

COVID-19 Crisis and Reverse Migration in India

Ashutosh Trivedi*

Abstract

The COVID -19 pandemic has brought the entire world at standstill. This global health crisis has not only triggered a massive economic predicament but has also generated serious social ramifications. The effect of this humanitarian catastrophe has been deep and intense especially in respect to the problem of workers and growing magnitude of reverse migration. With the situation of lock down and mandated social distancing, the problem of workers has aggravated phenomenally. Sudden job loss and incurring huge expenses in the host cities has compelled workers to migrate back to their home states. This has not only made workers vulnerable to the risk of contagion but can also exacerbate chances of greater discrimination and socio-economic insecurity. Our attempt in this paper would be to make a micro analysis of the reasons for reverse migration in India amidst COVID crisis and to scrutinize the socio-economic impact of this pandemic on migrant workers. The study would also try to explore the State intervention taken so far in this regard. A holistic approach to the issue would include probable remedial measures which need to be taken to address this critical problem.

Key Words: COVID-19, migrant workers, internal migration, reverse migration, 'One Nation, One Ration Card' system, Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan, PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana, MGNREGA, Cash transfer or coupon system, draft National Urban Rental Housing Policy, Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979.

* Dr. Ashutosh Trivedi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Satyawati College, University of Delhi.

Introduction

Human civilization has so far witnessed several pandemics notable being, SARS (2003), Spanish flu (1918), Plague, Cholera etc. But none of these manifested that much catastrophe as COVID 19 pandemic did. Infecting almost 21.3 crore population worldwide, the deadly virus spread like wildfire, thereby making it a worldwide humanitarian crisis. Unlike the earlier pandemics, which were localised in nature, COVID 19 pandemic assumed a global character due to forces of globalization which made its proliferation extremely rapid. With its epicentre in China, the pandemic knocked Indian doorsteps in early 2020 and since then it has affected almost every section of Indian population. One such defining affect has been on migrant workers. The COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent nationwide lockdown has severely dislocated the country's migrant population. The site of hundreds of workers, hungry and starved, rendered unemployed and stranded around streets, criss-crossing the State boundaries to return to their villages has been common in many parts of the country. Migrants and their families suffering accidents and death turned out to be the worse turn of events amidst this crisis. These events have made migrants and their issue, a centre of deliberation.

The issue of migrant workers and their multitude problems has always been an area of study and should be a subject of concern, but COVID-19 crisis has forced the country to finally acknowledge this question. At the same time, since the pandemic is still an ongoing catastrophe, there are several limitations to the studies concerning COVID 19 effect on migrant population. Lack of reliable and accurate data collection in this regard is one such impediment. The present study is a humble attempt to give an overview regarding the migration crisis amidst COVID 19 pandemic and thus add to the existing literature.

An Overview of Migration in India

Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence, across either internal (within country) or international (across countries) borders (PRS, 2020, June 10). As per 2011 Census, “India had 45.6 crore migrants in 2011 (38 percent of the population) compared to 31.5 crore migrants in 2001 (31 percent of the population)” (PRS, 2020, June 10). According to the PRS, “Between 2001 and 2011, while population grew by 18 percent, the number of migrants increased by 45 percent. In 2011, 99 percent of total migration was internal and immigrants (international migrants) comprised only around one percent” (PRS, 2020, June 10).

Our topic of concern in this study is internal migration. On the basis of origin, internal migration could be categorised into four types - rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural and urban-urban (PRS, 2020, June 10). As per 2011 census, “The classifiable rural-rural internal migration was estimated around 21 crore, which constitutes 54 percent of the total migration. Rural-urban and urban-urban migration was estimated around 8 crore migrants for both categories. In case of urban-rural migrants, it is estimated approximately 3 crore or 7 percent of total internal migration (PRS, 2020, June 10).

Majority of these migrant workers, working in informal sector or in the manufacturing and construction industries, are deprived of even basic healthcare, nutrition, housing, and sanitation facility, necessary for a dignified life. These workers also have no fixed savings or housing facilities. At the same time, there is no mechanism for centralized documentation of such workers, despite of the existence of the Inter-State Migration Workmen Act, 1979, which off course emerges as an object of concern. Keeping into mind, this situation of social and economic insecurity, migrant workers become the prime susceptible targets

in case of any exigencies like the present Corona pandemic. In such situations, these workers are left with no option other than migrating back to their hometowns. This phenomenon of migrating back is called reverse migration which is our area of concern in present study.

