

IJPSL

Volume 2, Issue 2

Living in an Informal Economy: A Study on the Economic Impacts of COVID-19 on the Internal Migrant Workers of India

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted India's enduring internal migrant crisis. The absence of comprehensive data on domestic migrant workers makes it difficult to efficiently communicate or reach out to them for financial support, food security or healthcare services. Despite this, migrant workers are the backbone of India's economy. Based on secondary literature, this paper analyses the specific ways in which the internal migrant workers of India have been affected by the pandemic and examines the government's response and its impact in addressing the crisis. By doing so, this paper aims to provide insights for more inclusive, comprehensive and effective migrant policies and operations involving multiple stakeholders at all levels. The paper sheds light on the vulnerability of India's internal migrants in terms of their lack of financial aid, healthcare, mobility and education. In addition, it critically analyses and compares the policies implemented for helping migrant workers in the post-pandemic period by other developing nations. Finally, it highlights the scope for improvements in the future by proposing inclusive policy reforms keeping in mind multiple SDGs of the United Nations.

Keywords: *migrants, labour, COVID-19, economy, policy-reforms, SDG, inclusive*

1.0 Introduction: Defining Internal Migrant Workers

The UNDP Human Development Report of 2009 states four times as many internal migrants globally as there are international migrants (Srivastava et al., 2011). Internal migration involves much poorer segments as its impacts on the economy, sending and receiving regions and the migrants along with their families are arguably much more than international migrants (Srivastava et al., 2011). Migration experts estimate the total number of internal migrants in India at 600 million in 2020. About 200 million of whom are inter-district and inter-state migrants and another 140 million are considered 'highly vulnerable' (Menon, 2021). According to the 2011 Census, almost 41 million interstate migrants in India are forced to migrate to other states, mainly due to their home state's lack of work opportunities (Migrant Workers in India: The Pandemic Pressure, 2020). The migrants have to secure their livelihood, find a job, access the health system and register with the local municipalities. Destination areas need to prioritize conditions that allow migrants to do this and integrate better.

Integration is a multidimensional process that includes various areas: employment, education, health, civil rights, social welfare and housing. However, in India, internal migrants, mainly interstate migrants, live in precarious conditions and face numerous difficulties in their destination state. They often have unsafe and unsanitary working and living conditions, limited access to health and social services and non-familiarity with the local culture and language – adding to their vulnerabilities. Added to this is the significant increase in informalization of the workforce in India – the percentage of all employees with any written contract fell from 25.4% in 2004-05 to 20.9% in 2011-12, as per the analysis based on the latest National Sample Survey (NSS) data (Aggarwal et al., 2020).

The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines the informal economy as "all economic activities by workers and economic units that are – in law or practice – not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements." (COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #49: Impacts on Migrants in Informal Economies | International Organization for Migration, 2020). The informal migrant workers constitute a large portion of India's workforce; many of them are without any access to healthcare and employment benefits. Thus when they get sick, they do not have guaranteed access to medical care and assistance. Moreover, many workers, including those in low-skilled employment areas such as construction, agriculture and domestic services faced safety and health risks, such as not having access to water and sanitation, thus raising their risk of contracting COVID-19 and other infectious diseases. Irregular migrant workers in the informal economy undergo even more dangerous situations. They are often not covered by any formal arrangements to access recovery measures put in place by the government (*COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #49: Impacts on Migrants in Informal Economies | International Organization for Migration, 2020*). According to research from Gupta and Misra (2021), two types of migrations are common in India:

- Long-term migration: the resettlement of an individual or household.
- Short-term or seasonal/circular migration: the to and fro movement from a source to a destination.

Most seasonal migrant labourers come from the economically backward districts of states like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh (Keshri & Bhagat, 2013). Analysis of the 2011 Census data shows that migration in India is mainly driven by factors like employment, marriage, education, movement with family, natural calamities and other similar factors; marriage and employment are the two primary reasons for migration. However, reasons for migration vary by gender, for instance, among men, employment is the leading cause of migration whereas, among women, marriage is the leading cause of migration (Kumar & Choudhury, 2021). In India, the major pull factors of labour migration are higher wage rates and job availability at the place of destination. Factors like job insecurity, low wage rate and low per-head agricultural land force people to migrate from their native place (Rajan & M., 2019). The paper revolves around the main argument that the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a massive socio-economic impact on the lives and livelihoods of migrant workers. It recommends ways in which the government should prioritise immediate support and ensure comprehensive long-term sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery for the vulnerable group.

2.0 Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

India has a population of 40-50 million seasonal migrant workers who work in construction sites, factory production and service activities. Since businesses were closed and establishments were shut during the lockdown, migrant workers ran out of work and were seen returning to their native places. It became difficult for them and their families to survive, because of no work, income or savings. Various reports have suggested that some migrant workers lost their lives to heat and exhaustion while returning to their homes on foot due to the suspension of buses and trains; some were also stuck in their workplaces. Having no work, income or savings, it became complicated for them and their families to survive. A survey of migrant workers by a Delhi-based NGO, Jan Sahas, found that 90% of the surveyed workers lost their only source of income, while 42% did not have food rations for a single day. Another survey on 11,000 workers has found that 96% have not received food rations from the government and 89% have not been paid by their employees during the lockdown (COVID-19: Lockdown Impact on the Informal Sector in India, 2020).

