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RESEARCH ARTICLE

A COMPREHENSIVE ANALYSIS OF LABOUR MIGRANTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

It has been extensively shown that the COVID-19 pandemic and its related practices of confinement or lock-down may be influencing the persistence of social, economic, and gender disparities. Migrants, especially the millions of labor migrants in Indian cities, have been placed in a particularly vulnerable situation as a consequence of the type of actions that governments enacted in response to the health crisis. This paper discusses a comparative and historical perspective on the circumstances of migrant workers, arguing that the disadvantages they experience are deeply embedded in economic and social structures and have simply come to attention as the consequence of the pandemic. In addition to providing immediate social protection, policies must address the structural issues that keep migrant workers vulnerable.

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INTRODUCTION

Inequalities are likely being reinforced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the accompanying practices of confinement or lock-down that have been extensively established. The better off are better able to protect themselves, either through staying confident in their work or by having the means to maintain themselves during a downturn, which reinforces economic inequities. Women frequently work in sectors that are more hazardous and bring them more health risks, which reinforces gender disparities. Socio-economic inequality usually interacts with social and identity (race, caste, and nationality) disparities. Migratory people have been placed into particularly vulnerable situations as a consequence of the policies governments all over the world adopted in response to the health crisis. Refugees are among the most at risk worldwide, and their living situations make it difficult to contain the virus while also increasing the possibility of discrimination. Similar to other migrants, labour migrants frequently have poor living and working conditions, are exposed to health risks at work, lack access to social security or insurance, and are frequently stigmatized. When the government imposed a lockdown, labour migrants in big cities were left without a job, sometimes without a place to live, and in many cases without a source of income. As a result, they had no choice but to leave for their home villages. This is when the vulnerability of labour migrants was exposed in extreme ways. Their suffering has been well represented in the media by civil society organizations performing in the roles that governments should be filling as well as by the efforts of research groups. The article presents a comparative analysis of migrant labourers working conditions. We will provide an overview of worldwide experience that has been recorded through investigative journalism and quick research and demonstrate the vulnerability of migrants and global policy gaps. Furthermore, it's critical to recognize that the circumstances in which migrants live in India are not recent and are the result of a structural condition of continuous migration between their home villages, which are unable to supply the necessary means of subsistence, and cities, which require them but do not provide them with the means of settling down. We called them, somewhat awkwardly, "unsettled settlers" in the publication on migrant workers in Calcutta (de Haan 1994). This paper demonstrates it by making comparisons to earlier crises, such as the one that

followed 1929, during which migrant labour vanished like "snow for the sun" (but without the negative health effects those migrants presently are experiencing). According to de Haan (1999), research, theories, and policies have a strong sedentary bias and have a profound tendency to deny and neglect the existence of this moving population. Academic studies have maintained that migration is a transitory phenomenon, frequently comparing it to what is thought of as a traditional industrialization phase that England experienced. Migration has mainly remained hidden from the view of policymakers due to inadequate data collection on circulatory migration, the tendency of many public policies to be residence-based, and frequent attempts to limit migration through rural development policies. This viewpoint is being offered to help with policy consideration, especially post-pandemic. If systemic neglect of migrants is genuinely a problem, the causes must be addressed in any policy changes. To ensure data fully address the complex but persistent patterns of movement that exist and to determine how public policies can be constructed in light of that reality, it would be necessary to reconsider the role that migrants play in India's society.

Objectives of the Study: The main objective of this study is to discuss the labour migrants during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The paper is divided into three major objectives.

- To review the inequalities magnified from an international perspective.
- To explore mobility neglected a historical perspective.
- To evaluate the inclusive policies during the Covid-19 pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

The information required for the paper in this research study was gathered from secondary sources. Several sources have been used, including articles, books, reports, websites, and research journals. The study concerns were examined using both descriptive and analytical methods.

Inequalities Magnified: A Global Perspective: There was an initial perception of the COVID-19 virus as an 'equalizer' when the pandemic started to emerge. It started in Wuhan, China, and then spread throughout the world, heavily affecting relatively wealthy areas in Europe and the USA. While the virus continued to spread globally, including in India, unprecedented policy responses were implemented that kept the spread of the virus under control in the majority of the countries. However, thoughts of the virus becoming the 'great equalizer', as the New York Governor Cuomo, for example, called it, are fast vanishing. Regardless of age, some individuals of racial and ethnic minority groups in the USA are more likely to contract COVID-19 or suffer from severe illness as a result of long-standing systemic health and socioeconomic disparities (CDC 2020). According to Public Health Ontario 2020, "social determinants of health" like gender, socioeconomic status, race/ethnicity, occupation, Indignity, unemployment, and confinement play an important role in the risk of COVID-19 infection, particularly when they limit the ability to maintain physical distancing."

