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Assessment of challenges of reverse migration in India in the post-COVID economy

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Abstract---Background: The present study was conducted for assessing the challenges of reverse migration in India in the post-COVID economy. Materials & methods: A total of 50 subjects were enrolled with whom telephonic interviews were carried out. Only those subjects were enrolled which were reverse migrants. These internal migrants belonged to different Indian states who had returned from the destination states. All the workers covered under this study belong to the low-skilled and semi-skilled workers category. A list of contacts of these migrants was prepared with the help of social workers and other researchers working with them. Telephonic interviews, which proved to be the most appropriate method due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, with all the migrants have been written as notes and analyzed. Challenges were assessed using SPSS software. Results: A total of 50 migrant workers were interviewed. Among them, 66 percent were males while the remaining were females. 54 percent of the subjects belong to the age group of less than 40 years of age. Due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown, the working class, especially the low-income migrant workers, have been the worst affected. One of our respondents and a construction worker who returned pushed him to return to his native state during the lockdown. Conclusion: The COVID-19 crisis should be used as an opportunity to bring positive measures and requires strong political will to implement them.

Keywords---challenges, reverse migration, COVID-19.

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic has triggered a massive reverse migration from the “destination” to “source” in large parts of the country. We witness hundreds of thousands of labourers marching back to their villages in order to find some warmth and empathy more than anything else, as the rest is going to be too hard to come by. The pandemic brought with it lockdowns and travel-bans that were imposed by the governments all over the world as a necessity to tackle the pandemic and to rein in its outspread. However, the lockdown upset the daily routines of the people especially the working class who were put in a major financial predicament.¹⁻³

A new normalcy of surviving in a state of constant panic came into place, with the people being asked to live in this uncertainty for a longer duration than what was anticipated in the beginning of the pandemic. A batch of novel practices came into existence as part of rigorous mitigation efforts, such as, “social distancing, household quarantine, facemasks, vigilant sanitisation and hand washing, and avoidance of public gatherings, public transportation etc.” As time passed and the situation became worse, the pandemic has slowly unmasked its harsh reality and people have started grasping this truth that the current state of the situation is going to last longer than what was presumed of it in the beginning, and this has affected them rather drastically. The transformational process of adapting to this pandemic risk as a public or global calamity, while dealing with the fear of contracting COVID-19, and managing the disease, is highly exhausting and not doable by all.⁴⁻⁶ Hence; the present study was conducted for assessing the challenges of reverse migration in India in the post-COVID economy.

Materials and Methods

The present study was conducted for assessing the challenges of reverse migration in India in the post-COVID economy. A total of 50 subjects were enrolled with whom telephonic interviews was carried out. Only those subjects were enrolled which were reverse migrants. These internal migrants belonged to different Indian states who had returned from the destination states. All the workers covered under this study belong to the low-skilled and semi-skilled workers category. A list of contacts of these migrants was prepared with the help of social workers and other researchers working with them. Telephonic interviews, which proved to be the most appropriate method due to COVID-19 lockdown restrictions, with all the migrants have been written as notes and analyzed. Challenges were assessed using SPSS software.

Results

In the present study, a total of 50 migrant workers were interviewed. Among them, 66 percent were males while the remaining were females. 54 percent of the subjects belong to the age group of less than 40 years of age. Due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown, the working class, especially the low-income migrant workers, have been the worst affected. One of our respondents and a construction worker who returned pushed him to return to his native state during the lockdown. A few internal migrants reported that they received work under the

same employer/contractor after the lockdown but complained of non-payment of wages during the lockdown period. They were forced to return to their villages due to unpaid wages, no place to live with basic facilities such as electricity and water provided by the contractor/employer and no immediate governmental protection. The internal migrants interviewed reported a sparse coverage of the government relief package as only a few respondents received immediate cash benefits. Only half of the respondents from UP and Bihar received a one-time cash benefit while the remaining did not. Another construction worker reported that he received free ration which would sustain his family only for 20- 25 days of a month.

