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COVID 19 AND MIGRANT WORKERS: LESSONS FOR INDIA

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ABSTRACT

There is a segment of the population that is always seen as critical for the economy; but a group that is often forgotten in the calculus of any calamity, not with any deliberativeness but somehow left out in the scheme of things—Migrant workers, formal and informal. In the context of India, migrant workers constitute a critical component of the workforce with particular concentration in industries, manufacturing, services sector like hotels and salons as well as domestic help by way of cleaning and cooking. These workers are transitional in that they do not seem to hold on to a permanent setting as was seen in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic when they wished to get back to their hometowns. There is yet another aspect to migrant workers—the constituency that leaves India in search of jobs overseas. This group is a critical backbone of the Indian economy because it provides the valuable foreign exchange remittances which in many cases go to shore up jobs within the country. The essential question that needs to be asked is if policy makers in India have learned anything out of the Covid 19 pandemic, especially as it pertained to the migrant workers. The lessons go far beyond providing short term succor to long term lessons that are to be learnt along with the wherewithal to deal with another pandemic that might come across in the future. The crux of the issue is the extent to which the Center and the State governments factored in the compulsions of the migrant workers when it came to lockdown and post lockdown issues. Is there a framework for the future, or are we going about in a pedestrian fashion-- moving from one crisis to another without a road map or even a clue of what is in front of us?

Introduction

From the developed to the developing nations, the coronavirus has impacted differently with only one common denominator: no one had a clue as to how to

react. In fact for a long time it may not be an exaggeration to say that governments were just whistling in the wind, not knowing what it was that hit them. Nine months into the pandemic there is the sad realization that the third spike in some countries is far deadlier than the first two; countries in Europe have resorted to a second shut down; and in a general feeling that governments have learnt very little from the first onslaught; and at the same time with a perception that governance in the aftermath of the full spread of the pandemic has been markedly different: that the response of a developing country like India has been more effective than developed countries of the West in Europe and Americas.

In the context of India and in the framework of governance, a number of questions are still being raised that would have to be effectively addressed if future pandemics are to be handled and governed in an efficient fashion so as to minimize loss to life and economy. This paper seeks to put a perspective on an issue that would have otherwise been snuffed out in the chorus of other so-called critical sectors. It puts the spotlight on the economy and that too in a highly focused manner as to how the Center and State governments have factored in Migrants—internal as well as migrants from India settled overseas who are being suddenly displaced and forced to return home, or in some cases wanting to return home for a number of reasons. Deprived of wages and salaries and without any basic ‘luxury’ of an ordinary resident worker like a ration card or a bank account do the government’s doles reach a migrant worker?

That apart, in a post lockdown phase and in the absence of even a basic count of how many migrant workers there are to what extent has the State government organized transportation to facilitate the movement of this segment back to their towns and villages? The answer to these questions should provide the backdrop for future planning as well as bring to terms the highly positive or deficient manner in which powers that be handled with a situation that is of critical importance to not just the economy but society as a whole. On the one hand it is easy to blame the media for not focusing well on the plight of the migrant labor; yet on the other hand, had it not been for the media which had continually flashed stories on hundreds of people left high and dry and at times even starting on a journey of hundreds of miles by foot, migrants’ story would have been pushed to the back burner.

The issues pertaining to Migrants is different for each state in India. In fact the pattern of migration is quite uneven in this country with the South showing a different picture than that of the East or the West; and hence the economic loss to the migrant community will be different regionally and by state. For example it is said that for Tamil Nadu the economic loss to migrants as well as to the State by way of monetary spending on a group that is estimated to be about 500,000. Also in the context of this Southern state, other refugee groups who have been settled in Tamil Nadu—like for instance a small group of Rohingyas who have been moved from Kashmir and the Sri Lankan Tamil refugees settled in the state have taken up jobs that migrant labour from other states of India have; and in the process making them eligible to be considered as internal migrants.