Despite making up only 52% of the population in Toronto, racialized people accounted for 83 percent of COVID-19 cases. Geographically, the pandemic began in urban areas with good transportation, but it is currently spreading to more remote regions, especially in developing nations, where the health sector is underdeveloped and there may be higher insufficient reporting rates. Inequalities and the effects of COVID-19 are correlated in both directions (Sachs 2020). Higher inequality is typically linked to poor overall health, which makes people more susceptible to COVID-19 death rates. Political polarization decreased social cohesiveness and trust, and inequality can all make it more difficult for governments to take the necessary action to stop the pandemic. The vulnerability of many workers is increased by social identity-related inequalities in the workplace, as addressed by Deshpande and Ramachandran (2020) for India. Manual labourers and small business owners sometimes have limited social security and are more likely to lose their jobs or working hours, which will reduce their income. Women and those employed in the informal sector are disproportionately susceptible (WIEGO 2020). On the front-line health workers, domestic workers, employees in the food industry, vendors, and those working in tourism are among those who must continue working despite being exposed to infections (Global Voices 2020; Dempster and Zimmer 2020); social and gender disadvantages typically exacerbate labour market ones.

During the pandemic, labour migrants experience a wide range of disadvantages, which could ultimately help the pandemic spread. Even while the initial COVID-19 outbreak did not largely affect labour migrants, the movement necessary for their subsistence can still constitute a risk for the transmission of infectious diseases. Many people became trapped as a consequence of the limitations governments all over the world imposed, which caused travel and commercial activity to stop. In many situations, the limits have increased hazards, especially for vulnerable groups like children (UNICEF 2020). Smugglers have illegally mistreated people, according to reports (Rodriguez, 2020). Jobs lost due to the pandemic in China exacerbated already-present inequities in the system for household registration (Che et al. 2020). Furthermore, because of the type of labour that most migrants perform and the surroundings in which they live, they are comparatively vulnerable. Health services are frequently underdeveloped when migrants return home. Implementing social isolation is more difficult for them when there are no social safety mechanisms in place. As stated by Choudhari (2020), issues with mental health may exacerbate these disadvantages. Investigative reporting reveals that migrant farm labourers in Canada's agricultural industry are exposed to and unprotected from the pandemic's effects, and Doyle (2020) suggests that access to healthcare may be hampered by migrant status. In addition, the pandemic may intensify surveillance (Castillo 2020), discrimination in native communities, and fear of disease carriers when migrants return. There are reports of new or intensified discriminatory treatment in countries all over the world, such as non-payment for domestic workers who continued working (Global Voices 2020) and xenophobia (Douglas et al. 2020; IOM 2020b) in contexts as diverse as the Gulf States (Migrants-rights.org 2020), Canada (Hennebry et al. 2020), India (Ramasubramanyam 2020; Bajoria 2020), toward African students in china (BBC 2020).

Labour Migrants in India: The extreme manifestations of the vulnerability of labor migrants were seen in India, where the negative effects of identity, employment, and migration status reinforced one another. Researchers like the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN 2020a, b, c) and civil society organizations have provided excellent descriptions of their conditions in the media. When the government declared the lockdown, labour migrants in urban areas suddenly found themselves without a job, occasionally a place to live, and frequently even a source of money. Many of them were left with little choice but to travel back to their hometowns on foot, frequently in the middle of hunger, infection risks, harassment, and uncomfortable forced quarantine circumstances because transportation had been blocked as part of the lockdown. The working circumstances for migrant labourers who remained in cities frequently worsened. Many migrant returnees are driven to live in cities once again because their savings have been exhausted (Patnaik 2020).

Although there are some estimates of how many individuals went by train, with ranges between 5 and 40 million, there are no credible statistics on the labour migrants who moved back home, as far as the authors are aware. Estimates of the number of internal migrants are uncertain in general (Srivastava and Sutradhar 2016; Srivastava 2020a; GoI 2017), and the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 continues to be mostly ineffective (Sivaram 2020). The total number of internal migrants is estimated to be around 100 million (compared to a Census estimate of about 45 million inter and intrastate migrants), with the majority coming from the smaller districts of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, etc., and only a small number of these migrants coming from Nepal and Bangladesh. Estimates and knowledge of periodic and seasonal migration, in particular, have remained unclear. According to Shanthi (2006), female labour migration is also probably underreported, significantly contributing to the total knowledge gaps on migration. Additionally, academic studies frequently undervalue the importance of labour mobility. Theories and models of migration frequently overlook the complexity of mobility patterns, adding to the information gaps regarding the scope and effects of population movement, which are frequently crucial to more marginalized populations. The ambiguous description of migrants in official discourse appears to be affected by the lack of precise statistics and may even be reinforced by it (Deshingkar 2017). Migrants and labourmobility, in particular, have never been fully embraced as part of India's policy, similar to other nations like China during its years of miraculous economic growth and institutionalized in its hukou system, mirroring mixed attitudes about the place of immigrants globally. Urban policies show widespread indifference to and frequent discrimination against migrants. Interstate migrants frequently lack access to city housing programs and run the risk of losing access to public social services and even health care that is linked to long-term residency. With a common focus on limiting migration in development and anti-poverty initiatives (as well as in much international development policy), the apathy toward labour mobility is frequently reflected in rural policies as well. Similar to the earlier Maharashtra employment scheme, one of NREGA's goals is to reduce labour migration by offering locally available employment in rural areas (Datta 2019: Solinski 2012).

