India's Response to COVID-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on Migrant Workers – A Public Health Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The current pandemic of Covid-19 has caused havoc on the world economy and the lives of millions of people. In India, because of the diversified population, different income groups, and social habits of people, the extended lockdown has made a severe impact on the lifestyle.

Aim: This article attempts to throw light on the effect of lockdown on migrant workers with regards to hardship and health.

Conclusion: Daily wage earners, migrant workers are severe sufferers. Extended lockdown lead to exhaust their handful savings forcing them to start their journey to hometown. The callous attitude of ruling dispensation has forced the migrant workers to start their journey on foot to reach their homes, making them susceptible to infection, accidents, and many more health-related adverse events.

Key Words: COVID-19, Migrant workers, India

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 outbreak has thrown most countries into a humanitarian crisis that humanity has not faced in modern times. The world is uncertain around how long this crisis will last and what damage it would do to the economy, livelihoods of citizens, and the availability of basic healthcare to those who need it the most. Unfortunately, with ever-changing virus transmission dynamics, it hits the most vulnerable groups of population killing tens of thousands of people who remain virgin ground for the virus.¹

In response to such a crisis, the lockdown was one of the common strategies that many countries have adopted to control the further outbreak of Covid-19. India too adopted a nationwide lockdown strategy since 24th March 2020 which is continuing. However, the lockdown strategy was adopted without any preparation and without giving any time to stranded people to return at their homes. Soon after the announcement of the lockdown, India has witnessed a mass exodus of people - from migrant workers going back to villages, to various young people working or studying in various cities, trying

hard to come back home. The migrant workers are the one among those bearing the brunt of the crisis most. Lacking jobs, money and with the public transportation shut down, thousands of the migrants were forced to walk hundreds of miles back to their home villages through the stony railway track and streets at a temperature of 40°C– with some dying during the journey. The images of horror and endless inhuman sufferings coming out from across the country show how hollow and merciless our system is, which couldn't even provide basic minimum necessities required to live a healthy and respectable life. This was nothing but murder to the morality of humankind. What was more striking that no concrete measures are being taken by the ruling party for the migrant workers who have been serving this country with their sweat and blood for the years. How ironic is that those who work for the country and make the city a dream are left with no work, no food, and no shelter or no transportation for an uncertain period? Instead of giving respect and protecting the dignity of the migrant workers deserve as fellow humans, the government at the behest of the capitalist force is snatching all their rights and providing an open platform of their exploitation to the heartless capitalist.²

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DISCUSSION

In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, the nationwide lockdown was announced under which all borders were sealed, transportation got stopped, factories, shops, restaurants and all types of the economic activities were shut, barring only the essential services. This brought turmoil in the lives of thousands of migrant workers, who lost their livelihoods overnight and became homeless. As they were mostly daily wage labourers, dependent on their daily wages to arrange a meal in a day for their family, have faced immediate challenges of food, shelter, loss of wages, fear of getting infected, and anxiety. As a result of this thousands of them started fleeing from various cities to their native places. Having no transportation facility, they walked on feet through stony railway tracks and streets in such a hot summer, and many of them lost their lives either due to hardship on the way, hunger, accident, or comorbidity, and some even committed suicide. A media report compiled on the website of Thejesh GN, shows that there are 650 deaths not directly related to the virus. (Figure 1 and 2)

Figure 1: Distribution of Non virus deaths from 30th January till 19th May 2020.

Figure 2: Comparison of deaths related to virus and non-virus deaths from 30th January till 19th May 2020.

{Source: media reports compiled on the website of Thejesh GN (<https://thejeshgn.com/projects/covid19-india/non-virus-deaths/>)}

A survey of more than 3000 migrants from north-central India by Jan Sahas (2020),¹ reveals that majority of the workers were the daily wage earners and at the time of lockdown,

42% were left with no ration, and one third was stuck at destinations city with no access to food, water, and money. The report further states that 92.5% of labourers have already lost work ranging from one week to three weeks, they were evicted from their informal settlements or labour camps, and have been either unpaid or abandoned by their contractors, leaving them with no means for sustenance. This tyranny situation has forced migrant workers to walk on foot to reach their home villages finding no public transport. They were seen as potential carriers of the infection and ill-treated by the police and locals. The country didn't realize that migrants are not a victimizer, nor a victim, but are vulnerable, and instead of the ill-treatment, they deserve respect and dignity in their life.² In one of the instances, a group of returnees was sprayed with chemicals to disinfect them for which the local administration apologized.³ What can be more shocking than a social murder of 18 migrant workers, who slept on a railway track to take rest in the night after being exhausted and tired of walking, was crushed by a train on 08th May 2020. In another shocking accident in Auraiya district in Uttar Pradesh on 16th May 2020, a truck rammed into a lorry in which migrants were travelling, and killed 25 migrants, and many were injured.

The problem doesn't end here, amidst the persistent misery of migrant workers, the accordance of approving ordinance by Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Karnataka government to suspend all labour laws for next three years shows the apathy of the state governments towards the daily wage workers, working at the behest of heartless capitalists. To revitalize businesses and the economy from the impact of COVID-19, ruling dispensation has amended the labour laws extending the working hours from 8 to 12 hours. The anti-poor and anti-worker autocratic measures of dilution of labour laws and extending the business hours are a gross violation of the fundamental human rights given in article 14, article 19, article 21, and article 23 of the Indian constitution, and the Directive principle of state policy given under various articles of Constitution. Moreover, it is also a violation of the international commitments of labour conventions. These anti-worker measures in the name of revitalizing businesses and the economy are nothing but an attempt to extremize the exploitation of daily wage workers, which will allow enslaving the labourers. This whole situation depicts how invisible participants in the economy the migrant workers are and have zero electoral value.

Apart from these issues, the influx of migrants to their home states also poses new challenges to the government in fighting the global pandemic Covid-19. According to a report in Times Now on 19th May, 50% of all Covid-19 cases in Bihar are now returning migrants.⁴ A news report states that on April 14, there were just 66 cases of the coronavirus disease in the state and now it has reached 646. Among these 119 cases are from May 5-10, mostly from amongst migrant

workers.⁵ Similarly, U.P and Karnataka have seen a surge in new Covid-19 cases. A report states that in the last two weeks 70% of the new cases involve migrants.⁶ The mass returning of migrants also challenges the herculean task of their isolation owing to the limited scope of quarantine facilities. There is news of escaping from the quarantine centres alleging poor facilities and lack of food and drinking water. As per a news source, 70 migrants fled on a single day from a quarantine centre in Nawada district, Bihar citing poor facilities and lack of food.⁷ This challenge indicates that the government must recognise the changing pattern of rising cases and make strategies accordingly.

This tyranny situation amidst Covid-19 has unfolded the bitter truth of the miserable plight and incompetency of the Central government in terms of administrating the whole situation.

CONCLUSION

The lockdown and global pandemic Covid-19 has caused ravage the millions of labours' life at an unimaginable level. Therefore, the Central government along with the State Government must take comprehensive measures to protect the life of migrant workers and must release an adequate relief package on an urgent basis to prevent further deaths and inhumane suffering of millions of migrant workers. These social welfare packages could only be effective if migrant workers are counted as migrant workers, and therefore creating digital profiles to provide migrants with identification documents would be the first step. However, in doing so, a provision must be made to prevent such a database from being used to surveillance the worker's movement.

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