COVID 19 Scare and Plight of Indian Migrant Workers: 
Decoding the Impact of Nationwide Lockdown

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ABSTRACT
This article looks at the plight of migrant workers who were put into a tight spot in the aftermath of the sudden announcement of nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of COVID 19. Lockdown-induced closure of micro, small and medium enterprises resulted in joblessness at a scale which was difficult to fathom. Besides, there were vast numbers of daily wagers, hawkers, vegetable and fruit vendors, street food vendors, plumbers, electricians, maidservants, etc. who had no work and hence no money to fend for themselves and their families. As such, for a large number of Indian workers in unorganised sectors, no work actually means 'no money'. Thus, sudden loss of livelihoods triggered a panic button, and the most impulsive reaction was a mad rush to return to their respective native places. However, homeward journeys were even more distressing. The article provides insights into the root cause of the distress of the migrant workers and a framework for tackling the issue in short and the long run.

Keywords: Migrant Workers, Lockdown, Joblessness, Income Insecurity, COVID 19, India

INTRODUCTION
The fright of COVID 19 triggered a nationwide lockdown since 24 March 2020. The lockdown indeed succeeded in arresting the growth rate of the spread COVID 19 to a great extent. However, the almost sudden announcement of the nationwide lockdown unleashed unprecedented predicament for the migrant workers. Lockdown-induced closure of micro, small and medium enterprises resulted in joblessness at a scale which was difficult to fathom. Besides, there were vast numbers of daily wagers, hawkers, vegetable and fruit vendors, street food vendors, plumbers, electricians, maidservants, etc. who had no work and hence no money to fend for themselves and their families. As such, for a large number of Indian workers in unorganised sectors, no work actually means no money. Thus, sudden loss of livelihoods triggered a panic button, and the most impulsive reaction was a mad rush to return to their respective native places.

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Even the governments at the centre or various states were not ready to tackle the unparalleled rush of the migrant workers who wanted to return to their respective villages anyhow. As the trains and interstate busses were closed, many of them chose to proceed towards their homes on foot or their bicycles, cycle-rickshaw or carts. Highways all over the country thus became a theatre of thousands of unpleasant stories of disgruntled workers being hungry, injured, hurt, beaten up by cops, diseased, and above all, emotionally sapped. Many of the workers were seen moving on the highways with their baggage on their head and kids on their arms. Besides, pregnant women and children were also walking with the same determined pace as their distraught parents so that they can reach the safety of their homes in their respective villages. Such a disdainful spectacle on the highways raised questions on the sensitivity of the central government as well as the state governments towards the plight of workers who were left in the lurch by the sudden announcement of nationwide lockdown which caught them unawares amid uncertainty, hopelessness, unemployment, and scare of morbidity and eventual death if they got infected by COVID-19.

ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS
The problem of migrant workers may not be unique to India, but the sheer scale – there are more than 40 million migrant labourers across the country – makes it difficult to provide relief to everyone (Pandey, 2020). Nonetheless, the opposition parties were quick to react to the distressful plight of the Indian migrant workers all over the country. The visuals of the migrant workers’ movement in the most disgraceful manner, running on electronic media augmented public anger against the state authorities. The incidents have shone a spotlight on the plight of millions of poor Indians who migrate from villages to cities in search of livelihood – and how the lockdown has left them stranded far away from home, with no jobs or money (Pandey, 2020). Further, it has been observed that the announcement of nationwide lockdown was made without an adequate plan to deal with the problems of the migrant workers as the sudden lockdown created immense panic and confusion as factories, small industries and construction sites closed (The Economic Times, 2020).

Quoting an opposition leader, The Economic Times (2020) mentioned: 'Unpreparedness has become the byword of this government. And this Unpreparedness may have unintentionally led to a humongous risk of Covid-19. At least one to one and a half crore people are left out on the streets. Have you, the PM, completely forgotten (before announcing the lockdown) that these sections of people do exist in our country? What is the point of sermonising to such people who are bereft of shelter, food and medicine? Shouldn't we have prepared for this contingency as it was nothing that could not have been foreseen?’ Furthermore, there is much substance in the claim of the opposition that the government of India did little homework before announcing the nationwide lockdown with an absolute curb on almost all business activities and mobility within the country, seemingly unmindful of the hardships such closure was likely to bring to the poor people at the receiving end.

