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Covid-19 Pandemic and Its Impact on the Migrant Labours in India: A Sociological Study

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Abstract:

In the year 2020 the whole world faced a challenge due to covid-19 pandemic. It is also known as coronavirus pandemic. Every country of the world affected by the disease caused by Novel corona virus. The life of individuals squandered due to pandemic. India Govt. started lockdown in our country in different phases. In this article the researcher pointed out the problems of migrant labours in the time of lock down. From West Bengal many labours go outside of the state in search of work. Their contribution towards our country is always neglected. In lockdown their condition is miserable. Most importantly we first recognised their existence in the time of lock down. They are forced to walk thousands of miles across the country. Many of them died due to starvation, fatigue, dehydration. They eagerly waited to return to their home but there is no way out. This article focused on migrant labours' problems, nature of work, causes for migration, contribution to the economy (both state and Nation) and overall, their miserable condition in lock down period.

Key words- Lock down, Migrant labour, covid -19, Pandemic, Government.

Introduction

The year 2020 witnessed an ongoing global pandemic of corona virus disease 2019. From its source gradually it spreads over the countries of the world due to its contagious nature. We have never seen such world-wide pandemic in earlier. WHO (World Health Organisation) reports that it is not an epidemic but it is a pandemic. However, this pandemic has changed the political and socio-economic structure of our country. As the epidemic spreads, educational institutions, many commercial enterprises, offices have been shut down. Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared 14-hour from voluntary public curfew from 7.00am to 9.00pm on 22nd March. On 24th March Prime Minister ordered a nationwide lock down for 21 days i.e., from 24th March to 14th April. On 14th April the lock down has been extended by the Prime Minister till 3rd May, i.e., second phase lock down. The third phase lock down has been declared on 1st May and was extended till 17th May. On 18th

May again Home Ministry declared 4th phase lock down extended up to 31st May. Thus, as the rate of mortality increased, as the number of affected people increased Govt. declared lock down in different phases in India.

People are not prepared for this extended lock down. All the factories, shops, restaurants, and hotels everything are shut down. The migrant workers of our country are in deep trouble. In the meantime, the owners of factories declined to pay the wages or salaries to the labourers, while most of them are engaged on 'no work no pay' basis. Naturally they have no money in their hand. In this context, it is to note that the exact number of migrant labourers is not known to us; still around 139 million labourers are engaged in different works in different states.¹ Among them, according to a statistical data, 11 lakh and 16 thousand migrant labourers of West Bengal are working in another state. When lock down was declared, only 2% among them are able to returning home.

Objectives of the Study: In this paper the researcher wants to know about the present condition of migrant labour at the time of lockdown. The objectives of the study are as follows-

- 1) The condition of migrant labour at the time of lockdown.
- 2) The reason behind their migration to another state.
- 3) Their nature of work.
- 4) Their sufferings due to lock down.
- 5) Govt. initiatives towards them.

Materials and method: In this paper the researcher used secondary data collection method. From various newspapers, books, articles, government publications, public records, journals the data are collected. The data can be classified into two types, namely, primary data and secondary data. Primary data or raw data is a type of information that is obtained directly from the first-hand source through experiments, surveys and observations. "Secondary data means data that are already available that is, they refer to the data which have already been collected and analysed by someone else. When the researcher utilises secondary data, then he has to look into various sources from where he can obtain them."² The secondary data includes magazines, newspapers, books, journals etc. It may be either published or unpublished data. The researcher collected data from various newspapers during covid -19. The time span of data collection is first 3-4 months of the declared pandemic.

The condition of migrant labour: When Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared the lock down due to covid-19 pandemic for the sake of country, the migrant labourers did not feel insecure as they have money in their hand. But when the lock down is extended, their owners stop payment to them and then the labours feel insecure due to having no food, no money even no shelter. They are not able to pay house rent. Then they think to return home by walking.

