant laborers argued that they are interested to go home and die without food rather than face covid-attack.

The problem of migrant laborer was further aggravated when the period of Lock down extended for second and third phase. In fact, lockdown was extended to check the spread of Corona Virus disease. But apathetic administration did not visualize the imminent danger of labourers. The inhumane treatment touched the heart of many leading news papers.

Many laborers were arrested for violating lock down, or faced police brutalities while crossing inter-state boarder. Some laborers died out of being extreme tired. Others died in accidents. On 31 March, 120 injured migrant workers were forcibly sent to Maharashtra by Gujrat Police. On 8th May, a goods train ran over the labourers sleeping on a railway track. In another example, on 16 May, labourers were killed in a road accident between two trucks. In an exceptional incident a 15 years girl transported her sick father for 12,00 kilometer on a bicycle from Bihar to Garugram in a week⁹.

Due to horrible situation of migrant's labourer, some special train and bus were prearranged by the government for their safe travel. But these measures adopted by the government were insufficient to contain the large scale migration of labourers. So

they choose to either move together in large groups in goods slot of trucks and containers, or travel by walking. They failed to wait for to board the government prearranged transportation. Moreover, they felt that going back to their home town; they could return to agricultural work or take up small employment under the MGNREGA.

Government palliatives to Contain disaster

Govt. of India (Ministry of Home) ordered on 27 March to the States to make certain that migrant would not travel during the lock down and shut down. It further allowed the states to utilize National Disaster Response Force (N.D.R.F.) for providing rations and asylum¹⁰. Further, on March 29th the government directed that the landlords should not insist on rent during the lock down and employers should pay salary without subtraction. However, guidelines regarding payment of salaries was reserved for the lockdown opening out on 17 May 2021.

Further, on 16 May, the administration also confirmed the formation of National Migrant Information system (NMIS). It is an online data base developed by National Disaster Management Authority¹¹. This was to help to rationalize the movement of migrant workers. It helped the state government to locate of migrant workers. By this means the administration intended to keep the workers updated by feeding their phone records in the scheme.

Establishment of Relief Camps

Establishment of relief camps was another imperative step taken by the government to lighten the crisis of migrant labourers. According to the directive of Central Government, some state government established relief camps to keep the lakh of migrant labourers and confirm their exodus. The government of Orissa established relief camps by the side of National Highways to house the migrants. In Delhi, Government supplied open food to 4 lakh people every day. By 5th April 2020, 75lakh people were being provided food all over the country in the food camp run by the government and NGO¹². The Kerala government provided south Indian food, mask, sanitizers, and medicine to the migrant workers. By April 12, 37, 978 relief base camp and 26,225 food base camps were set up. However, these relief camps were inadequate to provide checkup and health facilities. Because in several centers, migrants laborers returned without getting any help.

Dislocation in Government Sponsored transport Service

Several Governments arranged transport services to help the migrant labourer to reach their destination. 91 Lakh migrant had returned home by the transport services provided by the government by 28 May 2020. Nevertheless, there was a lot of confusion in this system. According Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), the migrant laborers became puzzled over correct procedure to record themselves for taking a trip. But the

system was confused because the state government adopted local language and English which was not known by the migrants¹³. Similarly, bus service arranged by the government failed to fulfill the demands of laborers. Uttar Pradesh Government provided some transport services at Delhi's Ananda Vihar bus terminal to return laborers to their villages. Poor management led to the chaos in the Bus stand. Their problem was compounded when lock down was extended in the last week of April and many remained stranded. 40 lakh migrant labourers returned homes by buses by 23 May 2020. The arrangement of bus has no correlation with number stranded migrants.

Introduction of Shramik Special Trains

In order to recover from the Covid-19, crisis, the government of India started Shramik Special trains for emigrant labourers and others trapped people. But this system was plagued with several problems. There was no coordination between centre and state government to carry out this program.

