

MIGRANT LABOUR: DISCRIMINATORY ATTITUDE OVER ECONOMIC CRISIS DURING FIRST WAVE OF PANDEMIC IN INDIA

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Abstract

Covid-19 dismantled the socio-economic fabric of countries worldwide. With its emergence, the global health infrastructure suffered breakdown, education got affected and social life underwent massive disruptions. To contain its spread, governments announced lockdowns and recommended social distancing. It produced two effects, virus containment and poorer quality of life for the impoverished. The Government of India was no exception and imposed the strictest lockdown in the country to curb this menace. However, the lockdown policy was a massive failure leading to community spread of Covid-19 and multidimensional distress for migrant labourers, who made desperate attempts to return to their native places and in doing so, encountered conflicts with the public authorities. The nation state also failed to release appropriate guidelines for state and local governments to provide adequate provisions for sustaining the life of the poor in a timely and systematic manner. At worse, the Indian society is characterised by stigmatisation on the basis of gender, class, caste and other demographic parameters. With lockdowns, social stigma became widespread. This study aims to unveil the societal stigma against migrant labourers during the first wave of the pandemic in 2020 and examines the public policies in this context. It heavily relies on secondary sources, online and print newspapers for obtaining relevant data.

Keywords : Coronavirus, Pandemic, Lockdown, Migrant labour, Stigma, Discriminatory Attitude, Labour Laws, Public Policy.

“Migrant labourers returning to their homes from cities were forced by the administration in Bareilly to take an open bath in groups with disinfectant before they were allowed entry into the district.”

THE HINDU, 30th March, 2020

Introduction

Coronavirus is considered to be the biggest tragedy of the 21st century. First detected in China, it swiftly spread to American and European countries, which represent the developed world. However, in no time, it made its way into the Indian soil and the country witnessed many a heartless instance across states and districts, which has been perfectly captured by The Hindu. Besides affecting physical health, Covid-19 caused economic downturns, social disturbance, educational setback and massive havoc in the political arena in most countries. The medical and administrative system also experienced a bottleneck. In view of unprecedented spread, governments compelled people to stay indoors, which is undoubtedly the best preventive measure for the pandemic. Following developed nations, third-world countries including India also undertook this policy. However, such nations, unlike the USA and Europe, have a

significant number of poor people residing away from their native place for earnings. In the light of Covid-19, they were compelled to return to their abodes at any cost. During their return journey, they were subject to ill-treatment by various public officials and other residents. On account of social stigma, they endured more pain from such inhabitants than the virus. Resultant, they experienced hunger, lack of shelter and other fundamental amenities. For some, both coronavirus and impoverishment made dual attacks. Even as the virus killed many lives mercilessly, discrimination and ill-treatment offered a death-like experience to the migrant labour force in India.

About the disease

Coronavirus is highly contagious and spreads quickly when a person breathes in open air. Fever, cough, headache, loss of odour and taste are some of its symptoms. About one-third of infected people have been found to be asymptomatic. While the virus causes severe health problems for some in the form of respiration difficulty and multi-organ failure leading to death, others experience mild issues and hence, are probable of regaining life. Several investigations by medical experts have revealed that some patients need to undertake long-term treatment after being infected with Covid-19. On the contrary, few others develop critical problems in their organ system. Taking these into account, doctors recommend physical distancing, masking and hand sanitisation for preventing this virus. In the event of being affected by it, quarantine and follow-up treatment are expected to weaken the spread of Covid-19. [1]

Pandemics in the past

Coronavirus is definitely not the first pandemic to strike the world. According to reports by renowned medical organisations including WHO (World Health Organisation), the

20th century witnessed three influenza pandemics starting with Spanish Flu in 1918-19 followed by Asian Flu and Hong-Kong Flu, which occurred in 1957-58 and 1968 respectively. While Spanish Flu claimed around 20-50 million lives, about 1-4 million citizens succumbed to the Hong Kong Flu. Of the three, Spanish Flu was the deadliest affecting about one-third population of the world. Conversely, the Asian Flu and the Hong Kong Flu lasted only for 2 months and mortality rate was quite low. These indicate that the Spanish Flu virus underwent continuous mutation leading to uncontrollable spread similar to Covid-19. [2]

