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**Impacts of COVID-19**  
**in the lives of Urban Poor**

**Ishika Chauhan<sup>1</sup> and Simran Arora<sup>2</sup>**

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*1. Project uP Research Team*

*2. Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics, Pune, India*

## **Abstract**

*COVID-19 has taken the world by a storm and a substantive lot of our country has suffered the greatest hits. Often health is looked at as wealth but not so often does it mean the same and in the case of the Urban Poor, health isn't wealth if they have to travel miles amidst a global pandemic. Topping their list of priorities is the financial crisis leading to food insecurity which has resulted in an increase in mental health-related problems coupled with a significant rise in domestic violence cases. The study aims at understanding the reasons behind the repercussions faced by the Urban Poor, comprehending their under-preparedness and conclusively looking at the aftermath of the pandemic in their lives. After reviewing certain initiatives by the government and analysing the case study of Dharavi, Mumbai, it is apparent that to re-examine the issues faced by this population, it is of paramount importance to promote social and economic resilience and ensuring inclusivity at all levels of the society, something that extends beyond the immediate crisis. Keeping in mind the substantive lack of data available on this agenda, this study seeks to act as a standpoint for further research on the same.*

## **1.0 Introduction**

A key feature of urbanization is density, which has many benefits in terms of enabling agglomeration economies, access to basic services, and to health care. Yet without adequate investments in planning and infrastructure, density can have downsides, particularly contagion and congestion. The downsides of a city's density are often most visible in its slums; close to 1 billion people live in slums globally. These neighbourhoods often lack access to drainage, roads, street lighting, electricity, water, and sewerage, together with policing, waste disposal, and health care. With people tightly packed together, the resulting crowding increases exposure to communicable diseases. Small, overcrowded and poorly constructed housing makes sheltering places nearly impossible for many slum dwellers. All these factors have contributed to the desperate situation of the ones living in slums in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other subgroups among the urban poor such as women and girls, migrants and the homeless population have also had a hard hit. Children of poor families are among the most vulnerable. Closing down of schools for many young people can lead to a significant loss in years of learning and some children may not return. Girls, in particular, are at high risk of domestic violence and unwanted pregnancies that can lead to higher dropout rates (World Bank Group, 2020).

Even though many commentators have highlighted the plight of the poorest sections of society, particularly migrants who are trudging miles to be back home, having lost their daily wages and now depend on either the government support or private charity for food and shelter,

less (if anything at all) is known about how low-income families living in urban shantytowns are faring due to the crisis.

It becomes important to understand:

- a. What has been the impact of the shutdown on their earnings and incomes?
- b. Have the state and Central governments responded with various measures to mitigate economic hardships, such as food transfers or camps, and cash injections directly into bank accounts?
- c. How effective have these policy responses been in reaching the low-income households in urban clusters? (Afridi, 2020)

The core aim of this study is to understand in-depth the impacts and implications of the pandemic in the lives of the Urban Poor, to bring forth answers to the aforementioned questions and to highlight the issues and challenges faced by the target community which exist around the question of COVID-19 in Indian Urban Slums. The paper seeks to review and compare existing policies and frameworks; both successful and unsuccessful and serve as a standpoint for further research.

## **2.0 Challenges and the underlying impacts of the pandemic**

India is a developing country with a huge informal sector, considered as a hotspot for around 90% of the population and significant proportion engaged as rickshawalas, landless agricultural labourers, migrant workers, etc (Buheji et al., 2020, p. 216).

In light of the current pandemic, slum dwellers have been forced to confront life-threatening situations - from losing jobs to walking arduously for hundreds of miles to reach their native villages. People living in slums share non-permanent occupations like daily wage earners, domestic helpers, etc. The existence of acute poverty, overcrowding and unhealthy informal settlements, and impuissant urban public health setup, evidently question the practice of guidelines by the Government of India and WHO in helping prevent the spread of the virus. It becomes essential to recognise and understand the challenges then understand and perceive the magnitude of its impact as central while planning on measures as the general guidelines are not always the most efficient and pragmatic in such conditions.

### **2.1 Life with social distancing norms in congested slums**

From the onset of the pandemic, the government and the World Health Organisation have emphasized certain key social-distancing rules to prevent the spread of COVID-19. However, the viability of these social-distancing norms for the Urban slum population is questionable.

The plight of their harsh living conditions is accentuated by a few dilapidated toilets that all slum residents share, with porous shared walls and small, communal spaces leading in intimate proximity to one another. It is further exacerbated by standing in queues at the administrative sites where government agencies distribute food packets.

Apparently, with limited resources and congested informal settlements, social distancing in most slums is a far fetched dream.