According to data analysed by the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy (CMIE), the labour force participation rate fell to an all-time low, and the unemployment rate rose sharply in March 2020. This resulted in a fall of 15 million in the number of the employed, which fell from 411 million to a shocking 396 million and a rise of 6 million in the number of unemployed, which increased from 32 million to a staggering 38 million in March of 2020. The CMIE data reported that unemployment surged to 8.7%, the highest ever in 43 months. Further, as reported in the Business Standard, only 30.8 million jobs were provided from 15th to 29th April 2020 under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), as opposed to 273.96 million in the corresponding year of 2019-20. The work under MGNREGA stalled to curtail the transmission of the virus. However, this came at a huge cost to the rural labouring poor (COVID-19: Lockdown Impact on the Informal Sector in India, 2020). According to a study conducted by Kochhar (2021) and Pew Research Center, the number of poor people in India (with incomes of \$2 or less a day) has increased by 75 million because of the COVID-19 recession. Suffering from the pandemic, the number of poor in India is projected to reach 134 million, more than double the number of 59 million expected before the recession. The poverty rate in India also increased 9.7% in 2020, from the January 2020 forecast of 4.3%. The majority of the population in India were in the global low-income tier in 2020. Among them, 1.20 billion people were expected to be in this tier in 2020 before the pandemic, accounting for thirty per cent (30%) of the world's low-income population. This number is projected to have dropped as the COVID-19 downturn pushed more people into poverty (Kochhar, 2021).

A survey conducted by Rahaman et al. (2021) gives a glimpse of the severe challenges faced by the migrants in this period. The field survey was conducted on 350 migrant labourers who were stuck in the informal working sector of Mumbai. The results were the following:

- Demographics - The majority of migrant labourers in the survey were aged 20–39 years (79.5%), male (95.3%), and belonged to the Hindu religion (61%). The study also found that almost one-tenth of the migrant labourers were aged people (40 and more years aged). Nearly 71% of the migrant labourers were married. Half of the respondents (50%) of the survey were illiterate or primarily educated. Thirty-seven per

cent (37%) of the labourers worked in the construction sector, followed by thirty per cent (30%) in the industrial sector, seventeen per cent (17.2%) in the sewage section and twelve point five per cent (12.5%) in the transport sector. About 30% of the respondents had mentioned that migrant remittance is the primary source of household income. More than half of the migrant labourers' monthly income was less than twenty thousand rupees.

- **Condition of Living** - The majority of stranded migrant labourers were living in unhealthy environments. More than half of the migrant labourers lived in semi-pakka or kutcha rooms. Half of them were residing in rooms at the working site provided by the employment authority. More than six people slept in a single room (64%). Almost 13% of migrant labourers were living in rooms without electrical facilities. One-third of the migrant labourers did not have access to improved sanitation facilities. Many migrant labourers used unclean cooking fuel (33.7%) and had no separate kitchen (90.9%).
- **Health Problems** - Among the labourers, the prevalence of fever/cough (25%) was high, followed by other health issues (20%) and breathing problems (13%). Almost 40% of respondents reported that they were not affected by any health issues during the lockdown. This shows that multi-morbidity was significant among aged labourers (aged 40–49 years). Breathing problems and cough/fever were significantly high among them. The prevalence of any diseases was found low among young adult migrant labourers (46%).
- **Maintaining COVID-19 Precautions** - A substantial proportion of respondents (74%) did not use hand sanitisers. Nearly 62% of the respondents did not wear any masks. Only one-tenth of them used masks regularly to protect them from COVID-19. Using masks and sanitisers was expensive for the marginalised groups and daily wage earner migrant workers. Almost 51% of stranded labourers were not maintaining social/physical distance.
- **Ration Shortage and Financial Crisis** - The survey displays that 54% of labourers faced acute ration shortages during the nationwide lockdown. However, 33% of labourers reported that they sometimes faced ration shortages. Simultaneously, only 14% of the

labourers did not face any kind of ration shortage. A significant number of them experienced a severe financial crisis (59%), followed by (22%) during the COVID-19 lockdown. However, almost 18% of them responded that they had not experienced the financial crisis during the COVID-19 lockdown.

- **Income and Wages** - Almost 86% of labourers did not get any wages during the lockdown. Only 14% of labourers received wages from their employers. Among them, 13% received wages, which was a partial payment. Only 1% of labourers received full payment of wages.
- **Anxiety of having COVID-19** - Most stranded labourers (57%) always felt anxious, followed by 31% of them who sometimes suffered from anxiety during the lockdown. About 12% of respondents said that they were not anxious about COVID-19 infection.
- **Access to Relief Services** - A significant proportion of labourers did not get any ration kit (31%) or financial aid (86%) during the lockdown crisis. Most of the labourers received ration kits from NGOs (60%), followed by governmental organisations (9%). Similarly, 12% of labourers received financial aid from NGOs, followed by governmental organisations (2%).