Migrants from India, especially in the Middle East and the Gulf States, whose sudden displacement by way of loss of jobs in the countries they are currently will impact overseas remittances and hence also the spending on development projects in states like Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In fact the migrant population from India also bears down in regions of South East Asia, but the fact remains that the Gulf states account for a predominant proportion of overseas migrants, one estimate putting

the figure closer to 2 millions. This bears a lot of policy implications for the centre and the state governments by way of planning, management and governance for any future eventuality. In fact it will not be an exaggeration to say that the safety of overseas Indian migrants, especially in the Gulf and the Middle East, surfaces only when the military or security situation in those parts of the world gets heated up bringing into question the potential evacuation of Indian nationals by air or sea. To a far less extent, central and state governments have had to contend with “stranded” Indian nationals overseas, particularly in the Gulf areas for an assortment of reasons, and not the focus of this paper.

In search of a framework for study

A developing country like India with its huge heterogeneous population of 1.3 billion and with its own problems of geographical proximity between Center and States and within States, the Covid pandemic was expected to tear into the social and cultural fabric of the nation. But mercifully, statistics are showing that India seems to have escaped the ravages of the virus when compared to other parts of the developed world, the West in particular. In the United States as of the middle of November the Covid has taken the death toll of more than 240,000 lives; and infecting close to 11 millions in all 50 states. The third spike that began in October is now seeing a daily infection rate in the upwards of 10,000 with 1000 casualties. One mathematical model is projecting that by the middle of 2021 the fatalities in the United States could top 600,000 unless urgent measures are put in place. In India as of November 14 the death toll nationally is put at around 130,000 with an infection rate of over 9 million cases. Globally it is said that some 1.5 million people have died with an infection of some 55 million people.

On the face of it some will make the argument that if India has posted smaller totals that is on account of fewer testings’ when compared to the world; yet others will make the point that India’s resilience against the virus has a lot to do with governance and management of the Covid. Taking the latter point of view any research will have to get into the micro aspects of governance and management—could New Delhi’s and Tamil Nadu’s “performance” been better if only certain segments of the population had been paid better attention? In this instance, it is that of migrant workers, the plight of transitional workers whose needs, if better taken care of, would not lead to a situation of a reverse movement back to their states. Is there a room for New Delhi and Chennai to improve its pandemic strategy so as to have a better elbow room in governance and management? And looking to the future and beyond any pandemics, what could be some of the lessons that the Center and the States can learn, not just in diagnostics, testing and cure but in management and governance.

Different models or does one size fits all ?

India is said to have an approximate number of 140 million Migrant workers (Guest Workers), that is people who officially are said to have moved out of one state to another looking for a job or work. It is noted that India does not have proper registry of Migrant Workers despite passing Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979, which is to safeguard migrants. It is a sad commentary that this has not been enforced anywhere in the Country. Indian states like West Bengal, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Punjab, Uttarakhand and Jammu and Kashmir are the major sources of Migrant Workers, while Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala are the major centers of destination. The top sectors of job for migrant workers in the urban region are Construction, Textile, Manufacturing, Hotel, Transportation, domestic works etc. The Covid-19

lockdown has made the Indian government to shine spotlight on the migrant workers, who are vulnerable to public health and economic crises.

Many internal migrant workers were initially stranded at their work places because of the lockdown because of which they faced a lot of difficulties, chiefly economic as the lockdown forced closure of economic activity leading to sudden loss of income and in many instances eviction from the places of work. To make matters worse, the shutdown of transportation facilities made matters worse as these migrant workers could not return to their homes where they could have enjoyed a basic living infrastructure. Pathetic still was that these migrant workers were at the mercy of government doles which in many instances did not reach them and some of it attributed to unscrupulous middle persons who sought to make a killing out of somebody's misfortune. The criticism has been that media highlights are focussed on misfortunes of migrant labor—by the continued accent on the visuals-- but not sufficiently addressing the causes of the continued despair.

