Migrants’ Misery and Livelihood Mapping: The Unfinished Agenda

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Abstract
COVID 19 pandemic has triggered one of the most unbelievable surges in reverse internal migration in India. Workers in almost all the metros and large cities have suddenly decided to return to their respective villages due to loss of livelihoods as a result of country-wide lockdown. On the surface, it looks like a scenario prompted by job losses. However, the current job losses are totally unexpected, short-term and unintentional. There is no indication that the job losses are permanent. This article presents a critique the emerging political economy of phenomenal reverse internal migration in the wake of COVID 19 scare calls for an in-depth probe from a fresh perspective. One has to look at the current urge of the workers to return to their villages from economic, non-economic, behavioural and contingency standpoints.

Keywords: Reverse Internal Migration, Migrants, Livelihood, COVID 19, Odia, India

INTRODUCTION
People are continuously on the move either for life or livelihood (Mohapatra and Jha, 2019). Migration is age-old, but its manifestation has changed over the times. Usually, people migrate from one place to the other primarily due to economic reasons (Ravenstein, 1885, 1889). Lee (1966) has provided a simplified framework based on push and pull factors to explain the causes and nature of migration. However, the emerging political economy of phenomenal reverse internal migration in the wake of COVID-19 scare calls for an in-depth probe from a fresh perspective. One has to look at the current urge of the workers to return to their villages from economic, non-economic, behavioural and contingency standpoints.

Is migration a choice or compulsion or a combination of both? The complexity decides the course of actions and nature of mobility. Currently, reverse internal migration, i.e. going back to native places appears to be impulsive, generally triggered by COVID 19. The behavioural aspects of migration determine the magnitude and intensity of the causes (Mohapatra, 2014). Push-pull economic factors mostly influence micro house-hold level decisions, but the macro-level aggregate migration decision may be influenced by such unusual and unexpected happening as COVID 19.

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Push factors which give a big push to these migrants include discrimination at work-place, expensive cost of living, lack of social identity, cultural conflict and social rejection, increase in crime rate, loss of livelihood among others (Mohapatra and Jha, 2019). COVID 19 is the latest trigger. Feel good factor of going back to their native places, rural infrastructure development, MNREGA, getting married, care for the older people, final settlement etc. are a few pull factors (Mohapatra and Jha, 2019). In the wake of COVID 19, the pull factor is a sense of safety and security of native place imbued with community support camaraderie that comes from being a part of large extended families.

In the changing matrix of reverse internal migration, the influx is augmented by COVID 19 factor, and push-pull factors set the tone as a multitier for the unplanned and impulsive mobility. Combined effects of the push and pull factors during the time of COVID 19 reveals that the reverse internal migration is not a ‘choice rather a compulsion’ and hence linked to a kind of distress migration. This is, in fact, a special kind of ‘situational’ and ‘seemingly life-saving’ mobility. Thus, large numbers of daily wagers, hawkers, blue-collar workers, maids and housekeepers, security guards, auto drivers, etc. are trying to flee to their respective native places even if they have to walk for over 1000 miles as the public transport is suspended for the time being. Although this type of migration is not frequent, it is significant in terms of numbers due to the COVID 19 effect.

A CASE OF ODIA MIGRANT WORKERS

COVID 19 has devastated people’s lives as well as their livelihoods and also endangered the socio-economic foundations; affecting the health including mental stress. Lakhs of workers are found stranded and living in dilapidated conditions during the lockdown. The economic recession caused by the global pandemic COVID 19 is further resulting in distress migration that caused a threat to life and livelihood.

To study the COVID 19 effect on Odia migrant workers, the exodus can be divided into ‘During-lockdown’ and ‘Post-lockdown’. Many migrant workers from Odisha have been stranded in other states due to lockdown caused by COVID 19, mainly in Surat, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Noida, Delhi, Mumbai and Chennai.

Unlike other states, during-lockdown phase, mobility has been limited for the Odia migrants, the major causes being distance, lack of readiness and wait for the summer vacation. Further, a few people had already made up their minds, got stranded amidst the lockdown due to lack of connectivity and are the hardest sufferers. It was found that sizeable number of Odia migrants entered into Odisha through West Bengal border without being noticed, adding to the concerns of the government. Recent news of 38 Odia migrants reaching Odisha from Chennai through a boat further aggravates the situation. The spread of corona through these returnees has created the horror. While awaiting the decision on revoking the lockdown, lakhs of people are in the offing to comeback to Odisha.