The above study gives an insight into the burning issues of stranded migrant labourers during the COVID-19 lockdown in India. The study also examined the risk factors for COVID-19 transmission among labourers. Risk factors such as living conditions (room density and WASH practice), co-morbidity and precautions (social distance, using sanitiser and using a mask) have been included in the study to assess the transmission of COVID-19 infection. The livelihood challenges such as ration shortage, financial crisis, unpaid wages and perception of the impact of lockdown on daily life were used to assess the vulnerability of livelihood (Rahaman et al., 2021). Moreover, finally, the access to governmental and non-governmental assistance (ration and financial assistance) during the COVID-19 crisis was analysed. Apart from financial and economic stresses, the migrant workers were also tormented by constant anxiety during the lockdown. This had a severe effect on their mental health, which in turn induced panic attacks and socially irresponsible behaviour among them. For instance, stranded internal migrant labourers fleeing to railway stations and bus stations, making

desperate attempts to go back to their home states ignoring lockdown rules.

According to the psychosocial issues among migrants during COVID-19 listed by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, Government of India, internal migrant workers suffer from high degrees of anxiety and fears due to various concerns during the pandemic and need psychosocial support. The continuous reverse migration of millions of migrant workers to their native villages can be detrimental to mental health and rural India may be particularly susceptible to suicide in the near future due to the heavy economic load of jobless migrant workers. Reports of migrant workers having severe nervous breakdowns and depressive, psychotic disorders have started appearing in the print media (Shastri, 2020). The acute shortage of workers in urban areas due to reverse migration and relaxations in basic occupational and industrial health-related laws have forced the available workers to work for 12 hours rather than the usual 8 hours shift mainly to boost production. However, it is contradictory to the Factories Act, 1948. The longer working hours in the absence of protective welfare legal provisions would also mean a reduction in rest hours and a substantial increase in psychological stress and may lead to occupational mental illnesses. Considering these lacunae, effective laws protecting the welfare and financial interests of the unorganised sector workers during disasters and health crises is the need of the hour (Choudhari, 2020).

3.0 Critical Analysis of the Steps Undertaken by the Indian Government during the Pandemic for Migrant Workers

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, a dramatic economic collapse and humanitarian crisis were unleashed in India. Delays in official response were very damaging for migrant workers in several parts of the country, many of whom were left without income and faced destitution and hunger as their savings ran out. Surveys of migrant workers after one month of lockdown found that the majority (96%) had not received food rations or cash relief from the government, while around 90% of the employees were not even paid their due salary (SWAN Report 2020). During the first phase, all movement of individuals was prohibited. They could not return to their homes; then, material distress forced people to pass by foot over long distances because of the lack of any other alternative. Interstate movement

of migrant workers in buses was allowed only after one whole month of lockdown by the central government. Special train services for migrants were started even much later and required travellers to pay full fares, disregarding the fact that most were already greatly impoverished due to the lockdown. Such delays in providing adequate and accessible transport facilities added distress and led to the more comprehensive transmission of the virus. The many migrant workers who were forced to congregate in stations to undertake and find their way home or had to steer many kilometres arrived enervated and exhausted, with greater chances of exposure and transfer of the virus and likelihood of spreading infection at their destinations (Ghosh, 2020).

A policy analysis conducted in November 2020 by India Migration Now, a migration research non-profit, supported its Interstate Migrant Policy Index (IMPEX), shows that the movement of migrants across the borders in search of livelihood leaves them particularly vulnerable, isolating access to crucial social security schemes including the public distribution system (PDS) for subsidised grain (Mitra et al., 2021). The central government launched a highly prospective One Nation One Ration Card (ONORC) Scheme under its pandemic relief package to help out the most vulnerable people. This scheme entitles migrant workers to shop for subsidised ration from any fair price shop in any part of the country. The beneficiary is not required to be a registered ration cardholder within the state, district or village of job or stay. However, ONORC is not precisely a 2020 product; it was launched in 2019 but is not yet fully implemented by all the states. Earlier this year, the Supreme Court passed an order that the registration of migrant workers and ration cardholders be completed on the national portal by July 31. It also directed all states and Union Territories to register all establishments and contractors before the deadline to ensure the food security of migrant workers. This was done so that the migrant workers who are unable to return home and people who are not ration-card holders at the destination can enjoy additional free food grains under the PDS.

The government announced Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Rojgar in June 2020, which was a ₹50,000 crore (\$6.9 billion) scheme for 25 target-driven works to make infrastructure and boost employment in 116 districts of six states for workers returning to their homes. However, as was duly noted by Ravi Srivastava, Director of Centre of Employment Studies

Institute for Human Development, a non-profit, the measures announced were not sufficient as schemes like the Garib Kalyan Yojana only converge existing schemes and need careful restructuring (Paliath, 2021).