Mobility Neglected: A Historical Perspective: There are similarities between the stories of migrants returning to their home communities and prior crises. Like the COVID-19 pandemic, the bubonic plague in 1994 caused an enormous migration of migrant skilled and manual workers from Surat, but they weren't left stranded because trains were made available. This resulted in a labor shortage when factories reopened. Migrant workers have experienced similar effects from economic downturns. Following the 1929 economic crisis, many jobs were lost in the jute sector in Calcutta (de Haan 1994). Workers returned in large numbers to the countryside without showing any signs of resistance, according to the British colonial Labour Commissioner R. N. Gilchrist (1932), who described their disappearance as "snow for the sun." The return occurred in the same month that employees typically would return for their yearly visit to their families, just as it did during the 2020 pandemic (see detailed discussion below).

According to 2020, it was anticipated that employees would return to their "native villages" in 1931. It happened frequently since migration patterns have always been cyclic. Early long-distance migration streams, for example from parts of Bihar to Rangpur, Mymensingh, and the Sunderbans in eastern Bengal, and Burma, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tended to be circular as occupations were seasonal and temporary, including for the construction of railways (Yang 1989). While industrial activity, like that in the jute industry, was considerably more constant, this circular pattern continued to be predominant. Many of the workers remained migrants and had strong ties to their villages of origin. Several explanations of this prevalence of circular (rural-to-urban) migration have frequently defined the occurrence as an exception. On the one hand, colonial authorities and factory management attributed the pattern to workers' unwillingness to settle down and lack of dedication to contemporary industries with high rates of labour turnover. They observed labour shortages, particularly in the summer, which is when crops are harvested and/or marriages are celebrated. This was frequently emphasized as requiring unofficial middlemen (known as "sardars") for the recruitment of workers and a widespread system of replacement laborers (known as "badli"). The segmentation of migratory streams was intimately linked to the personalistic and informal nature of recruiting; this pattern has continued to define India's labour market and migration.

On the other side, critical studies that have highlighted the extreme exploitation in migrant work, such as Breman's (1985, 2019; see also his contribution to this volume), have argued that it was in capitalism's best interest to keep the workforce portable because it created a nearly endless labour surplus (which was partly brought on by the destruction of traditional artisanal production under colonialism) and that employers and authorities did not invest in the living conditions that would have prevented this. Workers would frequently go home during strikes or lockouts as well. Many trade union organizers in the jute sector shared the bosses' concerns about the migrant employees' lack of commitment to the industry and urban region. The majority of migrant workers from India have been men, and this fact has also been attributed to either employees' traditional habits or preferences or managers' techniques and their lack of interest in improving the living circumstances around workplaces.

The view is that one-factor theories are insufficient to account for the diversity of migratory patterns within a particular sector or geographic region, as well as historical trends regarding a single male earner. To this concept, explanations for this pattern of rural-to-urban migration have to account for the complex interactions between rural and urban communities, in contrast to the 'classic' historical perspective of the development of an industrial and urban working class (de Haan and Rogaly 2002). Seasonal employment, of course, offers transitory options outside of settlements that do not themselves offer sufficient employment. However, migrants have continued to keep a connection with their villages even when their employment was more long-term. It is crucial to consider this ongoing interaction between rural and urban economic activity from the standpoint of rural development. The extensive history of out-migration from Bihar is demonstrated by research on the topic, as is the fact that it has affected most socioeconomic groups, including, for instance, the sons of larger landowners (as explained by Das 1986). Although poverty affected many areas of Bihar, from a functionalist viewpoint, this ongoing out-migration also contributed to the preservation of the state's socioeconomic framework, with remittances supporting the system of land ownership. The income from rural-urban unskilled labour migration typically did not allow for significant investment in agricultural or other rural production, unlike for international migrants who typically came from less impoverished areas of India, but functioned as a safety valve, both economically and socially. This relationship between rural and urban areas has largely been ignored by development initiatives since it may be thought of as only a transitory or uncommon phenomenon. Censuses and surveys that have undervalued the levels of labour movement and their significance for development in both urban and rural areas have not adequately reflected it. The majority of policies have been either silent about this reality or have, as was already indicated, tried to decrease such mobility.