As per official sources, the lockdown last year triggered a reverse migration that resulted in the second-largest mass movement after Partition. While the latter saw 14 million people displaced, last year's lockdown had some 6.7 million migrants returning to 116 districts in six states, according to the skill development ministry database. Independent estimates place the number much higher, at 60 million, or nine times the official count (Deka 2021).

Reasons for Reverse Migration during COVID-19 Pandemic

Amidst this COVID-19 pandemic, a trend of reverse migration is manifested in the country wherein thousands of workers are returning to their home places, in wake of future uncertainty and precarious environment. The reasons for this sudden mass exodus are worth examining:

- (i) Sudden Job Loss:** With the rapid spread of the pandemic, there was government directed lockdown, which brought the entire economy at a pause. Due to mandated social distancing, factories, industries, construction sites, which catered majority of migrant workers got closed. These left millions of migrant workers jobless all around the country. This pandemic forced lockdown, which was quite uncertain, has caused huge financial distress to migrant workers. This situation not only rendered them unemployed but also deprived them of their current and future livelihood.
- (ii) High Rental Payment:** Majority of workers and labourers working in different sectors, generally reside in

unauthorised colonies and city villages in rented accommodation. They are thus under obligation to pay regular rent and other expenses despite of their minimal wages. In some cases, landlords try to seek interest on non-payment of regular rent. It appeared even more obnoxious that within this COVID-19 crisis, many landowners started pressurising such workers to pay the house rent, leaving no other option but to go back to their native place.

As reported in a national daily, “The pressure to pay rent is such that migrant workers are slipping out of villages in the dead of the night to evade their landlords, some have shifted to their relatives’ houses and others have locked the rooms and simply left without their luggage” (Hindustan Times. 2020, May 7). The same daily further reported the plight of a migrant worker, Lakshmi Devi who is from Uttar Pradesh shared that “I am a widow and am raising two children by myself. I do not have a source of income since the lockdown has begun. I was not able to pay the rent of ₹2,200 to my landlord in Vishnu Garden and so was forced to shift with my sister” (Hindustan Times. 2020, May 7).

Another bunch of workers in Kasan, near Manesar industrial township, Haryana, argued, “We are still not sure whether the company would pay us for the lockdown period. It will not be possible for us to pay rent and survive if the lockdown is extended. It is better if the government sends us to our native villages” (Baruah 2020).

- (iii) **Food shortage:** The COVID-19 induced lockdown has created condition of food shortage among migrant workers. Although according to government reports, FCI godowns are stocked with enough food grains to sustain the poor populace for a minimum of one and a half year, still the problem of food shortage and

starvation death has occurred. At one side, government has come up with schemes to provide additional ration to poor and needy, on the other side, distribution system has proved ineffective owing to twin systemic lacunas. One drawback is the area specific nature of ration cards and other is that fair price shops are often beyond reach of concerned beneficiaries. At the same time, the nationwide implementation of 'One Nation, One Ration Card' system has still not been achieved. At the same time, migrant workers are less aware of this scheme. Apart from this, the biometric authentication needed for the above scheme was discontinued owing to the fear of spread of virus. Reports further highlighted that many migrant workers could not have access to food due to lack of Aadhaar Card, for instance, in Telangana (Vadlamudi 2020).

- (iv) Risk of Contagion in Large Cities:** Since big cities are densely populated, there always remains a risk of contagion. As per Live Mint, “The top 15 most populated cities in the country have about 60% of confirmed corona virus cases” (Devulapalli 2020). Keeping into mind such threat, coupled with lack of any health insurance, workers preferred to migrate back to their native places.

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Migrant Workers

COVID-19 crisis had adverse effect on migrant workers, which can be categorised into following heads:

(i) Social Impact

- **Sexual and Gender-based Violence:** COVID-19 crisis has made women migrants more vulnerable to sexual and gender-based exploitation. Probable reasons are, conditions of forced coexistence with potential perpetrator, constricted living, travel restrictions, coupled with economic pressure and fear of contagion. At the same time, they generally avoid reporting

violence due to discrimination or fear of arrest or deportation.