The Indian Minister of Finance announced a comprehensive COVID relief package on 26 March 2019 for the poor suffering from the pandemic. In April 2019, the govt. announced that 330 million poor people would be assisted through transfers amounting to ₹312,350 million under Prime Minister's Poor relief Scheme (PMGKY) (All India newscast, 2020); ₹100,000 million has been transferred to 200 million women holding special Jan-Dhan accounts (₹500 per person), ₹14,050 million was provided under welfare pension schemes to 28.2 million people, ₹161,460 million to 80 million registered farmers under cash income support scheme, PM-KISAN, and ₹34,970 million worth of monetary support to 21.7 million building and construction workers. Under the PMGKY, free food grains were given to 392.7 million people and 26.6 million LPG cylinders were distributed under the PMUY scheme (All India newscast, 2020). However, an assessment by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) shows that overall support by the central and state governments through various cash and type transfers and other measures, like healthcare infrastructure, testing facilities and tax relief, was only about 0.2 per cent of India's GDP (IMF Policy Tracker).

Critics have presented the argument at the same time that these disbursements are part of regular welfare dues to eligible groups and do not address the new catastrophic losses, such as incomes, leading to ongoing survival crises suffered by stranded and out-of-work informal migrant workers. The government was dressing up the small, targeted transfers as a special package for COVID-19 (Bajaj et al., 2020). These transfers amounted to no more than 0.8 per cent of the GDP and only 5.6 per cent of the central government's planned financial outlay for 2020–21. Cash transfers to Jan-Dhan accounts amount to less than ₹17 per household and ₹4 per person per day (Bajaj et al., 2020). As the majority of the seasonal migrants are landless or marginal farmers, they can not be benefitted from the grant to landholders under schemes such as PM-KISAN, through which the central government provides income support of ₹6,000 a year to farmers in three equal cash transfers of ₹2,000 every four months (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). The lockdown severely impacted the already volatile employment opportunities

of the informal workforce, and it could also be seen in the increase in demand for the rural jobs programme or the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). Approximately 13.3 crore people demanded to be given work under rural jobs programmes in 2020-21, which was nearly a 43% increase compared to the previous year. Up to 11 crore people worked within the programme in 2020-21, compared to an approx average of 7.8 crores in four years to 2019-20 (Paliath, 2021). Despite a further increase of ₹40,000 crores (\$5.5 billion) in funds for the programme in 2020-21, the govt. allocated 35% lesser money for 2021-22 compared to the previous year's revised estimate. The authors are of the view that this was a controversial step in the year that saw immense migrant distress (Paliath, 2021). Added to the present, there is also an 89% rise in revenue expenditure for village-based and small-scale industries over 2020-21. Many migrant workers who returned home to their villages sought local employment under MGNREGAs. The budget also doubles the investment in micro, small and medium enterprises, including self-employed workers. Nearly half of India's rural-urban migrants work as casual wage workers or are self-employed in the unorganised sector. However, this allocation may not be adequate as 64% of it is channelled towards an emergency credit line scheme- something that may see limited uptake in unorganised sector enterprises, according to IndiaSpend's recent budget analysis.

Another measure targeted at workers, also likely to profit migrant workers, was the formulation of an information portal to gather data on unorganised workers to assist formulate policies on health, housing, skill, insurance, credit and food. This is complemented by an approximately 10% rise in labour, employment and skill development expenditure under the Ministry of Labour and Employment. Nevertheless, there are no specific provisions for the information portal in demand for grants placed by the ministry. The finance minister extended some existing protections to migrant workers, including those working during a gig and platform-based occupations and traditional ones like construction. These protections include access to social security, minimum wage, and coverage under the Employees' State Insurance Corporation (ESIC). The new Prime Minister Atmanirbhar Swasth Bharat Yojana announced an outlay of ₹64,180 crores (\$8.8 billion) over the next six years to support 17,000 rural and 11,000 urban wellness centres as well as public health labs across the country. Although

neither targets migrant workers specifically, nor their countrywide net are expected to benefit from this. On the other hand, the reduced allocation for nutrition, including children, will affect all low-income families, including migrants' (Mitra et al., 2021).

One of the significant reasons that deepen the migrant crisis in our country is the lack of credible data or registration of migrants that hindered efforts to organise welfare measures such as distributing essential items and relief material to distressed migrant workers and their families. Although Census 2011 enumerated data on migration, it was shared partially only in 2020. In September 2020, the ruling party's government said in the parliament that it maintained no data on the death of migrant workers heading to their hometowns during the first few months of the lockdown. Answering various questions posed by opposition members, the Minister of State for Labour and Employment, Santosh Gangwar, said that no such data is maintained. As per a December 2020 International Labour Organisation report, jointly drafted with Aajeevika Bureau and Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, migrant workers remain unenumerated and unrecognised at the local, regional and national levels. The report also said that an interface between workers and public systems could be established only if there are reliable databases at all levels of governance. The first draft policy on migrant workers prepared by NITI Aayog has also made similar recommendations on the need for quality data (Paliath, 2021).

