

## Challenges Faced by Migrant Workers in India during COVID-19 Lockdown and Reverse Migration

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### ABSTRACT

*The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown in India have had a significant impact on migrant workers. This study examines the challenges faced by migrant workers during the pandemic, particularly during the lockdown and reverse migration. We explore the meaning of migrant workers and the trends and patterns of internal migration in India. We also examine the push and pull factors that influence migration, as well as the economic, social, and mobility impacts of the pandemic on migrant workers. Additionally, we investigate the unexpected lockdown and the government's neglect of stranded migrant workers during this time. Finally, we discuss the complicated transportation policies during the pandemic and their effects on migrant workers. This study highlights the need for policy changes to better protect the rights and welfare of migrant workers in India, particularly during times of crisis*

**Keywords:** *Migrant workers, Internal migration, COVID-19 lockdown, Reverse migration, Challenges*

### Introduction

Migrant workers play a crucial role in India's economy, contributing to various sectors such as agriculture, construction, and manufacturing. However, they face numerous challenges in their daily lives, including social exclusion, limited access to basic services, and precarious employment conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought these issues to the forefront, highlighting the urgent need for policy interventions that address the concerns of migrant workers. The outbreak of COVID-19 has brought unprecedented challenges to the world, and the pandemic's impact on vulnerable populations, such as migrant workers, has been particularly severe. India, with its vast population of migrant workers, has faced significant challenges in addressing the needs of this vulnerable group during the pandemic. The sudden and unplanned lockdown imposed by the Indian government in March 2020 left millions of migrant workers stranded, struggling to access basic necessities like food, shelter, and healthcare. This situation led to the largest reverse migration in India's history, with millions of migrant workers returning to their home states in search of safety and security. This study aims to explore the challenges faced by migrant workers in India during the COVID-19 lockdown and reverse migration, including economic, social, and mobility impacts. Additionally, this study will examine the causes of migration, both push and pull factors, as

well as the Indian government's response to the crisis. By understanding the challenges faced by migrant workers during this unprecedented time, we hope to identify potential solutions to better support this vulnerable population in the future.

### **Statement of the problem**

Migrant workers in India have a number of issues, which have been compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown in India have created an unprecedented crisis for migrant workers, who have been among the worst affected. In India has resulted in the displacement and distress of millions of migrant workers. The sudden loss of livelihoods, coupled with the lack of social security and support systems, has forced these workers to embark on a perilous journey back to their home states. The sudden and unplanned lockdown left millions of migrant workers stranded in cities, without jobs or income, and with limited access to food, shelter, and medical care. The lack of transportation and the closure of borders made it difficult for them to return to their hometowns, leading to a mass exodus of migrant workers on foot. The reverse migration has exposed the multiple challenges faced by migrant workers in India, including economic, social, and mobility issues. This study aims to investigate the challenges faced by migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown and reverse migration, and to identify the underlying factors contributing to these challenges.

### **Objectives of the Study**

1. To explore the push and pull factors involved in migrant workers.
2. To investigate the causes of reverse migration among migrant workers in India during the COVID-19 pandemic.
3. To examine the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on migrant workers in India, in their economic, social, and mobility challenges.

### **Research Methodology**

This study utilizes a qualitative research approach, relying solely on secondary sources, and gathered relevant data from existing sources, such as government reports, surveys, and news articles.

### **Limitations of the study**

1. There is a possibility of missing relevant literature due to search criteria and the lack of primary data collection.
2. Secondary sources may not provide enough context for the findings, limiting the ability to understand the nuances and complexities of the challenges faced by migrant workers in India during the pandemic.

**Meaning of migrant workers**

A migrant worker is a person who migrates within a home country or outside it to pursue work. Migrant workers usually do not have the intention to stay permanently in the country or region in which they work.

**Internal Migration in India: Trends and Pattern**

The Census of India distinguishes between two types of migration: Migration by Birthplace and Migration by Place of Last Residence. If a person is counted in the Census at a location different from their place of birth, they are considered a migrant by Birthplace. On the other hand, if a person has previously lived in a location other than their current Census location, they are considered a migrant by Place of Last Residence.

In India, there were 454 million migrants as of the 2011 Census, a huge increase from the 220 million and 315 million figures recorded in 1991 and 2001, respectively. Between 2001 and 2011, 74.7% of all migration was tied to marriage and families, with other family-related migration replacing marriage migration. Marriage migration accounted for 40% of rural-to-rural migrants while interstate marriage migration accounted for only 4.8%. In contrast, interstate migrants made up 43% of the rural to urban migration for employment and enterprise. Interstate mobility was essential to a commercial and labour migration.