At the onset of the current pandemic, medical researchers extensively worked on feasible solutions to overcome it. In the first stage, they realised that Covid-19 virus was extremely powerful and hence, was capable of spreading rapidly infecting people in large numbers. This challenged the current doctrines of medical science subsequently, promoting fear among the public. In such a circumstance, some researchers considered the Spanish Flu epidemic as an archetype for tackling Covid-19. They subsequently reviewed various reports on this disease and came into the conclusion that appropriate hygiene is more important than medical treatments for containing the virus. Newspaper articles of this period also suggested that isolating infected people, banning social gatherings and face masking were effective in breaking the chain of Spanish Flu around the world. [3]

Besides this disease, India has faced numerous pandemic-like situations owing to Cholera, Small Pox, Chicken Pox and Malaria. Each experience herein has been testament to the fact that unhygienic environment is responsible for increasing the spread of disease and isolation is the most effective treatment. Strict isolation has also been proven to be useful in various other instances. Additionally,

development of vaccines and extensive vaccination programmes weaken the power of viruses in the longer run.

Towards Lockdown

On 31st December, 2019, the Wuhan Government in China identified a new virus and was unaware about the potential of its spread through humans. Similar instance was reported outside China after 20th January, 2020. In view of this, the Chinese government shut down the city to prevent further spread. On 30th January, 2020, WHO declared a global health emergency. The USA reported its first outbreak in the same month following which, its administration imposed travel restrictions to and from China. Europe encountered its first outbreak in February causing its administrators to prohibit social gatherings. By the middle of March, almost every country in the world banned international travel along with local gatherings.

Lockdown in India

In an attempt to prevent coronavirus, the Government of India announced a 21-day lockdown on 24th March, 2020. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister, stated that since medical facilities and treatment were insufficient to break the virus chain, social distancing was the last resort.[4] About 519 cases and 9 deaths were reported during lockdown. People could only access essential products and services such as groceries and medical assistance and non-essential commodities were unavailable in the market. According to some epidemiologists, this lockdown saved tens of thousands of lives besides allowing the government to strengthen the healthcare infrastructure of India. On the contrary, migrant labourers were worst hit. With a majority of people belonging to the informal sector, job losses became a common phenomenon with no assurance about resumption of employment prospects in the future. Suspension of public transport promoted

hardships for the migrants putting them in a dilemma about returning to their native places amidst the pandemic. Such a situation compelled millions of labourers to walk home. While some of them succeeded, others lost their lives due to accidents, hunger and exhaustion in course of the tiresome journey.

Methodology

This article is based on a critical review of various news reports and surveys on Covid-19 in India, its lockdown policy and the migrant conditions. Drawing on key editorials, published articles and videos, the researcher has analysed the miserable experiences of the migrant population of this country during the first wave of the pandemic.

Theoretical Explanation

Covid-19 pandemic has undoubtedly changed social life by significant limits. Prior to this, Indian migrant labourers suffered economic deprivation. However, with its advent, they became increasingly susceptible to inhuman treatment by other people. Such discriminatory behaviour can be examined from the context of sociology.

Erving Goffman has propounded the theory of social stigma. The scholar defines stigma as an attribute, behaviour or reputation that is attached to an individual distinguishing him/her from the mainstream society. This subsequently causes others to mentally classify them as undesirable leading to rejection rather than acceptance (Goffman, 1963). Consistent with this theory, the majority segment of Indian population developed stereotypical thoughts and perception about the migrants and thereafter, considered them to be unfit for entering into the society during the first wave of Covid-19.

The second significant theory has been proposed by H.S. Becker. According to his theory of labelling, people have a general

tendency to attach labels to others with respect to specific qualities or behaviour, which simplifies their understanding of the surrounding social world. People who are labelled are considered to be deviant within the established social framework. Such an act further promotes stereotyping wherein they become soft targets for others and are highly vulnerable to negative psychological and emotional reactions of the society (Becker, 1963).