The COVID-19 crisis has altered life and livelihood as we know it and the migrant workers have been at the receiving end of dislocation and deep distress. Nevertheless, none of these measures taken by the government does much to alleviate their issues, that is, there is a lack of cash in hand for consumption. Most importantly, these are measures for the distant future. With the long-term benefits of the housing and the centralised ration card schemes yet to be a reality and lack of substantial immediate relief, uncertainty and suffering are in for the long haul for the poor migrants. A lack of short-term and immediate measures will lead to deep deprivation in rural areas, which would result in unemployment, poverty, social unrest, increased borrowing from moneylenders, undernutrition and starvation.

4.0 Comparative Analysis of Various Migrant Worker Policies in Developing Nations during the Pandemic

As discussed above, India's informal sector has struggled to cope with the pandemic-induced economic downturn and income loss during the past two waves of the health crisis. The Supreme Court has also asked the government to step up efforts to address the plight of migrants and informal workers (Das, 2021). Moreover, it is not just India, internal migrants from all over the world have been suffering under the clutches of the pandemic.

A lurching 90 per cent of workers in developing countries are dependent on the informal economy. Worldwide, approximately 2 billion informal workers are identified as individuals with casual work arrangements or no fixed salary. They are not recognised by social protection agencies and do not have the protections offered by formal sector employment, yet they make up most of the workforce. As the countries continue to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic, governments around the globe have been scrambling to respond. Social protection agencies are deploying resources and intelligence to tackle economic challenges resulting from this unprecedented health crisis. Financial regulators are facilitating access to relief measures designed to mitigate the economic impact on individuals and markets (Dabla, Rhee, 2020). Therefore authors feel that we must understand the policies and measures taken up by other developing nations of Asia to soften the blow of this horrendous pandemic on the informal workforce and then draw conclusions as to what policies and suggestions could be taken up by the Indian government also.

The one major challenge faced while formulating policies for migrant workers is that there is little data on beneficiaries. All the countries face this problem because of the volatile nature of migrant workers' settlements. Rules established on who qualifies for aid and how they secure it have created challenges and barriers in delivering COVID-19 emergency relief. Informal workers could also be challenging to spot and reach because they tend to fall outside the categories of individuals formally registered with governments. They may not qualify for social protection programs that use means testing and other mechanisms to work out eligibility even during normal times. South Africa has identified approximately 6–8 million

informal workers, i.e. more than 10 per cent of the population, who are deprived of all sources of income due to COVID-19 and lockdowns. The South African government designed a grant for this segment and can now, for the first time, compile a list of those who fall into the informally engaged category (Dabla, Rhee, 2020). However, no government has been entirely successful in collecting accurate data of all the internal migrant workers of their country. Governments should use citizen identification systems and digital technologies to set up more expansive and inclusive safety nets, whose effects reach down to all population levels. India's biometric Aadhar system is a good measure in this context. Such efforts have the potential to ensure that social protection programs can reach the people most at risk more quickly and efficiently, with the ability to scale up in times of crisis (Clare, 2020). While digital delivery models can effectively lower costs and decrease leakage, they come with their challenges and often do not reach the most vulnerable sections of people. Governments must ensure relief reaches those who need it the most—those on both sides of the digital divide (Dabla, Rhee, 2020).

The government of Indonesia's pre-employment card program is a noteworthy policy measure that provides beneficiaries with approximately US\$215 over four months. The program requirements are minimal and target informal and formal workers of micro-and small enterprises impacted by the pandemic. Such incentives are provided to reduce the burden of living expenses for employees that are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore the participants of the Pre-Employment Card Program has the independence to use the incentives that have been provided. The government must control the unemployment rate since this problem could trigger social turmoil and threaten the nation's stability. The Pre-Employment Card Program is expected to not only support the welfare of the job seekers and terminated employees during this challenging time but also could be optimally utilised by them to improve and enrich their skills to adapt to different types of jobs from other business sectors that not are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic (*Pre Employment Card as a Tool to Develop Indonesian Human Resources during Covid 19 Outbreak | Bahar, n.d.*). The informal economy within the Philippines consists of independent, self-employed small-scale producers and service givers. Nearly 40% of the workforce in the Philippines is considered employed in a "vulnerable" source of employment, which is a proxy measure for the informal economy.

The Philippines government has included a temporary short-term work program that employs close to 1 million workers in the informal sector in its COVID-19 response package. The TUPAD #BKBK program provides temporary employment opportunities to workers within the informal sector, as these workers have become particularly susceptible to economic hardship after the COVID-19 pandemic. Providing short-term public employment appears to be a comparatively uncommon emergency measure to support informal sector workers. However, the Philippines is additionally providing financial assistance by a measure of cash grants to individuals, including those within the informal sector. A Philippine Peso (PHP) 205 billion Emergency Subsidy Program has been launched for 18 million low-income families. Families with low incomes, including those in the informal sector, are eligible for this programme. They will be receiving between PHP 5,000 and 8,000 for two months (*The Philippines Provides Support to Workers in the Informal Economy*, 2021).

