

Research Article

Covid-19 Lockdown and Fate of Migrant Labours in Delhi

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A B S T R A C T

Fifty Eight percent (approximately 63 lakh) migrant population in Delhi and NCR is currently employed in the unorganised sector. Nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19 pandemic across Delhi and NCR has created huge challenges, fear, insecurity and uncertainty among the people. Migrant workers are the worst affected and face huge challenges for their survival during lockdown. In this context the present paper discusses the socio-economic, psychological challenges faced by migrant workers such as accessing food, water, shelter and other necessary requirements. The paper examines the role and responsibilities of the government to protect the rights of migrant workers. It highlights the narratives of the migrant workers during lockdown. Some key questions have been raised to the governments with regards to protection of migrant workers. The research paper reviews the secondary data published in leading news papers, magazines and personal field observation made to understand the ground realities. The paper concludes that there is no simple answer to this tragic dilemma between two humanitarian crises, the spread of the virus and the devastation caused by the lockdown.

Keywords: Coronavirus, Lockdown, Struggle for Livelihood, Migrant Labours

Introduction

A nationwide lockdown was announced on March 24th midnight, 2020 to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic for 21 days till 14th April, 2020 across the country and was further extended till 31st May, 2020. Lakhs of migrant labours working in the construction sector, agriculture, manufacturing, transport and other services sought to migrate to their home States. These labourers are the poorest and the socially discriminated groups and form the classic nowhere citizens of India. They have no rights and entitlements in the areas in which they work and in the villages to which they belong. The National Sample Survey and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) show that these migrant labourers are mainly from rural areas and

belong to the poorest. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes. They predominate in activities that are dirty, dangerous and difficult and consistently face discrimination.

Relief Package from the Government

In Delhi more than 1000 food centers were opened that provided free food including breakfast, lunch and dinner (Mathur Barkha, 2020). Delhi government had provided free ration to 71 lakh ration cardholders and five kg free ration to 10 lakh non-ration cardholders (The Hindu, 22nd April, 2020). Delhi government gave free ration to around 30 lakh people, who do not have ration cards. It provided 2000 food coupons to each MLA and MP of Delhi. Each of these coupons was applicable 5 kg of free ration to those

people, who do not have a ration card or any Id proof (The Hindu, 22nd April, 2020). The beneficiaries got four kg of wheat and one kg of rice each. The scheme initially caters to around 10 lakh people. Community kitchens were started to serve lunch and dinner to around 6, 90,000 people per day (The Hindu 11th April, 2020). The food delivery network established in all 11 districts facilitated by the Delhi police has led to provision of meals at more than 250 locations and dry ration kits to 1,837 people (Hindu 6th, April 2020). The Delhi government has released assistance of 5,000 for 7,242 construction workers engaged in the city. The government released 3.6 crore as assistance amount to 32,358 registered construction workers. The money is being transferred directly to the accounts of these labourers (The Hindu, 11th April 2020). Delhi government had announced several measures, including doubling the pension under the widow pension scheme for 2.5 lakh beneficiaries, the old-age pension scheme for 5 lakh beneficiaries and disability pension scheme for 1 lakh beneficiaries. Apart from these, a number of voluntary civil society organisations, Residents Welfare Association (RWA), Religious organisation, and student volunteers rendered food and medicine during lockdown. Number of corporate organisations came forward to help needy and poor people and sponsored meals for them.

Issues and Problems of Migrant Labour

During the lockdown to fight the novel coronavirus, States began imposing restrictions on the movement of people. This tough measure was met with fear, anger and frustration in many parts of the country. However, shortly after the lockdown declaration, a mass exodus of panicked migrant workers was witnessed. On the night of 19th March 2020 the Indian Railways announced the suspension of passenger trains, as a result there was a trickle of migrant workers most of them daily wage earners who no longer had the means to sustain themselves and the family members. Suddenly, in just a few hours, lakhs of migrant workers left their homes and Jhuggis and found themselves without work and fear of uncertainty of food in coming days. Lakhs of migrant workers across Delhi and NCR were seen wearing gamchas, carrying heavy backpacks and wailing children, and walking on national highways, boarding tractors, and jostling for space atop multi-coloured buses to leave for their home. The little or no guarantee to avail basic amenities such as food and water forced thousands of migrant labourers to flock to the city's bus terminals.