Another important theory in sociology emerges from the philosophy of Karl Marx. He argued that global societies consist of two classes of people, the capitalists and the proletariats. In the system of capitalism, capitalists control all means of production and labourers are proletariats, who earn a living by working for the capitalists. This mode of production also accounts for private ownership and surplus value. By producing goods and services, capitalists aim to maximise profits and invest in marketing for promoting their commodities. In India, capitalism has bred oppression by overexploiting the labourers, who are predominantly migrants staying away from their native place and earn a minimal wage. On the other hand, capitalists have increased their income through exploitation of surplus value. Altogether, these have led to inequality on the basis of wealth, power and social status. Due to this, migrants, who are already socially and economically deprived, have failed to emancipate themselves from the vicious cycle of poverty as continue to be susceptible to hunger, disease and illiteracy (Encyclopedia of Marxism at marxism.org, Capitalism, 2011).

Who are Migrant Labourers?

A migrant labour can be defined as one who moves within or outside the home country for higher earnings. They take temporary residence near their workplace and have no intention for permanent settlement. The 2011

Census reports that India has about 450 million internal migrants representing 37.7% of the total population. Based on trends, the number of internal migrants was estimated to be around 600 million in 2020 with 140 million being migrant workers.[5] This workforce has played a significant role in nation building. Globalisation in the 1990s created demand for labour especially unskilled workers. While some of them belong to rural areas, others are urban dwellers. Nonetheless, they are economically poor and illiterate following which; they have been compelled to engage in the unorganised sector characterised by contractual and irregular work since childhood. Hence, they leave their homes and reside near their working sites for earning their livelihood.

Over the years, various sociologists have tried to reason why people migrate for earnings. M.S.A. Rao has discovered two factors, historical development of a country and the economic and political conditions regulating the nature and state of employment prospects that collectively compel people to migrate from their place to origin for increasing their income. While this represents the societal viewpoint, the individual perspective mentions that personality of the migrants affects their socialisation process. From these it can be ascertained that while economic factors are necessary conditions for migration, they are not sufficient causes. Rather, the individual motivation to move, accessibility to information flow and presence of resource networks create adequate conditions for encouraging migration. (Rao, 1986)

Discriminatory Attitude

In India, lockdown during the first pandemic wave produced more negative consequences than positive. Prevalence of stereotypes promoted discriminatory attitude against infected people, healthcare professionals, police, religious minorities and migrant

labourers. A noteworthy observation herein is that white-collar professionals and students returning home from foreign countries and other states within the country were not regarded as migrants. This terminology was only applicable for those belonging to the lowest socio-economic strata.

The country was neither prepared nor aware about the potential effects of lockdown. In the first stage, migrant workers became jobless and subsequently, lacked shelter as their employment contract did not offer any form of security. Furthermore, economic shutdown also ceased the need for labour and their landlords were also unwilling to keep them. Resultant, they were left with no option but returning to their native place. Discrimination started herein when both central and state governments became ignorant about their issues. On the contrary, they made adequate arrangements for ensuring safe return of Indian students, professionals and tourists, who were stranded in foreign countries. Owing to the lack of state support, most of the migrants started walking. News channels perfectly portrayed their miseries. For instance, one video showed exhausted migrants walking with children and other belongings throughout the day under strong sunlight without any food. [6]

Since the commencement of lockdown, many labourers also lost their lives while walking and cycling for a prolonged duration. Some even travelled in commercial vehicles like trucks and were subject to harassment by public officials for breaking lockdown rules. Driver's fatigue was also another factor in maximising inconvenience for all labourers. In another instance, few migrant workers were crushed under a train as they slept on tracks. [7] Amidst such heatless incidents, none came forward with food, water and other necessary provisions for sustaining the life of the poor migrant workforce in India.