The Indian government also has similar cash-for-work programmes to help its informal workforce, covered under MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005) and aims to guarantee the 'right to work'. MGNREGA can be defined as a bottom-up, people-centred, demand-driven, self-selecting and rights-based programme. Hence, it remains crucial from an integrated resource management and livelihood generation perspective. A significant part of India's internal migrants have reverse migrated from cities to rural areas, and to address this migrant crisis, the government has allocated an additional fund of ₹40,000 crore for MGNREGA as a part of the stimulus package under Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan. However, the allocation amounts only to 0.47% of the GDP and continues to be much lower than the World Bank recommendations of 1.7% of GDP for the optimal functioning of the programme. Due to a lack of funds, state governments find it difficult to meet the demand for employment under MGNREGA (Insights Editor, 2020). Most of the Lao workforce is in informal employment, which has a share of 82.9 per cent in total employment. The Government of Lao, People's Democratic Republic (PDR) has recently approved the new National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) 2025, which sets out a roadmap for the developing social protection structure in Lao PDR. It includes the establishment of a National Social Protection Committee which will be responsible for the general implementation of the

NSPS, coordination among the various implementing bodies and of the different levels of the government administration: central, provincial and district, coordination with development partners, monitoring and evaluation of the NSPS implementation, and the assessment of the overall situation of social protection in the country including the identification of emergent issues. NSPS is assigned to state the national vision for 2030 and defines goals, strategic objectives and activities for developing the national social protection system. By doing so, the National Social Protection Strategy can effectively contribute to redistributing the fruits of economic growth to all groups in society, building social harmony and cohesion, reducing poverty and inequality, protecting people from natural and man-made disasters and establishing a stable and resilient growth that benefits all. A central feature of designing a social protection system must be its ability to build resilience to shocks – not just the present COVID-19 crisis but also future economic crises and climate-related disasters, which are becoming more frequent with time and with greater global and regional integration.

According to the IMF and Dabla & Rhee (2020), many countries are taking steps to ensure that informal workers have access to income support, even workers who previously had not received social transfers. Cash transfers are being ensured to reach the informal workers in several ways, including the following:

- Building on national social registries that are already in place (Brazil).
- Introducing online platforms (Thailand).
- Connecting to databases within the health and energy sectors (Morocco and Republic of El Salvador, respectively).
- Checking against taxation information (Colombia and Argentina).
- Establishing city-level schemes (Germany).
- Introducing one-off cash transfer payments programs (Cabo Verde, Ecuador, Malaysia, Namibia, North Macedonia, the Philippines, and Vietnam) (Dabla, Rhee, 2020).
- Preserving livelihoods through employee retention by providing support to small businesses to help them survive (Malaysia has introduced special grants for microenterprises that currently hire no more than five workers.)

These programs are universally provided without any differentiation in Serbia, Hong Kong, and Singapore. Because of the prevalence of informal workers in urban and peri-urban areas, countries like China, Uganda and Trinidad and Tobago are introducing and adopting such schemes to their situations (Dabla, Rhee, 2020).

Before the pandemic, countries like the Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam promoted the transition to formal employment, particularly by introducing voluntary social security schemes for informal workers; yet, the coverage remained low. At the onset of the pandemic, some ASEAN countries jibe in and introduce income assistance to pockets of informal workers. In Thailand and Vietnam, this took the form of unconditional cash transfers; in the Philippines, it was a form of work-for-assistance; and Indonesia expanded unemployment benefits to enable previously informally employed workers to gain access. Although this assistance is modest and temporary and not without its problems, it illustrates an acceptance that everyone – including those not registered in national social protection databases or eligible for benefits – deserves support. In 2016, ASEAN leaders adopted the Declaration on Transition from Informal Employment to Formal Employment towards Decent Work Promotion. The regional action plan that accompanied the declaration included a crucial study on statistical data gaps that paved the way for establishing an ASEAN informal employment database, including decent work indicators. While these measures made a massive quantity of data available to policymakers, significant policy changes are yet to occur. In the wake of COVID-19 and its dramatically unequal impact on work in the informal labour market, it is time to consider a more holistic approach that combines social protection coverage with promoting employment opportunities and skills development (The Diplomat, 2021)

5.0 Recommendations for Inclusive Policies in the Future

Most of India's labour policies address its employees in the formal sector, which accounts for only 7 per cent of all workers in the country, leaving the remaining 93 per cent without social protection and benefit (NSSO data, 2014). With the vast number of informal migrant labourers in the country, the national, state and regional administrations must focus on their social welfare and protection. This section of the paper provides some crucial

recommendations to policymakers through in-depth analysis on the state of internal labour migration in the country.