The trickle turned into a deluge at certain points, by March 28, 2020 thousands of migrant labours assembled in large numbers in Anand Vihar in Delhi bordering U.P.'s Ghaziabad; in Manesar, Faridabad and Gurugram in Haryana and in Noida and Greater Noida Zero Point on the Yamuna Expressway in U.P bus terminals was packed with migrant

workers who chose to put their urge to reach home above the need to practise social distancing. District administration announced that 200 State-run buses would ferry commuters to various locations in the rural parts of the U. P (Asian News International, 28th March 2020). Bound mainly to Agra, Aligarh and Lucknow, migrant workers and their families thronged the location to try their luck at boarding any vehicle, en route home, to return to their villages. Most of the private bus drivers charged double the fare ranging from Rs. 500-1,000 per passenger (Times Now, 28th March 2020). In spite of the fear to contract the Coronavirus the workers opted for moving to their respective villages. However, all of them were not lucky enough to reserve a seat. A majority of the migrant workers were seen boarding buses already overflowing with passengers, hoping against hope to reach their homes hundreds of kilometres away, others had to walk endlessly on highways linking States before the borders were sealed. They walked along the banks of the Yamuna river, through the wilderness of U.P and through unused railway tunnels before being told that the borders were shut. Those who had tried and failed, over two consecutive days when the lockdown was eased in U.P to find any means of travelling home returned to their rented accommodations to live a life of uncertainty. Some from States such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal, located far away from the NCR, decided to stay back. Apart from these lakhs of migrant workers were stuck in the capital and NCR during lockdown.

Despite government efforts and other help from various organisations, thousands of migrant labours spent sleepless nights without food and shelter. Migrant workers on top of their worries about rents, wages and food had cuts in their pays during the lockdown by their owners. Many daily wage labourers lost their jobs and were unable to return to their hometowns and found themselves locked in with the lockdown. They are solely dependent on the food and shelter provided by the authorities. During lockdown many workers were forced to stay in cramped rooms with little ration. Seven to eight people were cramped in a small room with little or no ventilation, nor proper space to cook. Those who missed the first wave of exodus to their home town and villages yearned to be back with their families.

Many of the workers lived in makeshift Gaushala, converted relief camps, schools, Dharmshalas, Gurudwara etc. They did not have any work to do and were not allowed to step outside on the road that made them feel bored and homesick. Most of the time they call their families to share their daily problems and feel more vulnerable and miserable. It was found that in most of the shelter homes and relief camps, people were unable to get adequate and quality food on time. They had to wait for three to four hours in a big queue since morning. Police personnel also received thousands of calls every day related to scarcity of food

and medical issues. Female migrant labourers faced huge challenges, living together in relief camps with unknown male and using common toilets. There was no privacy during day and night even in an emergency. It was very uncomfortable for a woman who stayed at the camp with the males all around. In most of the shelter homes there were no basic facilities, like electricity, light, fan, toilets and water. Most of the shelter homes were overcrowded and old inmates were not allowing new inmates in the shelter home. There was huge fighting, abuse among each other.

Most of the factory workers, who were staying in the jhuggis nearby industrial area, in Delhi had left for their hometowns, the others who stayed back were awaiting their salaries and hoped to resume work once the lockdown ends on April 14th 2020. In the jhuggis in Delhi and NCR many people were helpless and devastated by strict policing and unresponsive ambulance teams. It was painful for poor people even in health crisis situations. Many people face severe problems accessing health services in an emergency to reach the hospital. Many families did not attend the funeral due to the lockdown. Many migrant labours appeal for help to various local leaders, local administration, police and other authorities but to no avail. During lockdown, vegetables and essential goods witnessed a rise in the prices. Onion was retailing at 60/kg, tomato at 50/kg, potato at 40/kg, while other seasonal vegetables were selling at not less than 100-120/kg. Even dry ration supplies were being sold at higher prices. The prices were too high, not within the reach of the poor daily wage labourers (Business Standard, 28th March, 2020).