- **Health Risk:** Many migrants share accommodation or dormitories which are crowded and suffocative. In such accommodations maintaining social distance is next to impossible. Additionally, these workers have less resources and therefore have little access to personal hygiene and protective equipment including mask etc. Majority of them even lack adequate water and soap to clean them properly. All this have made them vulnerable to increased risk of contracting the disease. Apart from this there are reports that there is shortage of beds and other facilities in government hospitals in big cities due to sudden surge of cases. On the contrary, private hospitals, though well equipped, demand exorbitant prices which these sections of population cannot afford. In such situation, migrant workers stand exposed to major health risk.
- **Fear of Discrimination in Host and Native Cities:** Reports have claimed that many migrant workers who refused to return to their native cities, are accused of being infected with the deadly virus and are thus discriminated in the host cities. They not only struggle to acquire basic commodities, but many times also witness police brutality while going out of their dwellings. The irony is that even when they return to their native places or hometowns, they are considered suspicious of carrying Corona virus from the urban areas where they had been employed. Images of them being drenched down with soap solution or sanitizers speaks a lot about their helpless condition in these cases.
- **Mass Exodus and Deaths:** With lockdown restrictions and closure of factories/ manufacturing units; workers, left with

no job and work, found it more reasonable to go back to their native places. This resulted in mass exodus of migrants, since they felt that death by virus in their home place is better than death by starvation or hunger in host cities.

With public transport coming to a halt, these workers were forced to travel thousands of kilometres either walking or bicycling along with their families. Some travelled long even without food or water. According to the Hindustan Times, “Many even got arrested for violating the lockdown, after being caught at inter-state borders, forests between states” Hindustan Times, 2020, May 9). There are instances when some migrants even died of exhaustion while travelling back home. For example, “Jamalo Madkam, a 12-year-old along with 12 other migrant workers decided to return home on foot, but died due to electrolyte imbalance and exhaustion, barely 11 km from home” (World Asia, April 21, 2020).

Another example is of Aurangabad, where 16 migrants were killed on 8 May 2020. As per report, “The accident took place after a freight train ran over them while they were sleeping on the tracks, exhausted from walking” (The Hindu May 8, 2020). According to the Hindu, in another incident, “26 migrants were killed and many more were injured when a trailer carrying migrants rammed into a stationary truck, also carrying migrants, in Auraiya, Uttar Pradesh on 16th May 2020” (The Hindu May 17, 2020).

(ii) Economic Impact

- **Unemployment:** The closure of construction sites/factories has rendered large number of workers unemployed and directionless, leaving the economy in shambles. As per The Hindu, “According to the Azim Premji University COVID-19 Livelihoods Survey, about 80% of urban workers lost their jobs during the lockdown. The average weekly earnings of those

who were still employed fell by 61%” (The Hindu May 13, 2020). Many of these urban workers were migrant workers who had left their hometown in search of better livelihood but are now experiencing a financial distress due to the lockdown.

- **Economic Loss in terms of Loss of Salary/Delayed Salary:** The nationwide lockdown in India which started on March 24, 2020, to curb the spread of corona virus has impacted nearly 40 million internal migrants, according to World Bank (The Hindu. May 23, 2020).

The Economic Times reveals that, “according to a survey by Azim Premji University, eight out of ten workers in urban areas have lost their jobs during the lockdown and almost 6 in 10 people in rural India saw job losses,” (The Economic Times, May 12, 2020). This job loss has led to loss of continuous source of income. Also due to lockdown and mandated social distancing, the economic loss of factory owners got transmitted to workers in terms of delayed salary or at times no salary.

(iii) Psychological Impact

The above social and economic effect of pandemic has created a deeper psychological impact on migrants. It cannot be denied that the situation created due to this pandemic has led to the feeling of fear, anxiety, and depression among them. The sudden and colossal influx of these migrants might lead to psychological insecurity among native population and more intense struggle for livelihood among natives and migrants. This might lead to second migration crisis.

Government Intervention

(i) Relief Measures

Keeping into mind the financial distress faced by migrant workers, the Home Ministry, on 27th March 2020, issued an order

to the State governments permitting them to avail the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) for furnishing food and shelter to the migrants so that they might not resort to distress migration during lockdown.