5.1 Ensuring Better Preparedness for Future Disasters

The immediate action that the national government should take is integrating migrant workers in emergency preparedness plans at the employer, regional and national levels. This is found to be lacking in the current policies and is essential for the future. Hence, the following recommendations should be considered in policies for ensuring better preparedness for future disasters:

- Development of caste and gender-responsive emergency preparedness plans.
- Proper collection of data and mapping the profiles of the migrant workers keeping in mind privacy and confidentiality of the group.
- Creating national-level contingency funds for economic relief in preparation for future COVID 19 waves and other natural disasters.
- Effective communication between the workers and the government while implementing such plans through coordination mechanisms, transparency and a whole-of approach.
- Ensuring comprehensive plans to tackle future endemics and pandemics by providing proper vaccination programs and healthcare infrastructure.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the lack of emergency and contingency plans for the vulnerable migrant worker group. It is of the primary need that the government decide to devise a holistic and comprehensive action plan to safeguard the migrant workers for the upcoming calamities of climate change, pandemics, and natural disasters.

5.2 Transforming Migrant Mobility

Cities are becoming more exclusionary, increasing the cost of migration for the poor and the anti-migrant rhetoric is becoming more strident in many states and urban metropolises (*Internal Migration in India Initiative*, 2011). It is necessary to highlight the specific and express right to the movement (including internal migration for work) recognised in our constitutional scheme. Article 19(1)(d) of the Constitution provides to all citizens the freedom to move freely within India, and Article 19(1)(e) provides the closely related freedom to

reside and settle in any part of the territory of India. Combined with the fundamental right to life (which includes the right to a livelihood), the constitutional scheme is that there should be no unreasonable barriers to movement and that all persons in India are equally placed to take up livelihood opportunities. Therefore, the freedom of movement and the right to settle anywhere in India could be viewed as a necessary labour right and a necessary condition for development and a significant social measure to remove caste disabilities and spatial ghettoisation. It also created the conditions for women to move or migrate for work, other than for reasons of marriage or as a form of trafficking (*The Fundamental Freedom to Migrate within India*, 2021). Thus, keeping in mind the above arguments, the authors feel that the following recommendations should be considered for ensuring the right of mobility and migration to the migrant workers:

- Special inclusive laws to prevent discrimination of migrants based on their domicile.
- Ensuring proper employment and preventing ‘only local worker’ policies by employers.
- Encouraging migrants to permanently re-settle in their employment zones by providing proper housing schemes.
- Ensuring special subsidised transportation solutions to the group for easy and accessible movement throughout the nation.
- Setting up grievance handling cells for trafficking, minimum wage violations and workplace abuses and accidents of migrant workers.

5.3 Ensuring Decent Work and Economic Growth to Minimise Poverty

The United Nations lists Decent Work and Economic Growth as the 8th and Minimising Poverty as the 1st Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, particularly women migrants, and those in precarious employment, is one of the targets under this SDG. As already mentioned, one of the critical reasons for interstate migration in India is the lack of good work and employment opportunities. Studies show that employment provisions available in a locality reduce seasonal distress migration even at low wages. If local employment provisions (for example, under MGNREGA) are expanded,

migrants will have less incentive to move to urban centres. Economic activity and industry could further benefit the hinterland, reducing migration distances and allowing migrants and governments to react more quickly in times of crisis (Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020).

Given the uncertain future of employment in cities and the severity of the health crisis, a large proportion of migrant labourers may not be eager to return and rejoin urban employment anytime soon. Back in their villages, the agriculture sector, which is already facing a crisis, can provide only seasonal employment during the harvesting and sowing periods. In such circumstances, the rural labour markets will experience a further rise in unemployment (Singh, 2020). Thus keeping in mind the above arguments, the authors are of the view that the following recommendations should be considered to facilitate economic growth post-COVID-19 pandemic:

- Employing the migrant workers in public works for the maintenance and up-gradation of civic infrastructure.
- Employing the migrant workers in small-scale agro-based industries, livestock, food and fodder processing, water management systems, nurseries and seed banks.
- Providing financial help and economic stimulus through in-hand cash payments.
- Formalising the existing contracts between employers and migrant workers.
- Increasing the bargaining power and following international labour standards.
- Devising a wage code to ensure a system of minimum pay.
- Creating a national database.
- Repurposing of MNREGA and revising its wage rates.
- Conducting skill mapping of returning workers to get an assessment of the kind of employment that can be provided to them.
- Implementing large skill development plans for better chances of employment.
- Bridging the gap between the demand for skilled workers and workers seeking employment.
- Creating more employment guarantee schemes for better reintegration of the workers back into the economy.

5.4 Reducing Inequalities

Reducing inequality, adopting policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies and progressively achieving greater equality is the 10th Sustainable Development Goal that the UN wishes to fulfil by 2030. In India, internal migrant workers are subjected to both social and economic inequality. They are almost excluded from citizenship and lack the power to exercise their political rights in elections and other democratic procedures based on their "otherness". They are prone to social hardships like identity crises and alienation. Many of them also face increased levels of caste, class and gender inequality. The migrant workers suffer from inequality when it comes to access to healthcare and housing infrastructure. They are excluded from social welfare schemes and are considered a burden to urbanisation. They lack access to any sort of social security and thus become very vulnerable during periods of crisis. The authors are of the view that the following recommendations should be considered to reduce the gaping inequalities among informal migrant workers:

- Planning rigid and comprehensive social protection and social insurance programs.
- Ensuring social inclusion is at the heart of all the plans.
- Ensuring proper access to healthcare and public distribution systems.
- Encouraging NGOs and NPO's to provide necessary assistance and support.
- Developing policies keeping in mind the vulnerable SC/ST and women populations.