The plight of migrant workers hit by the COVID-19 lockdown was pathetic. There were lakhs of residents in Delhi's bastis and slum settlements who do not have ration cards either and cannot benefit from the government's promise of a free ration allocation. Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyan (DRAA) a Food rights group has found that the several ration shops were to be shut due to supplies running out and many people did not receive ration on time. In its report published on 4th April 2020 by the DRAA 10 of the 34 shops visited in Delhi by the team were found to be closed. However, Delhi government's March 26th, 2020 order said that supplies for two months would be delivered to ration shops. Therefore, it was not clear how the shops ran out of stock, since ration was distributed to only 60 percent of cardholders (The Hindu, 5th April 2020). Another report published by the Delhi Rozi Roti Adhikar Abhiyaan on 10th April, 2020 said that 13 out of 37 ration shops inspected by volunteers were found closed during working hours while six of the shops claimed to have run out of stock. Around 35 percent of the ration shops were closed when DRAA visited during the working hours. Only 18 out of the 24 shops which were open were found to be distributing grains to ration cardholders. The remaining shops stated that they

had finished their stock, the DRAA said in its report (The Hindu, 11th April 2020). This raises serious concerns about the possibility of diversion of grains. At times of crisis, when people are facing food shortages, it is absolutely essential that people gain access to their ration entitlements. For some of the shops which stated that stocks were over, it was found that there were cardholders who had not received their ration whereas, the online website showed their ration been dispatched to the shops.

The report released on April 15th, 2020 by SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network), an NGO revealed that only 51 percent, who were surveyed, had rations left for less than one day. Owing to the lack of cash and food availability, many had been eating frugally and some had even been on the brink of starvation. The report highlighted that there was much physical and psychological agony and trauma, and desperation to return home. It further explained that two weeks into the lockdown, only one percent of the stranded workers had received rations from the government and three weeks into the lockdown, only four per cent had received rations. 96 percent had not received rations from the government. 70 percent had not received any cooked food. 78 percent had less than Rs 300 left with them. 89 percent had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown (Sarah Farooqui, April 17th, 2020).

Narratives of Distress Migrant Labour

Many migrant workers in Delhi, and NCR faced huge challenges for their survival. Few of them shared their problems which are highlighted below to understand the plight of the migrant workers.

Santosh, said they are managing with the little cash they had, but were running out of essential basic commodities. "We did not venture out to walk to the relief centre fearing that the police might beat us," said Santosh (The Hindu, 3rd April 2020).

Shankar Ram from Bihar's Muzaffarpur, who works at an idol-making factory, said he did not get his monthly salary of 8,000. "I got 1,000 advance after which there was no word from the employer".

In Mayapuri, jhuggi Anita and her brother Annu Prasad, both employees of a private company, got a phone call informing the death of their father Kailash Prasad in a village in Uttar Pradesh's Azamgarh. With no mode of transportation, they told the relatives back home that they wouldn't be able to attend the funeral. They spoke to a police officer and a local leader regarding their problems but they couldn't help them. They feared that even if they reach U.P they will be put in separate shelters and won't be allowed to go home, said Annu (The Hindu, 4th April 2020).

Motilal Kushwaha, 35, a painter by profession from Bihar's Bettiah district in West Champaran, said "we are having

biscuits in our meals. We have no cash to return home. We are unable to buy daily food items. I appeal to the PM to intervene and help us in shifting to Bihar” (The Hindu, 4th April 2020).

Another worker Charan Kumar said it is the beginning of a new month and “there is depreciated cash in hand, as a result of which buying groceries is not an option. We are out of job. On usual days, we cooked for ourselves in our rented accommodations. Now, we have no money to spend. We have come to this school so that we do not have to worry about our meals and there is a roof over our heads,” he added (The Hindu, 3rd April 2020).

Manish Kumar, who was employed at a factory said: “Any form of transport which takes me anywhere close to my destination from here will do at this point. I’m going to die soon. If I stay here it will be of hunger; there is no one here to even beg for food. Everyone’s pockets are empty. If I contract the infection I can at least die on my own soil.

Shanti Devi tries to keep her three grandchildren indoors due to the fear of the virus. However, her son, the family’s sole earner who gets about 300 per day as a labourer, has lost his livelihood due to the lockdown and the family has no ration card or pension. The family still has to pay 3,500 rent each month for their two-room home. We want to protect the children from this disease they are talking about, but what is the use if they die of hunger instead? she asks. The family cannot even apply for a ration card, as they do not have any residence proof or any identity documents.