On 29th March 2020, the government issued certain pertinent orders viz. directing landlords not to demand rent during the period of the lockdown and employers to pay wages without deduction. This came as a big relief to crisis ridden migrant workers. Many State governments, including Odisha and Delhi and others, have issued specific orders to waive off rents in the wake of the covid pandemic.

As per reports, “the centre also directed the State governments to set up immediate relief camps for the migrant workers returning to their native states” (The Hindu, March 29, 2020).

Another major government intervention was the launch of National Migrant Information System (NMIS) by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). This is an online database aimed at streamlining the movement of migrant workers. This database will also help states in identifying the current number and location of stranded migrant workers so that relief measures could be targeted properly. To keep themselves updated with worker’s condition; the authorities also created mechanism to feed the contact numbers of migrants in the system.

Thousands of relief camps were made to house stranded migrants and stop the mass exodus. According to Punya Salila Srivastava, Joint Secretary (Ministry of Home Affairs), “...a total of 27,661 migrant relief camps have been set up in states and UTs, with government funded 23,924 relief camps and 3,737 camps by NGOs. At least 12.5 lakh migrant workers have been provided shelter in these camps” (The Tribune, August 20, 2020). She further pointed that, “Besides this, 19,460 food camps had been

set up in various states/UTs (9,951 by the government and 9,509 by NGOs), where over 75 lakh people were being provided food across the country. Besides this, the MHA has been continuously monitoring the enforcement of lockdown measures across all states and UTs” (The Tribune, August 20, 2020).

At the same time, with the aim to simplify and modernise the labour regulation, central government has proposed to replace 29 existing labour laws with four codes (PRS, 2021).

(ii) Food Distribution

To provide food, sanitation, and medical services to stranded migrants, on 1st April 2020, the Ministry of Health and Family Affairs, directed state governments to operate relief camps.

On May 14, 2020, the second tranche of the Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (ANBA), was launched which included free food grains for two months to be provided to migrant workers who do not have a ration card. The measure is expected to benefit eight crore migrant workers and their families (PRS, 2020, June 10). The finance minister also announced that, “One Nation One Ration card will be implemented by March 2021, to provide portable benefits under the PDS. This will allow migrant workers to access ration from any fair price shop in India” (PRS, 2020, June 10).

PM Modi in his address to nation on 30th June 2020, announced the extension of PM Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana till November 2020 thereby providing free ration to 80 crore people. During second wave of COVID pandemic in 2021, The PMGKAY was reintroduced for two months till June, which is further extended by five more months till November-end this year (PTI, 2021).

(iii) Transport Arrangements

Between May 1 and June 3, 2020, more than 58 lakh migrants were transported through specially operated trains and 41 lakhs were transported by road (PRS, 2020, June 10). On May 1,

2020, Shramik Special train were launched by central government for making commutation easy for stranded migrant workers. Between May 1 and June 3, Indian Railways operated 4,197 Shramik trains transporting more than 58 lakh migrants (PRS, 2020, June 10). These trains were allowed to use 50% of the coaches which were converted into COVID-19 care centres.

In this regard, Government of Uttar Pradesh took a major and appreciable step by arranging free bus services at Anand Vihar bus station (Delhi) to help migrants go back to their native places.

(iv) Financial Assistance

Soon after the announcement of lockdown, the government announced relief package of 1.70 lakh crore under PMGKY (Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana) for the poor, mostly migrant workers, daily labourers etc. to help them come out of financial distress. The plan included both cash transfer as well as measures to maintain food availability and security.

With the aim to provide proper food and shelter arrangements, the central government released a corpus of ₹ 11,092 crore to states and UTs under the NDRF (PRS, 2021, February 13).

From 1st April 2020, it was further announced that, the average daily wages under the MGNREGA were to be increased to ₹ 207 (US\$2.80) from the earlier ₹ 187 (US\$2.60), so that migrant workers could earn their livelihood once they return to their native places. The budget allocation for the scheme was increased by Rs 40,000 crore in 2020- 21 (under the Atmanirbhar Bharat package) to address the need for more work during the Covid19 pandemic especially for returning migrant workers during the lockdown (PRS, 2021, February 13).