## **2.2 Employment**

All kinds of economic activities came to a halt after the nationwide lockdown was announced on 25 March 2020. Residents of slum engage in informal jobs so even if they have to confront the dilemma of social distancing or working, they are certainly compelled to work because of their poverty-stricken life. The existence of dual sustaining realities of slums - living in densely populated space and continuing to choose to work despite the social distancing and self-isolation guidelines - would only foster the transmission among the wider population (Wasdani & Prasad, 2020, p. 417).

Domestic help workers are at the mercy of their employers regarding payments for lockdown days, and most of them have lost their jobs as well. This has disturbed their means of livelihood.

As working from home is a solution in the formal economy, it can not become a standard procedure for all kinds of jobs in different sectors of the economy, especially for people belonging to the informal sector or engaged as contract workers or daily wage earners. The scope of such jobs has diminished due to the lockdown.

## **2.3 Food insecurity**

The economic shutdown has deprived slum dwellers of their daily wages and hence their source of acquiring food. And with the closedown of schools, children in slums can no longer depend on their access to only consistent meals and essential nutrition. The burden on households has increased manifold to arrange and cook meals for family members that fulfil requirements of calories, proteins and nutrition as well (Corburn et al., 2020, p. 351).

Even though the government's attempt coupled with an increased dependency of NGOs for distributing food and minimal cash transfers could put out the fire, they cannot ensure security and normalcy of life.

#### **2.4 Understanding the physical and psychological impacts**

The Urban Poor's inability to work has had a direct impact on their mental health, an aspect in which the government has failed to provide assistance. It will be imperative to say that mental health problems are here to stay even after conditions normalise as the future will be welcomed by anxiety, fear and stress disorders till they make up for all the lost time.

Such an environment of uncertainty, anxiety and financial stress poses the risk of escalating incidents of domestic violence, theft, robbery and crimes against women. A study has identified that there are direct and indirect linkages between epidemics and increased gender-based violence (GBV). (Peterman et al., 2020)

From another standpoint, the lockdown has forced children to stay at home, away from studies and within close proximity to violent family members.

Then there's the condition of the migrants who had moved across cities to reach their hometowns but were stuck between quarantine and stress but sadly received help only regarding the former and not the latter.

WHO had released considerations pertaining to mental health and psychological well being for the general population, health care workers, children and adults, and people in isolation. There should be a provision to translate and communicate such helpful information to the poor population, to help and make them aware that they are not alone in this stressful period, and making sure that such practices are followed at all levels (World Health Organisation, 2020).

#### **2.5 Education**

Evidently, COVID-19 has hindered the regular methods of teaching and flipped the entire scenario to one that has led to children sitting in front of screens to attend school. This, however, is pushing the policymakers to work on strategies to implement e-learning efficiently while bridging the digital gap.

The concern over the education and classes of students is increasing exponentially and some states like Kerala are trying to democratise education by televising classes instead of simply restricting sessions to online classes. For the Urban poor, having an internet connection or access to a device is a privilege they can't afford (India Times, 2020).

Unfortunately, schools which are able to conduct online classes through all means and have been able to access and afford technology effortlessly, are only functional now. The public schools are closed because of lacking adequate infrastructure required to conduct classes online and lack of accessibility to network and tech gadgets. Due to the lack of useful resources and proper connectivity, these children are unable to study through online classes and are being deprived of their right to education (Chotiner, 2020). This is saddening as the impact of the shutdown would only reverse the progress made by this ambitious scheme in the past few years.

A multi-pronged strategy is necessary to manage the crisis and build a resilient Indian education system, essentially, inclusive learning solutions, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized, need to be developed (ET Government, 2020).

## **2.6 Community health**

Several studies indicate that infection can spread even before the onset of symptoms and that the virus is detectable for some time on surfaces, aerosols, and stool (van Doremalen N, et al., 2020). Therefore, a lot of attention is focused on maintaining proper physical distancing, washing hands strenuously, avoiding touching face after touching any contaminated surfaces, going into self-isolation if showing symptoms, to mitigate the transmission (Corburn et al., 2020b, p. 355).

Usage of sanitizers every now and then can add to their fragile budgets, one according to which even regular hand washing is more of an aspiration than a reality for most. There should be proper planning for community-specific and feasible alternatives to fit the dynamics of health management in slums.

One of the key principles of global health is social justice and equity, especially to ensure that the decisions regarding health care must be taken in consideration with the proportionate burden of high vulnerability to communicable diseases and other risk factors borne by deprived people who barely manage on precarious livelihoods in any

country. If the course of action towards fighting the COVID-19 is inequitable, then the inequalities are expected to increase in the long run.

Even though the implementation of the lockdown in the entire country was well intended, it failed to be the tool for curbing the spread of the virus for the majority of the Urban poor population.

### **3.0 The Migrant Crisis**

The migrant crisis triggered by the pandemic was something that nobody had foreseen. Under the lockdown, when the government had strictly restricted overcrowding and mass movement, millions of unemployed, urban poor were forced out of the cities, on a journey they could've never imagined they would take just to reach their hometowns and villages.