Migrant Workers Turn Violent

Across the country migrant workers become frustrated and violent after living without food for several days and uncertainty of the future. Many migrant labourers did not maintain social distancing in the shelter homes and camps where they have been housed. The situation was very precarious in certain pockets in the city. They have been asked to stay in their huts and slums against their wishes; without work as factories are already shut. Migrant workers want to go back to their villages and be with their families. This created tussles among them and sparked protests. In Delhi where three night shelters at Kashmere Gate were set on fire allegedly by homeless people on 11th April, 2020 after a body was recovered from the Yamuna and they suspected it to be that of a fellow shelter home inmate (The Hindu, 12th April 2020).

Some Key Questions

Number of questions and concerns were raised by political parties, civil societies regarding plights and the uncertain future of the migrant workers. Many of the critics are of the opinion that the government should have given 2-3 days of time to the people in general and migrant workers in particular to make requisite arrangements for piling up

the necessary amenities and moving to their hometowns, before announcing the complete lockdown. On one hand where the government requested the people of India to light diyas on 5th April, 2020 to show solidarity with each other, the poor workers’ plight is struggling to gather enough oil to bake their next roti. These psychotherapy techniques can address the first world anxiety problems of the ‘haves’ who have a balcony to cheer but what about those who don’t even have a roof on their heads. The Supreme Court has expressed concern over the plight of migrant workers, especially in the unorganised sector, during the lockdown.

India’s roughly 400 million informal workers, who are estimated to make up 80 percent to 90 percent of the total workforce live without a safety net. Many have faced hunger and police brutality. At least 200 migrant workers have died on the way (Sarita Santoshini, April 13, 2020). India’s economic growth model is based on the cheap labour of rural-to-urban migrants who often work for less than minimum wages in its high growth sectors. Yet during the Covid 19 crisis, they remained an unremunerated, unrecognized presence in Delhi and NCR, and were excluded from relief funds. Thus, Indian authorities need to urgently adopt measures to protect the poorest and most vulnerable people if COVID-19 containment and relief measures prove inadequate (Human Rights Watch, 27th March 2020).

Recommendations

There are various recommendations for centre and state government and civil society for implementations of programmes and policies for migrants workers under different categories, such as (i) those who have returned home, (ii) those trying to reach home but were stopped and sent to relief shelters, (iii) those trying to reach home, were stopped but were not able to reach a shelter and are sleeping on roads and in public spaces, and (iv) those who have been living under miserable conditions in the cities and rural areas where they work.

The cash transfers to the poor should be hiked to at least Rs. 3,000 a month for the next three months to the bottom 80 percent of households to tide over the crisis, in addition to enhanced rations of food-grains and the inclusion of certain other essential commodities within the ration basket. Government should prevent the inevitable loss of employment and livelihood of migrant workers. There should be a uniform mechanism for the dispersal of both income support as well as essential items such as rice, wheat, millets, medicines, water and anything else that these families will require. Centre should launch a “food for work” programme, to help out those whose livelihood was under threat during the nationwide lockdown. Preference should be given to the ragpickers, rickshaw and cart pullers, daily wage earners, nomadic workers and destitute persons who are unable to earn their livelihood during the present

crisis. Through ESIC funds or under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, health and relief measures to be started for daily wage workers and industrial labours. The government should ensure that those at heightened risk, including sanitation workers (safai karamcharis), community health staff (ASHA workers), early childhood caregivers (anganwadi workers), and people such as midday meal workers-often poorly paid public service officials who are at the front lines during this crisis, should be provided protective equipment, medical benefits, and timely wages.

Conclusion

There is no simple answer to this tragic dilemma between two humanitarian crises, the spread of the virus and the devastation caused by the lockdown. Daily wage earners, labourers and migrant workers are at the greatest risk of economic and social insecurity. Eighty percent of migrant workers belong to marginalized communities and play a key role for economic development of the country. But due to sudden lockdown, the nation builders have become vulnerable beggars. They face widespread economic upheaval and geographic displacement. Despite the hardships, migrant workers supported the government's decision for lockdown to contain the virus. The decision had hit everyone hard and more so the poor daily wage labour. However, a little planning could have eased the pain of the poor. People have appreciated the government initiative to tackle the migrant labour problems. The sheer importance of a social security net in helping them tide over this predicted period of unemployment and privation cannot be overstated of migrant labours.

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