On 13th May 2020, an amount of ₹ 1,000 crore was allotted for support and welfare of migrant workers from the corpus of PM CARES Fund.

(v) Union Budget 2021 and Migrant Workers

It was announced that a portal will be launched to collect information for gig or construction workers. This portal would help in framing schemes on health, housing, insurance etc for migrants working in unorganised sectors. It was also declared that the Apprenticeship Act will be amended to enhance apprenticeship opportunities among these workers (PRS, 2021, March).

According to the Times Now, “It is also declared that Labour Bureau, an attached office under this Ministry, will work on four new surveys for Migrant workers, Domestic workers, Employment generated by Professionals and Transport Sector. It will also prepare ‘All India Establishment based Employment Survey (AIEES)’. Results of all these surveys are likely to come within 8-9 months from the start of actual field surveys” (Times Now, 2021, February 8).

Although, the overall measures of Central and State government in this hour of crisis are highly commendable but still these were kept under scrutiny from some quarters.

Much was said about the transport arrangements/measures. As per reports of the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), there was serious confusion among workers regarding exact procedures of registering themselves for travel. One probable reason was the linguistic barriers among workers as far as state registration portals were concerned. These portals were at times unintelligible by them since most of these portals were either in local language or in English. Apart from this, in some cases, due to lack of information, migrants were compelled to pay large amount of money for their own registration.

Reports have also claimed that norm of social distancing were hardly followed in the buses due to overcrowding. Stranded

workers have also complained about over charges and mismanagement like lack of food, water, and proper sanitation.

Even at quarantine centres, the conduct towards migrant workers came under strict criticism. Upon their return they were treated with discrimination; being treated with fear or as 'carrier of infection'. In some cases, they even met inhuman or embarrassing treatment like sprayed or wash down with spirit, sanitizers, or detergent solution.

The changes in the labour laws, especially by Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh governments were also put under critical lens. Labour unions criticised the provision of disseminating greater authority to employers, for relaxing the rules of hiring and firing of labours and their service conditions. However, in defence, it could be argued that these changes were motivated with the spirit of propelling growth.

Recent Direction by Supreme Court on Migrant Crisis

Keeping into mind the plight of migrant workers, the Supreme Court took *Suo motu* cognisance regarding this issue and passed a historic order on 29th June 2021, involving following major directions (The Supreme Court of India, 2021):

Firstly, it directed the Central Government to develop a portal in consultation with National Informatics Centre (NIC) for registration of the unorganized labourers/migrant workers (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 80 (i), pp.76-77). It further directed that, "the Central Government, respective States and the UTs to complete the process of portal for registration under National Data Base for Unorganized Workers (NDUW Project) as well as implement the same not later than 31st July 2021...The process of registration must be completed not later than 31st December 2021" (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 80 (i), pp.76-77).

Second, to redress the problem of food security among the migrant workers, the Supreme Court directed the Central government, “to allocate and distribute food grains as per the demand of additional food grains from states for the distribution to migrant labour” (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 80 (ii)(iii), pp.78-79). As per statistics, 204 lakh tonnes of additional food grains have already been allocated by the centre for the period from July to November 2021.

Third, the Supreme Court further directed the State governments, “to draw appropriate scheme for distribution of dry ration to migrant labourers, which may be implemented on or before 31st July 2021. Such scheme may be continued till the current pandemic (Covid-19) continues” (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 80 (iii), pp.78-79). Also, Union government can provide additional allocation to the State for such special scheme.

Fourth, the Supreme Court emphasised upon implementation of the ‘One Nation One Ration Card’ (ONOR) scheme by all state governments and said that “we direct the States who have not implemented the ‘One Nation One Ration Card’ scheme to implement the scheme by not later than 31st July 2021” (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 38, p.32; PARA 80 (iv), pp.79). The court also directed regarding community kitchens and stated that, “The States have been running community kitchens during the pandemic. (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 78, p.74-75). State should run the community kitchens at prominent places where large number of migrant labourers are found...these community kitchens should be continued at-least till pandemic (Covid-19) continues” (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 80 (vii), p.79-80).

Fifth, the Supreme Court has directed that, “the Central government may undertake an exercise under Section 9 of the

National Food Security Act, 2013 to re-establish the total number of beneficiaries eligible for securing subsidised food grains in urban and rural areas.” (The Supreme Court of India, 2021, PARA 80 (v), p.79).