On the other hand, there are some migrant labours who decided to return home after two days of Prime Minister's declaration. For instance – Ranbir Singh, a delivery agent of a restaurant in Delhi's Tughlakabad decided to return home which is near 350 km from Delhi.

He walked around 200 km, but unfortunately in Agra due to starvation, fatigue, dehydration he died.³ Like Ranbir, a huge of migrant workers becomes desperate to return home. On hearing of the news that Uttar Pradesh Government will arrange special interstate bus service for them, a thousand of migrant labours assembled at Anand Vihar bus terminal in Delhi for returning home by bus.

The reason behind migration-

Migrant labours are mainly from the village areas. In case of West Bengal, the scope of work specially in the village level is not sufficient. The wage is very low. As a result, the workers must migrate to another state to earn their livelihood. The financial condition of some migrant labours is good also. They migrate to earn more money.

Nature of Work: There are different types of work of migrant labourers. Some of them are given below-

- a) Construction industry, as mason, daily labour.
- b) Delivery boy/ agent, cook in hotels, restaurants.
- c) Lace or brocade work, embroidery artist.
- d) Maid/Aya /Attendant in house.
- e) Works in the stone factory of Jaipur.
- f) Weaving industry worker.
- g) Agricultural labourer.
- h) Jewellery work.
- i) Transportation.
- j) Small scale factory or shops.
- k) Brick industry (Brick-kiln)
- l) Making of spare parts of car factory.

Discussion: On 14th April at Bandra station Bus stand in Mumbai, the migrant labours, majority of them being day-labourer, assembled and protest demanding from the government either helps them to return home or give them food, but police beat them with sticks. No solution has been achieved. To tackle the situation, Central Government introduces PM cares fund for corona virus affected people. But PM cares fund hardly helps the migrant labours.

However, in the relief camp there are around 20 lakh migrant labours. In Prime Minister Poor welfare scheme a relief package of 1.7 lakh rupees has been declared sanction for the migrant labourers, but it was not sufficient. Nobel Laureate Abhijit Binayak Bandyopadhyay suggested to give them emergency ration card or give them money. Because majority of them have ration card at their home. So, the government can give them emergency ration card for tenure of three to six months to each of them irrespective of their economic status. The labour ministry opens 20 control rooms, likely Call Centres, where the labours call or send message through WhatsApp or can send email to intimate about their problems. Naturally the whole country witnessed a parade of migrant labourers on roads and highways of India. For instance, Astab Ali Shaikh from Domkal, Murshidabad sold

shankha (a bangle of married Hindu women) in Uttar Pradesh, because he was in a remote village of Uttar Pradesh at the time of lockdown. He arranged a bicycle and managed somehow to move 700 kilometres to return home.⁴ In the long journey to home, labours depended on guides who are local people.

Like Astab Ali or Ranabir Singh, a lot of migrant labours walked miles after miles in the lockdown period from their workplace to their villages. Some of them were able to reach their destination and some could not. Migrant labourer Dayaram Kushvaha started work from Delhi with his 5 years old son, Shivam and finally reached his village in Madhya Pradesh. But all labourers are not as lucky as Dayaram. Jamlo Makdam, a migrant child labour, a poor girl from Bijapur of Chhattisgarh worked in a Chilli Garden in Kannaiguda village of Telangana. Her age is only 12 years. She walked for 3 days at a stretch on the road, sometimes in the forest to avoid police also. From Telangana to Bijapur is 150 km. She walked in scorching heat such a long distance without food and water. 14 km away from home due to dehydration, the girl felt sick and she died. Though Child labour is banned legally, still the Indian poor child worked in different sectors even outside their state. This particular incident pointed out that along with lockdown and migrant labour problem, child labour is also a burning issue in India even at present. A recent survey of Stranded Workers Action Network reveals that after five-week lockdown, 64% migrant labourers have no money, not even hundred rupees. More than 97% labourers got no monetary benefit from government. 78% labourers were paid no wages; 16% of them got half wages. Hawkers, rickshaw pullers, van pullers have no income. 50% labours have one day ration in their hands.⁵

All India Trade Unions complaints that the factory owners do not want that the migrant labour returned to their homes, because when the factory will open after the end of lock down, no workers will be there. Simultaneously, their home state is also reluctant to take them back.