Traditional studies on migrant workers have often stressed the “Push-Pull” theory with the conceptual framework focussed on the reasons that push the workers out of their state and the factors that pull them to migrate. The push factors would include lack of job opportunity and insufficient wages; and the pull factor would see more job avenues and higher salary and wages as being the reasons. From a sectoral point of view, organisations seek to recruit migrant workers to make up for the acute labor shortage in their state as the existing labor may have moved away, in some instances overseas, for better employment opportunities. But to argue that migrant workers face a dream world in their new setting is as exaggerated as it is wrong. The struggles faced are enormous starting with a different cultural milieu and language and accentuated by non-payment or irregular payment of wages and salaries. These factors only worsened during the Covid pandemic with critics maintaining that lack of proper governance at the Center and State levels only made the problem more acute.

Innovation or path breaking aspect of any research on migrants

The World Bank and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative have said that the Coronavirus is going to further aggravate conditions of poor people in the world pertaining to health, education and living standards; and one of the regions is South Asia, especially India. The proposed framework is path breaking in that it has as its primary focus the migrant workers in developmental process. The research would uncover not just the numerical force of migrant workers which is by far unidentified but also the extent to which the Center and the State have acted to protect the interests of this segment of population that is living on the fringes of poverty. The prescriptive part of the research should highlight on the measures that need to be taken to ensure if migrant workers of India are not to further burden the class of “new poor” that is said to be emerging as a result of the pandemic. Any study should also shed light into the key challenges faced by the internal and international migrants with respect to health, livelihood, and mobility; to explore whether the present policy options that are available to the government to address the above mentioned challenges are migrant-sensitive. The new analytical framework must reflect a new pattern through which future policies can be made inclusive of the migrant population for not just pandemics but factoring in any emergencies.

For a country like India the study of migrant labor is critical not just in terms of demographic movement and its impact nationally but more importantly in the fact that migration is a part of the developmental process. Migrant labor is a part of

development; and in some instances are reflective of the process of non-development or un-even development. The migration of labor from the north of India to the East, West and South may, in some instances, have contributed to a higher level of economic development to other regions; at the same time one cannot ignore intra-movement of migrants contributing to uneven development of some states as well.

In a pandemic of this sort ravaging the country and the world at large, the analytic framework to study the problems faced by migrant workers should not merely focus on the economic angle as it has far reaching societal implications as well. The complete shutdown of production in all forms has led to loss of income for a large section of the country's population. Millions have lost their jobs as a result of closing factories/ manufacturing centres throughout the country. Shut down of state and district borders has resulted in uncertainty and hence in mass movement of people attempting to reach their hometowns, the surge only reminiscent of partition in post-independent India.

There is no doubt that "the Great Lockdown is the worst recession since the Great Depression, and far worse than the Global Financial Crisis" as Gita Gopinath, writing for the International Monetary Fund puts it. This means there is going to be a decline in people's standard of living, reduced employment opportunities and overall social instability. In fact nearly every national and international economic organization has made the point that a new class impoverished running to the millions is going to be added and in the process further burdening economic growth and recovery. The framework of study may help ease the aforementioned burdens on the most vulnerable population of the society – migrant labourers and that too in the informal sectors.

The story of the migrants is here to stay, be it for the rich or poor, the developed, developing or under developed. This group of people simply cannot be wished away as some kind of a wandering crowd of gypsies who need not be counted in the scheme of things. Developing nations like India are continuing to move up the ladder only because of the movement of people to help the developmental process; the hope is that eventually this group of people will move back to where they came from to help build their own societies. Rich countries in the Asia Pacific have looked up to migrant labor from parts of South Asia—India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Pakistan—to build their infrastructure. Likewise the United States that looks up to a vibrant Hispanic immigrant group to shore up its activities, primarily in construction and infrastructure. It does not require international organizations to remind nation states of their responsibilities to migrant groups as the onus is on every individual as well as on political parties and governments, not just at the time of the elections cycle!