Suggestions and Way Forward

The migrant population contributes significantly to national and especially urban economy. As per the ‘Report of the working group on migration, 2017’, “In manufacturing in urban areas, 38% of the male workforce is composed of migrant workers, with a similar share in modern services” (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017, January). However, ironically their contribution is not well recognised. This has opened the Pandora box regarding the migration issue, especially during COVID crisis. The issues regarding migrants are complex and thus the remedies need to be a combination of both short term and long-term measures.

(i) Immediate/Short term Remedial Measures

- The first immediate measure on the part of authorities should be that as soon as migrant workers reach their native place, provision should be made to provide them relevant jobs, based on their skill and talents under existing rural employment scheme. States/UTs should be advised in this regard. The government of India has also allocated an additional Rs 40,000 crore for MGNREGA under Atma Nirbhar Bharat package to provide work to these workers (Ministry of Rural Development, GOI. September 2020). Also, if required minimum wages to workers under MGNREGA should be increased as done by many States like Meghalaya, Tamil Nadu, and UT like Puducherry.
- Another suggestion in this regard could be to create a database at local level distinguishing skilled and unskilled

workers so that they can get access to employment opportunities as per their unique skills or talents. This would help in regularizing employment of migrant workers.

- Also, till the time migrant workers are not getting employment, a provision of minimum compulsory monetary assistance should be provided by the government. Union government, in this regard has forwarded a proposal of providing a minimum daily wage of more than Rs 200 to all inter-state migrants.
- Monetary assistance through Aadhaar linked bank account could be a unique measure to provide them financial assurance.
- Cash transfer or coupon system could be an alternative wherever Aadhaar linked bank account facility are not available, though this is not beyond scrutiny.

(ii) Long Term Remedial Measures

Firstly, there is a need of a just and effective labour migration governance system for our workers. This would require following measures to be taken:

- There is a need to create a centralised database of migrant workers. This composite database would include both the educational and health data of all migrant workers and their families. Educational database would include complete information of all inter State migrants along with their educational qualification, skill information etc. This would help these workers get access to relevant jobs in destination States as per their unique skills and talents. Apart from this, the health database should also include the complete health information of these workers and their families, for instance, their blood group, ailments, allergies, chronic health problems etc. This will help in providing authorities to get immediate

health information of migrants in case of some misfortune or accident. Though creating such a comprehensive database would be a herculean task.

- Back at home, there is a need for a robust support system at local level for providing employment related information and counselling to potential migrants. This information should then be effectively coordinated between different states to ensure a smooth integration of migrant workers into national economy.
- Government which is currently running parallel social programmes like PM-Kisan, Ayushman Bharat, MUDRA, Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, should try to converge the data of these schemes and create a detail database for future schemes and programmes.
- The restrictions based upon domicile provisions required for working in different states must be altered by states so that workers movement could be smooth and without any bias.

Secondly, apart from an effective labour migration governance system, government should ensure portability of benefits to the migrants. Migrants who are registered entities at their home places, lose access to their legal entitlements and benefits once they migrate to another place. The reason could be lack of portability of benefits and dearth of digitalization. 'One Nation One Ration Card scheme', initiated by Modi government could be a welcome step in this regard. This would help in availing the facilities under National Food Security Act (NFSA). With the help of a common ration card, beneficiaries would be empowered to avail food grains from PDS shop of any part of the country. Presently, thirty-two States and Union territories have already completed the formalities of the scheme.

Thirdly, portability of food security should be followed by portability of healthcare and education benefits to migrants. A provision like

this would help migrant children get absorbed under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan at different states. This would not only ensure continuous education to these migrant children but would also evade the problem of low enrolment and dropout rate. This would require a centralized self-registration portal, where registrations could even be authenticated by a simple text message. Similarly, SMART cards could be provided to these migrants so that they might avail health services across the country.

Fourthly, there is a need for a complete overhaul of the Construction Workers Welfare Board (CWWB) in each state, which aims to provide social security to migrant workers. However, it is alarming to find that the fund utilisation by this board across states is low. Amidst this pandemic, Maharashtra is one of few States which has provided one-time payment to such interstate workers. The 'Report of the working group on migration, 2017' also recommended that Ministry of labour and employment should actively engage the states to improve utilisation of CWWB cess revenues by expanding coverage to workers in related sectors of construction and by providing social services and housing facilities. (Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation, 2017, January).