Indeed, the mass movement surprised the state authorities as clearly, no policymaker had planned for such a reaction, and no detailed contingency plans seemed to be in place (Chatterjee, 2020). In a huff, the officials issued frantic orders to seal inter-state borders and for people to maintain social distancing so that the virus could not spread. Such administrative orders further complicated the matter for the poor workers who now had to fight the law-enforcing cops alongside hunger and fatigue. Several incidents of the scuffle between the migrant workers and the cops were reported from different parts of the country during initial phases of the nationwide lockdown.
It is true that the Prime Minister of India apologised for the miseries faced by the fuddled migrant workers due to nationwide lockdown. However, the apology did not bring in any relief to the workers who somehow wanted to reach their homes amidst no support from the state authorities. In some of the facilities created by the state governments to accommodate the migrant workers, the arrangements were far from adequate and satisfactory. Whether living in shelters, sleeping on footpaths or under flyovers, the migrants are restless and are waiting for restrictions to be eased so they can go home. The mismanagement of the migrant crisis and the treatment of its poorest citizens during the pandemic could be India’s shame (Pandey, 2020). Hence, Prime Minister’s ‘apology’ should be for lack of planning, zero preparation, no relief measures for the poor, no warning and continuing waste of public money on expensive projects like Central Vista, anything short of that is a deflection from guilty and shirking blame (The Economic Times, 2020).

A lockdown, however necessary, was always going to be unbearably difficult for those without a social and economic cushion (Chatterjee, 2020). Apart from the suddenness of announcement regarding nationwide lockdown and lack of preparedness to tackle unforeseen exodus of the migrant workers from metros and larger cities, the state authorities were not able to reach out to them due to lack of centralised data. Unfortunately, India has no central registry of migrant workers despite passing legislation 40 years ago to establish such a database (Srivastava and Nagaraj, 2020). According to an International Labour Organisation assessment, 40 crore informal sector workers in India could be pushed deeper into poverty due to this lockdown (Press Trust of India, 2020). However, due to lack of credible database on migrant workers, it is undoubtedly a daunting task to make appropriate policy interventions.

THE WAY FORWARD
Migrant workers never seem to be much of a consideration for politicians, and despite their numbers; they have no political clout (Chatterjee, 2020). Besides, migrant workers rarely have access to welfare measures for people below the poverty line (Chatterjee, 2020). Surprisingly, in a survey conducted by Jan Sahas, it was found that 62 per cent of workers did not have any information about emergency welfare measures provided by the government and 37 per cent did not know how to access the existing schemes (Chatterjee, 2020). Hence, the migrant workers were not assured when the government announced free ration or direct benefit transfer. As a result, they continued on their impulsive journeys back home.

Apart from protecting the villages from the rapid spread of COVID 19 due to the large influx of migrant workers, another major challenge for the state authorities is to ensure their rehabilitation in terms livelihood and income security. The migrant workers left their villages earlier due to shrinking employment opportunities. Suddenly, the villages have vast numbers of people who would require jobs to sustain themselves. Already distressed farm sector cannot accommodate such an enormous rural population. Hence the government needs to spend not only on revitalising the farm sector through appropriate policy interventions (Jha, Mohapatra and Lodha, 2019) but also focus on rural infrastructure development in a big way.

Currently, India is reeling under an unusual situation. No one knows precisely when the COVID 19 scare will be over. It is unlikely that the majority of workers will return to cities and towns anytime soon to reclaim their jobs. Hence, the government needs to work hard to empower the villages in the manner that every family has adequate and sustained income over time. While the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee can be used as a quick fix, it cannot be a lasting
solution to a typically high incidence of rural unemployment and income insecurity. Holistic development of rural India may be an appropriate response to combat the emerging scenario in the wake of COVID 19. There are considerable opportunities in the overall rural development. Most of the villages in India lack basic amenities like electricity, healthcare centre, school buildings, roads, cold storage, granaries, etc. A unified focus on providing basic amenities can create new job opportunities.

Modernising the villages as well as developing aspirational villages can also reduce large population influx from villages to the megacities and towns. If the villages offer decent healthcare and educational facilities, people may prefer to stay back. Further, industries should be incentivised to start or relocate their factories and offices close to the villages so that they have a readily available workforce. Rural India needs an image makeover on the ground. COVID 19 has presented an opportunity to reinvent Indian villages on the lines of counties of the European nations. However, this is possible only if the local communities own up the responsibility of rebuilding their villages in all earnestness.

REFERENCES