With transportation systems initially shut down, many had no recourse to travel options back to homes and villages, resulting in harrowing journeys home. Those who were able to make it home found, in some instances, villages refusing entry because of fears of transmission.

The shocking images of migrants forced to walk in desperation showed the enormity of the crisis as well as some of the challenges posed by an extended lockdown in India where so many people live hand to mouth and cannot afford not to work (Patel, 2020).

The pandemic has exposed migrants to threats so grave that practically endangered their lives. In times like these it becomes essential to understand the loopholes in governance that led to a situation as desperate as this.

#### **3.1 Neglected: Migrants and the informal economy**

The crisis brought to light the actual condition of millions of migrants, one the government hadn't anticipated, indicating failure of measures taken by them.

COVID-19 has massively impacted this group of workers. Stranded Workers Action Network found that 50% of workers had rations left for less than one day; 74% had less than half their daily wages remaining to survive for the rest of the lockdown period; and 89% had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown (Patel, 2020).

From a lack of robust data on internal migration to estimating that more than 70% of people working in the informal sector could fall in the category of migrants, the government is facing a plethora of challenges.

While the migrants, especially daily wage workers' inability to pay rents have forced them onto the streets, hence, they are struggling to make two ends meet as they have limited to no access to basic amenities and social security.

There's not much that these people need and as the country's massive workforce, it's all that they deserve. If not catered to properly by the government, getting the migrants back to the cities could be another challenge for the government in the near future.

### **3.2 What the future holds for the migrant population?**

A country is nothing without its workforce and with millions of migrants in their villages/ hometowns, the work, whenever it begins will get greatly affected. Now that the industry is realising the value of its labour, one that was considered cheap, it's time to rethink work in all its aspects. The situation can also be perceived as an opportunity to rejuvenate rural economies and make them successful and sustainable.

As thoughts will turn to how to stimulate economies and get people back to work, it is imperative that those in authority turn their minds to how to create a more just society, that invests in healthcare, and has a social protection system that supports the most vulnerable in society.

Migrants are not just objects of charity that need support. Internal migrants are key income generators that play a vital role in Indian society and should never be overlooked again (Patel, 2020).

### **4.0 Case study of Dharavi, Mumbai: From fear to awareness and progress**

Dharavi is Asia's largest Slum located in the capital of Maharashtra, Mumbai. Since Dharavi is stretched across an area of over 2.4 square kilometres and is home to around 8,50,000 people - one of the most densely populated slums - it posed the greatest challenge for the governments in curbing the spread of the contagion.

First few cases of COVID-19 positive patients were enough to alarm the authorities about the anticipated exponential increase in the number of positive cases because Dharavi is congested — it is practically impossible to move without rubbing shoulders in a maze of tiny lanes and to follow physical distancing norms.

The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) adopted an aggressive strategy by focusing on chasing the virus and instead of waiting for the impending disaster. The approach used was based on four essential Ts - Tracing, Tracking, Testing and Treating. “Mission Dharavi” began with the set up of “fever camps” in different parts of the slum with proactive screening. Complexes, wedding halls and schools were temporarily converted into quarantine facilities for suspected cases, with the availability of free meals and laughter yoga sessions to beat inevitable stressful thoughts.

The fact that Dharavi’s 80 per cent of the population depends on 450 community toilets and approximately 8-10 people live in a space of 10/10 feet, combined with the existence of narrow lanes and a large number of small factories, made it an extremely difficult and a huge task of contact tracing. The challenges were tackled with quick responses and dynamic strategy - toilet areas were sanitised and disinfected at hourly intervals in a day and created awareness about maintaining hygiene, strict enforcement of lockdown in the containment zones used drones to monitor movements, volunteers helped in distributing rations and food packets, only critical patients were admitted in hospitals outside and around 90 per cent of positive cases were treated in Dharavi itself. All these measures were taken to restrain unnecessary movements in the area. The doubling rate gradually improved from 18 days in April to 43 days in May and has slowed down further to 430 days in July (TIMESOFINDIA.COM, 2020).

Efforts of the Government, the administration and the front line workers were recognized by Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyes, Director-General of the World Health Organisation (WHO) for being able to curb the spread of the virus in such a densely populated area especially when the outbreak in the country was on a significant rise.

Given that Dharavi supports the lives of about a million migrants and is one big hub for small factories, namely that of leather, garments, pottery, etc., and risking lives of another set of migrants could’ve turned into a haunting nightmare for the government is probably the reason as to why it received attention from media, health and all other departments but when it comes to other massive slum clusters around the country, the outreach has been minimal. The government is not to be blamed solely because a lack of data has led to a blurry image of urban slums as a whole.