5.5 Providing Access to Quality Education

Children of migrant workers face challenges in terms of enrolling and attending school. They are at a lower grade for their age, with the disparity deepening with age progression. They are also more prone to abuse and health risks and are more likely to drop out of school to supplement their household incomes. A survey across 18 states reveals that 46.2% of migrant children have discontinued their education. COVID-19 has caused a massive spike in child labour, exacerbating the digital divide and loss of regular income, undoing decades of progress (Iype & Rajamohan 2020). As per Census 2011, every fifth migrant in India is a child, with the country having a total population of 92.95 million migrant children. Studies have shown that migrant children between the age of 6-18 years are more vulnerable to child labour and discontinued educational opportunities. Almost 22.1 per cent of

migrant children of this age group are not enrolled in any educational institution. The ongoing pandemic has further fuelled the vulnerable situation of the group (Pandey, 2021). Hence, in view of providing quality education to the migrant children, the authors are of the view that the following recommendations should be considered:

- Ensuring non-discrimination of migrant children in admission to any educational institution.
- Providing flexible schooling days/instructional hours.
- Constructing open schools, seasonal schools in destination areas, residential schools in source areas.
- Creation of Integrated Child Development Service (ICDS) centres at arrival points to facilitate health check-ups and educational tracking.
- Eliminating language barriers and ensuring effective implementation of NEP (Pandey, 2021).
- Creating a national database and portal to provide an accurate estimate of the number of migrant children.
- Creating an identity card that serves as a storehouse of critical information throughout a child's life cycle in education.
- Providing career counselling to the migrant students.
- Implementing proper mid-day meal programs to provide adequate nutrition to impoverished children

6.0 Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic has had dramatic effects on the roles, livelihoods and well-being of workers and their families and SMEs worldwide. The impact of the pandemic on domestic migrants of India was extreme and the poor and marginalised were the hardest hit. Migrants died due to reasons ranging from starvation, suicides, exhaustion, road and rail accidents, police brutality and denial of timely medical care (*Migrant Workers and Human Rights | India Water Portal*, n.d.). While specific sectors and industries have successfully moved online, pointing the way towards exciting innovations within the world of labour, many workers have lost their livelihoods and many more who are concentrated in highly

exposed sectors remain at high risk. As with numerous aspects of this pandemic, the impacts are falling disproportionately on those already in precarious circumstances and who can least absorb the extra blow (*Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19*, 2020).

It was also a tragedy in India that migrant labourers are often stigmatised and unjustly blamed for spreading disease. However, they were one of the worst affected groups. They have been particularly affected by the economic consequences of the virus as they tend to be concentrated in sectors with high levels of temporary, informal or unprotected work characterised by low wages and lack of social protection. Those toiling within the informal economy often without rights at work and social protections suffered a sixty percent decline in earnings during the first month of the crisis alone. Young people account for at least four in ten employed globally in hard-hit sectors. Combined with disruptions in education and training, this has placed them at risk of becoming a 'lockdown generation' that will carry the impacts of this crisis with them for a long time (*Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19*, 2020). This paper tries to analyse how the pandemic has exposed inequalities and social fissures in societies that are hitting the most vulnerable and marginalised groups. Moreover, as a result of which, multidimensional poverty and inequality are likely to increase significantly. The authors further discuss the policies and measures that the central government has taken to protect migrant labourers who have been in dire need of help due to the pandemic and how far those measures have been successful.

Now is the high time to think beyond the reflex paranoia about Aadhaar cards and privacy violations to develop a well-thought-out scheme for migrant workers who have suffered such unprecedented levels of crisis. Governments can devise a digital multi-purpose benefit smart-card that can be used anywhere to draw money without queuing at remote banks. The improved Direct Benefit Service (DBT) must be designed in such a way that it works on all ATMs and other points and allows the migrant workers to draw their rations from any part of the country. Though it promises to give more rights to migrant workers than the earlier law, one must remember that implementation is key. More emphasis should be laid on block-chained digital administrative techniques, like smart cards for inter-state workers in this

era of digitalisation. It is time to re-examine old taboos against discussing labour reforms. It is high time that policymakers ensure that all the benefits given to the organised sector are also extended to the unorganised sector that makes up approximately 93 per cent of the labour force (Sircar, 2020). To soften the impact of the deepest global recession since World War II, the governments and other key stakeholders worldwide have taken coordinated, timely and sustained large-scale action. In addition, the authors further make a comparative analysis of some of the policy reforms and measures taken by ASEAN Countries to protect their informal workforce. India must build on those steps by taking inspiration from other nations and implementing innovative ideas to accelerate the transition to a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient world. A reset to the past is not an option. The level of change and transformation required to rebuild the global economy goes beyond building back better, and policymakers and stakeholders must strive hard to create a more inclusive and equitable world for all (*Policy Brief: The World of Work and COVID-19*, 2020).

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