Extended lockdown triggered the intensity of mobility which is very impulsive and driven by hardships. This movement is a mix of impulse, fear of death and loss of livelihood. At this juncture, migrants prefer life strategy to livelihood strategy. Many migrant workers left their places of work and started walking hundreds of miles towards their native places, are the hardest sufferers.
In the post-lockdown exodus includes two groups of migrants, the first group which includes the stranded labourers with higher compulsion factor for mobility and second group of those who have decided to come but not stranded, influenced by choice factors. These groups look for the right time to get back to their native places. Post-lockdown migration will be caused by SAD factors of Stress and Displacement (SAD) and may be triggered by culture and seasonal factors, which include summer vacation, Raja Parba, and marriage seasons. Seasonal migrants look forward to agriculture work in the advent of the monsoon period. Amidst uncertainty, disillusion and bewilderment, it is not possible to predict the movement due to the pandemic.

LABOUR PARADOX -THE TWIN DISEQUILIBRIUM

COVID 19 is not confined to a health crisis which is the only visible part of the iceberg but has already caused a major jolt to the labour market and paved the way for the economic slowdown. In turn, it has begun exasperating inequality and widespread poverty. The hardest sufferers are workers, mostly semi-skilled and unskilled labourers. Critically the class struggle has taken a different shape of mass struggle due to COVID 19. Further, the bigger challenge is encompassing the workers’ life due to technological advancement, resulting in automation and robotics, causing widespread job losses.

A peculiar form of disequilibrium is going to occur amidst COVID 19, which will affect workers' life and industry output. Labour-intensive industries will face a situation of 'shortage of labour’ in the labour market and have to operate at less than their capacities due to the scarcity of labour. Similarly, in rural areas, labour supply will exceed labour demand, leading to a situation of ‘excess supply of labour’ which will worsen the misery. This will cause a twin disequilibrium paradox that will affect income, output and employment, and may not be corrected anytime soon.

INITIATIVES AND INTERVENTIONS

Currently, the government of Odisha is evaluating and monitoring migrants' situation with inter-state coordination ensuring their safety and providing food for the stranded. In order to assist and support, 24X7 helplines are being created under dedicated teams, supervised by nodal officers. Recently a web portal to keep records of migrants with mandatory registration has been launched. Odisha government is taking multiple initiatives to reduce the discontent among the stranded and arrest the spread of the disease simultaneously. Government has delegated powers to the Sarpanch to deal with local situations. The data collected and recorded by Sarpanch is used for crafting strategies to fight COVID 19 spread through migrants. Additionally, hospitals, doctors and support staffs are ready to deal with lockdown and post-lockdown issues, including mental health and support.

The state government is also working proactively on policies to mitigate concerns of travel, health, accommodation, rehabilitation and economic engagement of the migrants. To address and overcome migrants' issues, people's participation and migrants' cooperation is essential (Mohapatra, 2015). Active participation of people and robust processes of capturing data on migrants, their health check-up and follow-up, is utmost essential to stop the spread of disease in the community. A vital role is envisaged for the local and national media to communicate information about these migrants and their mobility pattern. A large number of NGOs and volunteers are working within and outside the state in helping the Odia migrants. At this stage, thinking only about the workers’ rights and their employability is not enough and will be a short-run arrangement. It actually requires a sustainable eco-system to deal with such a situation.
With a significant focus on livelihood enhancements through MNREGA, agriculture, dairy farming, fisheries and poultry, and horticulture, it can be hoped that a broad-based policy shall cater to the new-found issues of reverse migration to support the deprived sections of the society. Role of agriculture is of tremendous importance in creating employment opportunities for these returnees and the success of agriculture depends upon micro-credit availability at the grass root level (Jha and Mohapatra, 2020). Moreover, the government also needs to strengthen the farm sector so that the villages can sustain such a huge influx of migrant workers (Jha, Mohapatra and Lodha, 2019).

Government of India has announced a relief package of Rs. 1.7 lakh crores recently and extended a bouquet of provisions including, Rs. 1000 in two instalments for poor senior citizens and widows and raised the daily wage of MGNREGA workers from Rs. 182 to Rs. 202 to name a few. Apart from this, many steps have been taken by the state governments at their level for hapless people, which include food and financial support to the poor and migrants. During this prolonged crisis, the government should address the health and livelihood issues of the migrant workers and support them proactively. Democracy will lose its shine if the deprived and affected masses are not able to get their livelihood during this crisis.

This paper includes the impact of corona on migrant workers and on the economy till April 2020, however new issues and insights will crop up over the time till corona persists and will surely carve a scare mark in the millennium history.

REFERENCES