On 3 May, the Government of India criticized the state governments for quickly asking for trains to transport migrants. It stated that the trains were generally intended for those who trapped due to sudden lock down and not the immigrant. Moreover, additional charges were imposed over the regular charges¹⁴.

Due to this, the central government faced numerous criticisms from opposition. The Indian National Congress declared to finance the vouchers of migrant's labourers. After that Govt of India declared that it would finance 85% subsidy on the train fares, and state government subsidy residual 15%. But the migrant were still forced to pay unnecessary fare in some cases. First, the central government, declined to finance the railway ticket of the migrant workers, but later agreed for the same due to interference of the state government. Moreover, there was difference between Maharashtra and other states to carry out the directives of central government. Moreover, there was no consistency of policy on the running of Shramik Special trains.

The trains carrying the migrant laborers were cancelled by the Karnatak Government. The Bihar Government also did the identical things to trains upcoming from Kerala. These states later changed their consideration. Even if special trains were introduced for the migrants by the government, proper arrangements were not made for transportation. Some migrant complained that there is no provision for food and water in the trains. A train coming from Goa to Manipur was late by 58 hours. Similarly, no food or cleanliness facilities were available on the train.

In some other trains transporting migrants, those who received water and food packets complained that the different necessities were simply discarded at the entrances of the compartments. It led to tussle among the workers to get food and water. Some

migrant were passed away out exhaustion, food and water. Railway Protection Force (RPF) provides information that, there had been 80 deaths of migrant workers in the trains between 9th May to 27th May 2020.

According railway ministry report, on 23 May 2020, migrant laborer from Bihar and Utttar Pradesh comprise 80% of train travelers. By 12 June 2020, 4277 trains reserved for migrants had transported about 60 lakh people¹⁵.

Relief Measures for migrants

In order to save migrant from crises Finance Minister, declared the sanction of a 1.7 lakh core, to alleviate the condition of the people. It was included cash transfer and steps to guarantee food security¹⁶. Again, on 3rd April 2020, the Government of India again declared the sanctioned Rs11,092 crore to states and Union territory to provide rations and shelter for the migrants. Again, to alleviate the distress of the migrants the daily wages under MGNREGA was increased. Again 35 billion was spend for providing free food grains to migrant workers¹⁷.

Social Isolations and suffering of migrant workers

The migrant faced atrocities in the society during the lock down period. Those who chose to stay in their house during migration faced physical attack from their neighbor. Many faced policy brutality if they ventured out of their home. Even if they reached their village or home town, the neighbor apprehended that they are carrying corona virus¹⁸. They faced stabbing and annoyance from the people of their hometowns. Almost all the migrant faced social isolations in the society¹⁹.

Death of migrants and Social Crises

There was widespread death of migrants during lock down. More than 300 deaths were reported till 5 May 2020²⁰. 80 migrant were killed while returning by the trains in April 2020, since imposition of lock down. Eight migrant workers were slaughtered and nearly 55 wounded when the truck ran over with a bus near Guna, Madhya Pradesh on May 14, 2020. According to Save Life Foundation, an N.G.O working in Road Safety, 198 migrant labourers were killed in road accidents as of 2 June 2020²¹. Starvation, suicide, exhaustion, rail and road accidents, and police brutalities lack of timely medical care were potentially responsible for huge death rate among the migrants.

Decision of the Supreme Court

On 30th March, 2020, the Supreme Court ordered the central government to file a status report with respect to the condition of migrant workers in the country. In its report, government of India, confirmed that the migrant workers, worried of their survival, moved in panic created by false news that the lock down would continue for more than three months. Further, on 16 May, 2020, the Supreme Court discarded a PIL, to direct the

district magistrate to make out and provide relief and transport to the migrant workers, directing that it was accountability of state government²². Further on 26 May, 2020, the Supreme Court directed that the Centre and States to provide open food, shelter and transportation to trapped migrant workers. This provided a respite to the migrants.