In order to prevent virus spread, local administrative bodies sealed state borders. As exhausted migrants reached their respective states, they were denied entry and experienced manifold hurdles for being with their family. People in the mainstream society also labelled them as "virus spreaders", further aggravating their woes. For instance, they underwent brutal torture and social exclusion for not wearing masks and moving in groups while reaching home. Thus, their "migrant" identity became a key discriminating factor during the first pandemic wave. [8] This together with their social identity led to stigmatisation in the mainstream society. In view of these, local administration in every state arranged for mass sanitisation before allowing them to enter. As evident from several videos in social media, groups of migrants including women and children assembled at a place and a public official, wearing personal protection equipment (PPE) sprayed a solution of chlorine and water or sodium hypochlorite through hose pipe. Such chemicals are only suitable for cleansing surfaces and are harmful for the human body. Hence, the authorities were questioned about the rationality of their actions. They however defended it citing public safety and unawareness about the side-effects of the chemical. They even added that migrants were asked to close their eyes while being sanitised. Taking cognisance of the discriminatory attitude towards such people, Justice Ashok Bhushan ordered the central and state governments to make immediate arrangements for providing free food, shelter and transportation to them. [9] Subsequently, the Government of India, towards the end of April, announced guidelines for transporting the internal migrants safely to their homes. Accordingly, they provided interstate bus service besides offering free-of-cost meals and shelter particularly, to asymptomatic individuals. Those who develop

Covid-19 symptoms or any other form of illness were able to access medical services. On International Labour Day, the Government of India announced Shramik Special trains for transporting migrants. Within one month, about one crore workers travelled through such trains. However, their experience herein was certainly not devoid of miseries. Firstly, railway transportation was not free requiring them to pay about 800-1000 INR along with additional charges, 30 INR for superfast speed and 20 INR for other services such as food and water; neither of which were provided. [10] Secondly, social distancing was not maintained. Instead, trains were running in overcapacity causing the migrants to fight for reasonable space in the event of which, some even encountered death. However, the Railway Board attributed the fatalities to illness. Distress continued even after they reached their native place as they lacked access to food and was left penniless. In view of this, both central and state governments strengthened their Public Distribution System (PDS) for distributing free food grains through ration. [11] Migrants, who did not possess a ration card, were again deprived of the basic necessities. Lack of employment prospects and hunger caused some of them to sell fruits, vegetables and similar commodities for sustaining their families. Furthermore, if anyone unconsciously violated the lockdown norms, were subject to massive harassment and ill-treatment by public officials, who also prohibited them from selling their items. [12] At the end, coronavirus affected everyone in migrant communities, which further deepened their crisis leading to more impoverishment and discrimination. In a country where bureaucrats hold maximum power, such migrants were deprived of minimum support besides being victimised and blamed for promoting chaos in the mainstream society during the first wave of the pandemic.

Human Rights and Indian Constitution

Every country in the world has developed a set of rules to deliver justice to the poor. The Indian Constitution also lays out certain provisions for preserving the human rights of its citizens including migrant labourers.

1. Article 14 states that everyone is equal before the law
2. Article 15 prohibits the state from discriminating against any citizen on the basis of gender, religion, caste, sex or place of birth
3. Article 16 confers to the right to equal employment opportunities under the state
4. Article 21 guarantees the right to life and personal liberty
5. Article 38(1) requires the state to ensure social order for promoting public welfare and wellbeing

In addition to the above constitutional laws, the Government of India has enacted the Inter-State Migrant Workers Act (ISMW) in 1979 and amended it in 2017 for improving their work conditions and enhancing their quality of life. As per the amended act, the ISMW Regulation of Employment & Conditions of Services) Central (Amendment) Rules, labour contractors must secure a license and register the migrant workers with government authorities by providing them with a passbook. Besides this, the Payment of Wages Act, 1936 and the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act, 2008 also seek to protect the interests and uphold the human rights of the migrant labourers. [13]

Conclusion

Nature never discriminates humans unlike societies and Covid-19 promoted the degree of discrimination against migrant labourers, whose sincere efforts constitute the backbone of the Indian economy. Regardless of this,

governments and the public augmented their distress through victimisation, harassment and stigmatisation altogether, leading to a moral crisis in addition to the health emergency. In fact, the pandemic has exposed the negative fallouts of power hierarchies of a bureaucratic society like India.

This article highlighted discriminatory attitude belonging to a particular social class. It is important to note that discriminatory attitude

reduces health, help and treatment-seeking behaviour and needs to be mitigated, apart from the focus on COVID-19 treatment and prevention. Global Health communication plays an important role in the construction of diseases, their social perception, and resulting psychological issues. Thus, the government, media and local administrative bodies, as well as hospitals, ought to mitigate discriminatory attitude through a multipronged approach.

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