Table 1: Profile of the migrant interviewees

Variable		Number of subjects	Percentage
Age group	Less than 40 years	27	54
	More than 40 years	23	46
Gender	Males	33	66
	Females	17	34

Discussion

It was recognized early that attack of Covid-19 on India – the second most populated country of the world – may cause mayhem, given the average quality of health infrastructure in the country. Response stemmed from the humanitarian principle that human lives lost once cannot be brought back. With this background, India enforced sixty-eight days of four-phased-lockdown starting from 24th March to 31st May 2020 to deal with COVID-19 pandemic. Forced by the pandemic, the ominous choice between ‘life’ and ‘livelihood’ had to be made and many were left with no alternative but to migrate back to their villages which was their most familiar place. Hence; the present study was conducted for assessing the challenges of reverse migration in India in the post-COVID economy.

In the present study, a total of 50 migrant workers were interviewed. Among them, 66 percent were males while the remaining were females. 54 percent of the subjects belong to the age group of less than 40 years of age. Due to the COVID-19-induced lockdown, the working class, especially the low-income migrant workers, have been the worst affected. One of our respondents and a construction worker who returned pushed him to return to his native state during the lockdown. A few internal migrants reported that they received work under the same employer/contractor after the lockdown but complained of non-payment of wages during the lockdown period. They were forced to return to their villages due to unpaid wages, no place to live with basic facilities such as electricity and water provided by the contractor/employer and no immediate governmental protection. The so-called source regions that see a large influx of migrants to the destination regions are Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, MP, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, largely eastern Up, parts of Maharashtra and Gujarat (especially the tribal areas). Invariably, these regions internally also experience chronic drought, have deforested landscapes and devastated agro-ecologies that bear the imprints of

tardy implementation of welfare schemes as well as schemes in the arena of agriculture services of soil and water conservation. This failed development contributes to the continuation of poor resource bases and assets of marginal and small farmers, which is accentuated by the persistence of a context of subjugation that perpetuates severe economic deprivation and thrives on entrenched social discrimination—the exploitation of the poor, the landless, and the castes at the bottom of the social hierarchy. Due to the young male population out-migrating, the source eco-niches are also getting increasingly characterized by the feminization of agriculture that has meant the largely distress-induced participation of women. Thus, migration is not a reflection of failed agricultural policy alone.^{7- 10}

The internal migrants interviewed reported a sparse coverage of the government relief package as only a few respondents received immediate cash benefits. Only half of the respondents from UP and Bihar received a one-time cash benefit while the remaining did not. Another construction worker reported that he received free ration which would sustain his family only for 20- 25 days of a month. States such as Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal with high number of returnee migrants could bring down the unemployment rates by providing work under MGNREGA. Reports suggest that the scheme not only helped the unskilled workforce but also provided respite to the graduates and professional degree holders who lost their jobs in the cities and returned to villages. The pandemic related distress had significant impact on the food and nutritional intake of the reverse migrants. A study conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies found in their sample that only 38.9% (547) said that they never went completely out of food during the lockdown.^{10- 12}

Migration thus gives an optimistic livelihood strategy for migrant workers and their families, contributes to the economic growth of the destination state/country, while the origin state/country benefits from the remittances and the skills acquired during their migration. Migrants from Kerala, a southern state in India, earn high wages as highskilled workers in the Gulf, allowing them to remit more (Rajan & Zachariah, 2020). Even though labour migration compensates for labour shortages in the destination states/countries, workers employed in the low-skilled, labour-intensive sectors suffer malpractices such as wage-related abuse, working overtime without compensation, lack of social security cover and lack of protection during recruitment and employment (Srivastava, 2013). This points to the vulnerable position of these migrant workers which was heightened further during the COVID-19 crisis.^{13, 14}

Conclusion

The COVID-19 crisis has magnified several pre-existing problems faced by the migrant communities which led them to suffer invariably at different stages of their reverse migration. This crisis, therefore, should be used as an opportunity to bring positive measures and requires strong political will to implement them.

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