**Causes of Migration: Understanding the Factors**

A thorough investigation finds that there are many factors that influence migration, which can be broadly categorised into four categories: environmental, economic, cultural, and socio-political. These variables can be categorised as push or pull variables.

**Push Factors: Factors that Force Migration**

Push factors are circumstances that push people to migrate because of the risk they face if they stay in their current area. Poverty, a lack of job possibilities, unemployment, underdevelopment, poor economic conditions, natural disasters, and a lack of fertile land are examples of push factors.

**Pull Factors: Factors that Attract Migration**

The conditions in the destination country that entice people or groups to leave their homes are referred to as pull factors. These characteristics contribute to place utility, or the appeal of a location that entices people to relocate. Better employment and education opportunities, higher wages, better facilities, and better working conditions are examples of pull factors.

**Confronting Multiple Challenges During Reverse Migration**

Due to the loss of jobs and income in the cities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, millions of migrant workers in India have begun to move back to their original states. However,

obstacles like limited mobility, a lack of access to social security and healthcare, and weaknesses in the unregulated labour market have made their return to their home country difficult. The challenges that both categories of migrant workers faced during reverse migration, repatriation, and reintegration have emphasised the urgent need for legislative measures to address their concerns.

### **The economic impact**

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the economic conditions of migrant workers in India, especially those with low-income backgrounds. Due to the sudden lockdown, many of them lost their jobs and were not paid their wages, which compelled them to return to their home states in search of work. Wage theft emerged as a common issue reported by both internal and international migrants, which further worsened their economic struggles. The lack of employment opportunities and basic facilities such as electricity and water provided by their employers forced them to return to their villages, where they faced a lack of immediate governmental support. The economic challenges faced by migrant workers underscore the need for policy interventions to address their concerns and enhance their well-being.

### **The social impact**

Before and after the government repatriation efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants in India faced social difficulties. On their return trip, at quarantine facilities, and in their villages, migrants reported experiencing discrimination and being held responsible for the virus's spread. In addition, a large number of migrants had little literacy skills and minimal ability to bargain with their employers. They also lacked the financial means to pay for housing, food, and return tickets. The necessity for Governmental measures to alleviate discrimination and advance the social welfare of migrants in India.

### **The migrant worker's mobility impact**

The central government of India was initially hesitant to save stranded migrants at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These migrants consequently encountered numerous challenges as they attempted to cross state boundaries, including instances of police brutality and even fatalities from exhaustion and dehydration. The pandemic had an especially negative impact on low-wage workers in sectors like restaurants and construction; many of them lost their employment and were left stranded on the streets without assistance. All foreign newcomers were required to undergo a 14-day quarantine by the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, the first seven of which were spent in institutional quarantine. International migrants had to cover the costs of quarantine facilities and COVID-19 testing on their own, whilst internal migrants got state sponsorship.

## **An Investigation of India's Lockdown Practises**

### **An unexpected lockdown**

The Indian government implemented a lockdown with very short notice of only four hours, which was an unexpected and rare phenomenon in a democracy. The public had not been given any warning, despite the first case of COVID-19 being reported in January 2020 and its numbers increasing by mid-March. The government officials had assured the public that the virus had not yet taken the form of an epidemic and that there would be no lockdown in the near future. However, on March 24, 2020, the Prime Minister announced a three-week nationwide lockdown effective from March 25, 2020. This sudden lockdown led to panic buying of essentials and the return of migrant workers to their hometowns, which could have been anticipated and taken into account by the government. The United Nations Human Rights Commissioner and the National Human Rights Commission of India expressed deep concern over the plight of affected migrant workers, and human rights violations were reported during the lockdown.

### **Government neglect of stranded migrant workers during lockdown**

In the lockdown, the Indian government made a second mistake by doing minimal to help the stranded migrant workers. Most migrant workers in India are neither permanent employee nor paid much. The government demanded that firms pay their full wages, but many small enterprises lacked the funds necessary to accede. Indian Inc. also demonstrated a disregard for workers by implementing measures like layoff and non-payment of dues. Many workers lost their jobs and were unable to support themselves without help. The government assured that food supply would be uninterrupted during the lockdown, but most migrant workers didn't have ration cards and couldn't benefit from the free ration scheme. A survey revealed that 96% of stranded migrant workers didn't receive rations, 70% didn't receive cooked food, and 89% didn't receive payment from their employers during the lockdown.