Conclusion

Covid-19, paralyzed the social fabric of India. In order to check the disease, the government of India fastened lock down and shut down. It is definitely a good plan to contain the virus. But the Government failed to visualize the implication of shut down on the common people. Because, the government suddenly imposed shut down without any planning. When the problem of migrants became so acute government prepared several plans to save the migrants. But plans were made after the migrant faced the crisis but not before the crisis. Moreover, there was no coordination between the central and state government in effectuating the migrant welfare policy. If this could have done, several migrants could have saved from death and destruction.

References

1. Rashid Omar and Ananda Jatin (2020). India Corona virus Lockdown, Migrant workers and their Long March to Uncertainty. *The Hindu*. 2020, April 4.
2. Economic Times (2020). The precarious condition of women walking hundred kilometers with their child in their lap. April 8. 2020.
3. Sharma Krishnavavatar (2020). India has 139 million internal migrants, They must not be forgotten. World Economic Forum. 2020, May13.
4. Jha, A., & Mohammad Kawoosa, V. (2019). What the 2011 census data on migration tells us. *Hindustan Times*. 2020, May 27.
5. Srivastava, R., & Nagaraj, A. (2020). As migrant workers struggle for lockdown aid, India seeks to count them. *Reuters*. Retrieved, 17. 2020, May 17.
6. Singh, Sidhartha and Parija Pratik (2020). India has enough Food to Feed poor if there is prolonged Shut Shutdown. *Bloomberg Quint*. 2020, 24 March 24.
7. Vadlamudi Swathi (2020). Sans Adhar, No Ration for Migrants. *The Hindu*. 2020 April 19.
8. Jaiswal Pankaj (2020). Corona virus update: A long walk home on empty stomach for masked migrant. *Hindustan Times*. 2020. March 26.
9. News paper report (2020). Bihari girl who cycle down 1200 km carrying father, to be called for trial by cycling federation. *The Hindu*. 2020 23 May.
10. The Associated Press (2020). Govt. of India (Ministry of Home) ordered. 16 May 2020.
11. Mahale, Arjeet and Bharadwaj, KV (2020). After turning their back during lock down, cities now want migrant workers back. *The Hindu*. 2020, June 27.
12. Jagga, Rakhi (2020). Trains, taxis, even flights: Return of migrant workers continues in Punjab. *The Indian Express*. 2020, June 6.
13. Joy, Semin (2020). Govt withdraws orders of mandatory wage payments during lockdown. *Deccan Herald.*, 2020, May 18.
14. Mathur Atul (2020). Delhi Lock lockdown, Over 500 hunger relief centers set up for 4 lakh people. *The Times of India.*, 2020, March 28.
15. Laharia, Khabar (2020). No food. No water, no money, Back in UP's Banda on Shramik Special, migrant laborers look back on long journey home. *First Post*, 2020, May 15.
16. Haksar Nandita (2020). Filthy toilets, attacked with stones: For North East workers from Goa, a 119- hour nightmare on rails. *Scorll* 2020, May 27.
17. Times of India (2020). Relief Measures for migrants. 2020, 15 May.
18. Rashid, Atikh (2020). Migrant workers return home against all odds- only to be seen as carriers of virus. *The Indian Express*, 2020, May 20.
19. Kumar Chandan Mohanty (2020). Migrant workers battles, stigma, bias back home. *Hindustan Times*. 2020, May 10.
20. Modak Sadaf (2020). Not Just Hunger, Psychological factors, job insecurity behind migrants exodus. *The Indian Express*. 2020, April 20.
21. Elsa, Evangeline (2020). The human cost of India's Corona virus lockdown: Death by Hunger, starvation, suicides and more, *Gulf News*. 2020, April 15
22. Rajgopal, Krishna Das (2020). Supreme Court orders Centers and States to immediately provide transport, food and shelter free of cost to stranded migrant workers. *The Hindu*. 2020, May 26