Nevertheless, the government of Maharashtra with the support of BMC has proved that achieving social-distancing goals in slums is not impossible, by preventing the spread of virus

along the congested lanes of Dharavi by adopting an aggressive community-based strategy along with providing basic essentials ensuring hygiene and sanitation.

## **5.0 The Government's initiatives**

The government has been quick to realise their mistakes when it comes to the Urban poor population and has tried to work for them. This section aims at breaking down initiatives taken by the government to bring the lives of the urban poor back to normalcy.

### **5.1 Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package (PMGKB)**

In March 2020, as an immediate response to the lockdown due to COVID-19, the Indian government instituted the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package (PMGKB), a ₹1.7 lakh crore relief package for the months of March, April and May 2020. This support aimed at working alongside pre-existing initiatives such as the Public Distribution System (PDS) and Direct Benefit Transfers (DBT).

Under this scheme, sanitation workers, ward-boys, nurses, ASHA workers, paramedics, technicians, doctors and specialists and other health workers would be covered by a special insurance scheme.

Though the government has given a figure of ₹1.7 lakh crore, it did not provide a breakup as to how this amount was arrived at and if it was budgeted or borrowed (Sharma, 2020).

The implementation of the package was being continuously monitored by central and state governments. The government claims that more than 42 crore poor people received financial assistance of ₹65,454 crores under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Package (Ministry of Finance, 2020).

### **5.2 Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan**

The Aatma Nirbhar Abhiyaan is a manifold economic package announced by the government in May 2020 with the aim of making the country independent against the tough competition in the global supply chain and to help in empowering the poor, labourers, migrants who have been adversely affected by COVID.

The following are some of the key policy highlights from the Aatma Nirbhar Abhiyaan for the relief of the distressed Urban Poor population:

- **One Nation One Card:** Migrant workers will be able to access the Public Distribution System (Ration) from any Fair Price Shop in India by March 2021 under the scheme of One Nation One Card. The scheme will introduce the inter-state portability of access to ration for migrant labourers. The scheme was estimated to cover 67 crore beneficiaries in 23 states (83% of PDS population) till August 2020. All states/union territories are required to complete full automation of fair price shops by March 2021 for achieving 100% national portability.
- **Free food grain Supply to migrants:** Migrant workers who are not beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act ration card or state card will be provided 5 kg of grains per person and 1 kg of chana per family per month for two months. Rs 3,500 crore will be spent on this scheme, and eight crore migrants are estimated to benefit under it.
- **Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) for Migrant Workers / Urban Poor:** The migrant labour/urban poor will be provided living facilities at affordable rent under Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana (PMAY). This will be implemented by (i) converting government-funded housing in the cities into ARHCs through PPPs, and (ii) incentivising manufacturing units, industries, institutions, associations to develop ARHCs on their private land and operate them (*Summary of Announcements: Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan, 2020*).

Recent reports show a new front-loaded special refinance facility of Rs. 30,000 crore sanctioned by NABARD during COVID-19 to RRBs & Cooperative Banks. This special facility is to benefit 3 crore farmers, consisting mostly of small and marginal farmers in meeting their credit needs for post-harvest and Kharif sowing requirements. When Kharif sowing is already on its full swing Rs. 24,876.87 crore out of Rs. 30,000 crore has been disbursed as on 06.07.2020, out of this special facility (“Aatma Nirbhar Bharat Package: Progress So Far | DD News,” 2020).

There are still a lot of unanswered questions that pose a challenge to the government:

- a. How will the government ensure coordination within and across states?
- b. How will monitoring and auditing of the progress of multiple schemes take place given the fluctuating state of migrants?

The government needs to come up with more inclusive and flexible plans to cater to the needs of these people and understand that alternatives such as direct cash transfers (DCTs) cannot save livelihoods of those who do not have access to banks.

All of these measures and their little progress might indicate that there have been certain efforts and initiatives by the Government pointed in the right direction but it will be wrong to say that these are going to bring the situation of the Urban Poor near to normal in the coming days, therefore, regular checks and audits to track the government's progress will play a crucial role in determining the fate of the Urban Poor population in the near future.

## **6.0 Conclusion**

Nobody could have foreseen the ongoing pandemic or how underprepared we, as a nation were for it but there has always been one sect of the society that is impacted more than the others.

COVID-19 has highlighted how deep-rooted social division in our country is and how the current systems fail to do justice to the needs of the Urban poor, ranging from health and sanitation facilities to the education of children. The pandemic has proved to be an eye-opener for the government and has, in some way, reinstated how inclusivity in India is only one fancy word on paper.

The plight of the Urban poor may or may not improve in the coming days but there is clearly a long way to go for the day when social norms will be just to 'all' the citizens of the country.

Learning from the current scenario, not immediately but gradually, the governments should come up with strategies that are inclusive so that in the coming future, the Urban Poor can have the government's support at all times, whether uncertain or not.

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