Fifthly, there is also a need to grant reasonable residential and basic amenities to migrant workers in urban areas. The problem of migrant accommodation has brought forth the deplorable situation of housing and basic amenities in urban areas. Though migrant population constitutes a major portion out of the total population in urban area, yet there is deficient supply of low-income ownership and rental housing options for this section of population. A rapid burgeoning of migrant population has led to mushrooming of informal settlements and slums in urban areas. In this regard, Modi regime has come up with Prime Minister Awaas Yojana (PMAY) to help the economically weaker population and

low-income group obtain residential facilities thereby shortening the housing gap in the country. But since housing is a state subject, approach of States towards affordable housing exhibits stark variations (PRS, 2020, June 10). This flagship scheme is also lacking on the element of social rental housing. It is a system where rent is made affordable for the poor by adjusting it below market rates. A mechanism of social rental housing (SRH) could be accommodated in national and State level housing regime.

In 2015, the Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs released the National Urban Rental Housing Policy (NURHP) draft to resolve the said problem. Apart from need based and market driven rental housing, this draft policy included the element of social rental housing for poor and shelter less living in urban areas including migrant workers.

The recently launched Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan, encompasses a scheme for Affordable Rental Housing Complexes for Migrant Workers and Urban Poor with an objective to furnish reasonable rental residential units under PM Aawas Yojana (PRS, 2020, June 10). This could prove to be a welcome step, but its implementation effects are still to be seen.

Sixthly, there is a need to completely revamp the outmoded legislations regulating migrant workers in India. In this regard, there exists an Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 (ISMW Act), which envisages certain safeguards for inter-state migrant workers. However, a report by the Standing Committee on Labour observed that there is not only low registration of workers under ISMW Act but also inadequate implementation of safeguards under the said Act. (PRS, 2020, June 10). This has resulted in non-penetration of benefits to migrant workers.

Seventhly, another long-term measure could be to provide skill and vocational education to youth by local authorities so that they

might become self-reliant. This could be aided with meaningful government intervention in direction of promotion of Swadeshi, monetary assistance for creation of start-ups or for becoming entrepreneur. More strength must be given to missions like 'Make in India', 'Made in India', 'Vocal for local' and 'make local global', in future. This could generate newer employment opportunities in rural areas and help in making the dream of an 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat' come true.

Last but not the least, there is a need of change of heart as far as the behaviour of civil society towards these vulnerable sections is concerned. It becomes imperative to consider these people as one among us though caught in rather difficult situation. This distress time reminds us about the relevance of Gandhian concept of trusteeship, wherein, big industrialists, factory owners are obliged to consider themselves as trustees of wealth at their dispersal, which they must spend at times of crisis like the present one. An element of 'Seva Bhav' present in Sanatan dharma needs to be instilled in the heart and mind of people, towards the society.

Until we, the members of civil society do not imbibe within us, a sense of love, compassion, and empathy towards these migrant workers, they would find it difficult to resettle again in big cities without any apprehension, after this pandemic gets over.

Conclusion

It cannot be denied that migrants are those invisible group in the country's population who have neither been entailed into urban planning nor incorporated into city's population and ironically not even counted within villages. In such a situation, it become very difficult to get an actual picture regarding their conditions and this is the reason there is no such unified database or legislation concerning them. Government intervention in terms of monetary assistance under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, food

security and portability of benefits under schemes like ‘one nation one ration card’, cheap housing rental scheme under Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan etc are appreciable. But still a lot needs to be done in this regard. As per the International Labour Organization (ILO) new report ‘Road map for Developing a Policy Framework for the Inclusion of Internal Migrant Workers in India (2020), “a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach is needed for amelioration of migrant population” (ILO, 2020, December 7). We need to understand that this COVID-19 pandemic has provided us the chance to convert adversary into opportunity. This crisis should be seen as a prospect to revamp our labour migration governance system and implement measures of enhancing skill development, self-employment, and entrepreneurship. This would surely help in transforming India into a self-reliant and Atama Nirbhar Rashtra in which even this section of population will get their due share and recognition.

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