Though somewhere police helped them, guide them, give them food, water; somewhere they were beaten by police. An extreme social and economic disparity is seen here. The students who are studying in Kota, Rajasthan are returned to their home by bus arranged by government. The pilgrims also returned by but no bus, no train or truck can be arranged for the countless migrant labourers. Viewing the worst situation, a number of states urged to the central government to arrange special trains for returning of the migrant labourers to their home States. Central Government proposes that the states should arrange buses and take the labourers back to their states. According to West Bengal government more than one and a half lakh migrant labourers are confined in other states and in West Bengal near about 2,30,000 labours of other states confined.

According to a source of *Nabanna* (Office of the west Bengal government) in hundred buses near about 3500 Rajasthani migrant labourers returned to their state from West Bengal. In these hundred buses the students of West Bengal came from Kota Rajasthan. Such exchanges also have done in Jharkhand and other states also. But the number of

migrant labourers is huge, so this process is not applicable for returning of thousands of labourers.

At last, after a long parade of death of migrant labourers and repeated protest of opposition parties and different trade unions, Central Government in the third phase of lockdown on 1st May decided to arrange special trains for returning of migrant labourers. On 1st May the first train, called Shramik Special train departed from Telangana to Ranchi. On 4th May 2020, a special train from Ajmer Sharif of Rajasthan and Kerala departed with more than 2500 migrant labourers and pilgrims and patients to West Bengal. Railway minister decided non-AC train will be arranged with 24 coaches. More than 1200 passengers are not allowed in the train. The state will make the passengers list to the rail. Mask is mandatory for all passengers. Before and after train journey health check-up will be done. If the total duration of journey is more than 12 hours, the railway will arrange food for passengers. Social distance will also be maintained inside the train. Most importantly, the train fare will be paid by the government of the concerned States in which the labourers will go.

Some valuable questions may arise here. In our country an Act has been passed, which is “right to food”. A survey done by Standard Workers Action Network reveals that the number of hungry people is more in comparison to government relief. That the number of migrant labours who have a limited ration increases from 36% to 50% within one to third week of lockdown, the data reveals.⁶ Government provided ration and the number of labours increases only 1% to 4%.

Different states have the different number of migrant labours. Naturally an equal mode of distribution based on a single policy has not been applicable to all the states. In this context central government should take an important role. Moreover, a solution of this problem, a scheme, ‘ek desh ek ration card’ may be implemented by the government. Supreme Court ordered in 30th April, 2020 to implement the scheme. If the scheme is running then the problem of migrant labourers might be solved.

West Bengal Government introduced ‘Prochesta Prakolpo’ for labours. Outside West Bengal, the labours may fill the form online and submit. Money will be deposited in their account. The amount of money is 1000 rupees. But due to network problem and lack of smart phone, the most of the labour cannot avail the benefit. In lockdown period, cybercafes are also closed.

On 27th March, Central government declared the labours will not go home. On 13th April government gives permission to the labours to go home only by bus. Finally on 1st May Central government decided to arrange special trains for them. The passengers of first train in West Bengal which came on 14th May 2020 include 1187 migrant labours. The government arranges a health check-up and advised home quarantine for them. The persons who have some symptoms are taken to quarantine centres.

Though the trains are arranged finally by the government, many migrant labours walk through road to reach their home. For the fear that police may ask them questions and confine them, many labours avoid roads and walking on the Railway track as they know that no trains will come in the lockdown period. India never seen such long parade of migrant labours on the roads and railway track. In this parade, we see migrant labours, their children, their mother, pregnant women, and young mother with her 7 days old baby, old age people, and handicapped boy. India became stunned and speechless at these incidents. Indian never knows that in her soil there are innumerable migrant labourers. Though there are some more incidents to wonder about.