### **The Plight of Migrant Workers During COVID-19 Lockdown in India**

During the lockdown in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrant workers were left stranded without transportation and had to travel on foot or by other means to reach their hometowns. Sadly, some of them died due to hunger, accidents, or even suicide. Despite the dire situation, the government did not provide adequate assistance to the migrants and failed to set up food and water stations for them. Instead, police and paramilitary forces were relied upon to enforce the lockdown, resulting in some instances of brutality towards the migrants.

### **Complicated Transportation Policy During COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Indian government allowed migrant workers to return home during the COVID-19 lockdown, but the process was complicated. Migrants had to obtain a medical fitness certificate, register online with their home state, and secure a travel pass from the local police station. However, many migrants did not have access to smartphones or internet facilities, and the websites frequently crashed. Meanwhile, middle and upper-class passengers were able to travel more easily. This disparity in treatment compromised the migrants' rights and reflected a larger issue of injustice.

#### **Findings of the study**

1. Migration in India is influenced by various factors, including push factors like poverty, lack of job opportunities, and natural disasters, and pull factors like better employment and education opportunities, higher wages, and better facilities.
2. There has been a significant increase in the number of migrants in India, with 454 million migrants as of the 2011 Census. The majority of migration is tied to marriage and families, with other family-related migration replacing marriage migration.
3. There is a higher percentage of inter-state migration for employment and enterprise, particularly in rural-to-urban areas.
4. Many lost their jobs and were not paid their wages, which forced them to return to their home states in search of work. Wage theft emerged as a common issue, which further worsened their economic struggles.
5. Migrants in India faced social difficulties, including discrimination and blame for the virus's spread, highlighting the need for government measures to address these issues.
6. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of migrant workers in terms of their mobility, with many facing significant challenges when attempting to return to their home states.
7. The sudden lockdown led to panic buying of essentials and the return of migrant workers to their hometowns, which could have been anticipated and taken into account by the government. Human rights violations were also reported during the lockdown.
8. There is an urgent need for the government to address the lack of social security and basic facilities for migrant workers, especially during times of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic.
9. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities and neglect of migrant workers in India. The lack of adequate transportation, food, and water stations resulted in the tragic deaths of many workers

10. The complicated transportation policy during the COVID-19 pandemic in India disadvantaged migrant workers who did not have access to smartphones or internet facilities, and favoured middle and upper-class passengers.

### **Suggestions**

1. The government needs to take policy measures to address the economic challenges faced by migrant workers, such as providing better access to social security and healthcare and creating more employment opportunities in their home states.
2. It needs to address the issue of wage theft among migrant workers to implement strict legal measures and regulations to ensure that employers pay their workers fairly and on time.
3. To alleviate discrimination and advance the social welfare of migrants in India to promote social integration through awareness campaigns and community programs
4. To improve the mobility of migrant workers during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, governments should establish clear guidelines and procedures for safe and efficient transportation, including provisions for food, water, and medical assistance during the journey.
5. The government should provide more notice and preparation time before implementing any future lockdowns to prevent panic and minimize the negative impact on the public.
6. The Government to implement a comprehensive plan for the welfare of migrant workers, including access to food, shelter, and healthcare during such crises.
7. The Indian government should prioritize the welfare of migrant workers during future crises and establish better systems for their protection and support.
8. The Indian government should have provided better access to registration facilities and streamlined the transportation process to ensure that all migrant workers had equal access to travel back home during the pandemic.
9. The Government should work towards addressing larger issues of injustice and inequality in the country.

### **Conclusion**

The study identified various factors influencing migration patterns in India, including economic and social factors. It also revealed the vulnerability of migrant workers, with many facing economic struggles and social discrimination. Additionally, the study highlights the government's neglect of migrant workers, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the urgent need for policy measures to address their welfare, including access to social security, employment opportunities, and healthcare. The study suggests several measures to alleviate the challenges faced by migrant workers in India, including addressing wage theft, promoting

social integration, establishing clear guidelines for safe transportation, and addressing larger issues of injustice and inequality in the country. Overall, the study emphasizes the importance of protecting the rights and welfare of migrant workers in India, particularly during times of crisis.

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