On 8th May, 2020, a team of tired hungry migrant labours sleep on the railway track after walking 40 kilometres. They know that no train will come in the lockdown period but at 5 a.m. a goods train run over the migrant workers. 15 workers were killed by train as they slept on track. Ironically their dead bodies are taken by Rail to their home States. Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh government announce 5 lakh rupees as compensation for the families of dead migrant labours.

Gradually many Shramik special trains have been started in which the migrant labours and their family came back to their home. They complained about the mismanagement in the Shramik special trains. No food, no water has been provided by the rail. Around 80 peoples have been died in Shramik special train between 9th May to 27th May.

The death parade of migrant labours is still going on. On railway track and road many accidents take place. The poor labours are compelled to buy tickets in Shramik special trains. Sometimes they do not get the scope to avail the train. So, they are compelled to spend more money to buy bus tickets. The donated money in PM CARES fund is not spent for them in reality. But according to the Prime Minister, from PM CARES, it is said to be spent of Rs. 1000 crores for the migrant labours in all the States and centrally administered areas. Finance minister, Nirmala Sitaraman, announced free ration for them for two months and it is said that in future, the schemes like *Ek desh ek ration card*, housing scheme for migrant labours in cities on rent etc will be implemented. But considering the worst condition of migrant labours at present, some immediate steps for the upliftment of their condition has not been taken by central government.

The Economists like Abhijit Binayak Bandyopadhyay, Kaushik Basu, Raghuram Rajan, ex- governor of Reserve Bank of India, always suggests giving the migrant labourers some cash in their hands which will help them in this starving situation, but unfortunately the government (neither Central nor State) turn a deaf ear to all the suggestions. There is also a question about the fruitfulness of the initiatives taken by the govt. for the benefit of migrant labour. Meanwhile the long march of labours on roads is going on. The number of accidents on roads and death of migrant labourers are increasing. Till 17th May 115 migrant labourers died on accident in different states.

In Kerala, the State Govt. set up many camps for migrant labours and introduced a new term guest labour; not migrant labour. The camp has community kitchen from where the

labours were provided food. Besides, the Govt. gives rice, dal, potato etc. and other necessary items including mask, soaps and sanitizer. The total number of camps is 4603. Kerala Chief Minister P. Bijoyon said that as long as there is lock down, the responsibility of the migrant labourers is up to Kerala Govt. About 1 lakh 44 thousand labourers took shelter in the camps. The number of camps will be 5 thousand in future.⁷ Kerala set up an example before us that how to assist the migrant labours in such emergency period. In West Bengal quick response team has been set up which observes the condition of the people who are in home Quarantine. Local health workers, Asha-kormi and Panchayat members also look after this matter.

Another incident happened in Muzaffarpur station in Bihar. A migrant lady labour with a child coming from Ahmedabad to Bihar in Shramik Special train was tired and felt sick due to severe hot weather during the journey. Later she was found dead. The video of this incident becomes viral on social media. Too much irresponsibility and callousness on the part of the Railway and pure mismanagement is seen here.

Number of Shramik Special Trains in lockdown period-

Top five States from where maximum trains originated -

Gujarat	979
Maharashtra	695
Punjab	397
Uttar Pradesh	263
Bihar	263

Source- Business Standard.com, an article written by Shrine Jacob, “shramik special trains face heat over on-board deaths, food, water issues.”

In Supreme Court, West Bengal government gives the data that till 4 June total 8 lakh migrant labours came from another state and 3 lakh 74 thousand labours from West Bengal to back to their respective States. Central Government informed to Supreme Court that till 3rd June total 1 crore migrant labour go back to their respective State. According to Anurag Singh Thakur, the Minister of state for finance and Corporate Affairs, Central announced free ration for 8 crore migrant labour. Supreme Court finally ordered on May end that no fare of bus or train can be taken from the labours. Court gives 15 days to state and Central Government to give them back to their home state.

After coming home, the migrant labours are quarantined for 14 days in Quarantine Centres. But they did not want to go to the quarantine Centres at all. The quarantine centres are also accused by improper environment, insufficient food, poor sanitization process, irregular visit by doctor and so on. Even milk has not been given for the child who resides there. Drinking water is also not available. The local people also agitated against the decision of making quarantine centres in local schools and colleges. But government pays no attention to their demands. Some relatives of the labours also bring food for them from home. It creates anxiety in villages. The villagers also complained that the migrant labour went outside the quarantine centres during the quarantine days. So, the fear of spread of

infection increases in the villages. Study also shows that from migrant labours the spread of corona virus increases. The labours mainly are asymptomatic. They spread corona in our state according to our health ministry.

According to Health Ministry of West Bengal the numbers of migrant labourers are 45000 initially. Gradually the number increases. And finally, their number is 1 lakh approximately. The corona graph also increases in the districts. According to Health Ministry of West Bengal, in Bengal among new covid positive patients 56% are migrant labours.

However, Some State governments had a plan for the migrant labour that they can find a work in their home states. The '100 days' work' plan has been taken by the government. The irrigation works, plantation of trees, renovation of dams, roads, to dig ponds etc. includes in 100 days work plan. Central government allotted extra 40000 rupees in MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2005). They hope the migrant workers can be engaged in several activities through this. Extra 300 crore working days will be allotted and the work will continue in the rainy season also. According to the Government 80% of the migrant labourers are reluctant to go back to their workplace in other state.

The labours who come back to villages, for them Central Government started "Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhijaan". In this fifty thousand crore rupees Prakalpa among six states of India, 116 districts have been selected. 4.17 lakh family already completed their schedule quota in 100 days project. The specialist advised that in this year '200 days project' should be started by the Government to prevent disaster in rural economy.

Conclusion: The pandemic due to covid-19 pointed out the existence of migrant labours to us. They came to be identified as a human being, while earlier they are ignored by society. We never try to understand about their existence, their exact numbers and how they help our society. Covid-19 successfully arrests our attention to visualize their existence. Being the worker of unorganised sector, they have no job security. Sometimes even they have no room where they can take shelter, while rural economy partly depends on their earnings. The money which labours sent to their family in village helps not only their family, but rural economy also flourished by it. Economic stability also properly maintained in rural areas with the help of migrant labours.

1991 census showed that nearly 20 million migrant workers migrated to other states. In 2001 census the figure is doubled. 2001 census showed nearly 40 million people (41,166,265 persons) migrate from one state to another. 2011 census reveals that in all over India the number of migrant labourers is about 48.2 crore.⁸ The actual figure of labourers is not known to us. It is difficult to assume. In 2016 the figure raises to 50 crores. The figure is increasing day by day due to poverty and unemployment.

The migration of people always directs from rural area to urban area, from underdeveloped sector to a developed one. In 2020 we see the migration on totally opposite

direction, from urban to rural area. This pandemic showed us that life is more important than development. The stagnant rural economy compelled the labours to go to urban developed areas, more developed states. The migrant labours are from unorganised sector. So, there was no specific labour act for them. Moreover, no trade unions raise their voice for them. In 1970 The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition Act) has taken. The Interstate Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 is an act whose purpose is to protect workers. But in reality, the proper implementation of these acts is very rarely seen.

The pandemic makes us understand that Nature is superior to man. The migrant labours go back to their roots and ignored the allurements of urban life, though they did so out of compulsion. After the pandemic is over, they again go back to their workplace. But it is true that in trouble they took shelter in their village, in their roots. Therefore, it is expected that the governments will take requisite steps and take care of the migrant labours to smoothen the path of development and nation building.

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