This is essential to stress that different migrant groups are affected by this neglect in different ways and that migrants working in the unofficial sector are severely affected. It seems that neglecting the so-called informal sector is a reflection of neglecting the long-term and pandemic situations of migrants. While India's modernizing economy has continued to be characterized by circular migration, the scale of the unorganized sector has not changed, and initiatives to address it are either ineffective or nonexistent. The long-standing disregard for migration has contributed to the policy shortcomings that the COVID-19 lockdown exposed. According to international reports, India appeared to be the country where migrant workers suffered the most. A similar pattern of yearly return is seen during Chinese New Year, and there have been reports from West African cities of young migrants returning to their villages to help with harvesting. This pattern of circular migration, which has contributed to the sudden large-scale movement, is not unique to India. While public health concerns naturally led to a suspension of mobility, there were no or very few attempts to secure the travel of those tens of millions of workers. What is apparent is the negligence and carelessness of official policy and workers.

Inclusive Policies: During Covid-19 Pandemic: It is important to pay attention to the programs that support migrant workers in India, such as civil society initiatives (such as SWAN, which was already stated, and SEWA, which is discussed in Homenet 2020), Self Help Group programs (IFAD 2020), and support programs from the Central Government. The Chief Minister of Bihar offered to pay the expenses for stranded migrant workers in other parts of India. In addition to opening special hospitals and health facilities and announcing a package of financial and employment support for returning workers, the Chief Minister of Odisha offered to bring back migrants who were stuck in various parts of the nation during the lockdown (Mishra 2020; The Indian Express 2020). The state of Kerala, which distinguished itself for its quick response to the COVID-19 pandemic, offered assistance to migrant workers who had lost their jobs (The Week 2020; The Economic Times 2020). It established camps using buildings like schools as a model, and it distributed basic commodities and health-related information in a variety of languages. A relatively limited number of migrant labourers may have returned to their home villages as a result of Kerala's response (Nideesh, 2020). While these solutions have a part to play and have given migrants crucial support, they are not sufficient to address significant disparities or the risks connected to health and other shocks. The negative aspects of migration that this pandemic has uncovered are deeply embedded in social and economic processes. How is it possible to change this? What laws are required to remove the widespread obstacles that keep migrants at risk? And does the current crisis provide a chance for such alterations?.

The need to accept migration, its unique patterns, and the contribution migrant workers make to local economies is seen as critical. It's crucial to acknowledge the vulnerability of internal migrants, even though there is frequently a more significant concern for the welfare of migrants from other countries. With the benefit of hindsight, it is clear that the government's surprise at the interruption of the lockdown and the potential hazards to the public's health is part of a pattern of disregarding labour migration. Seasonal and circular migrant workers do not have a fixed or accepted place in cities, despite their crucial role in the urban economy (and potential costs to the economy due to labour shortages workers have left) (Kundu 2009), with many of their entitlements based in their home villages. A crucial first step is to consider these movement patterns and their effects on household forms in surveys and censuses, such as Kerala's migration survey. All citizens will have access to rights and benefits regardless of where they are currently residing due to the "regularization" of migrant labour. Some nations and agencies restricted immigrant rights during the crisis, while others strengthened them. Bahrain declared an amnesty in 2020 to allow its undocumented workers to become citizens without having to pay any fees or fines (Sorkar 2020). On the receiving end, nations like Bangladesh, which have institutionalized support for international migrants for many years, have put in place programs for returning workers, including soft loans for training and launching businesses (Sorkar 2020). The Philippine government has been praised for its aggressive involvement in repatriation and assistance measures for migrants (Although there are significant gaps in the implementation; Liao 2020). A variety of changes and new measures the majority of which are not new are needed to ensure that migrants have access to their rights. Social security programs must be made "portable" (Srivastava 2020b); for

instance, subsidized food must be available wherever it is. There is a need and potential to use current technology to enable easier transfers of financial support, and the "one nation, one ration card" proposal might be an important step in that direction (Shreedharan and Jose 2020). Education (CREATE 2008) and midday meals must be available to migrants who migrate with families that include children, similar to education initiatives under the Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan and the District Primary Education Programme (Majumder 2011). Welfare provisions should be simple to register as well.

A recent analysis by Gaikwand and Nellis (2020) highlights poor political engagement by migrants, and consequently a lower likelihood that politicians reflect their interests. Migrants should be permitted to exercise the same political rights NRIs have been granted, including the ability to vote by ballot (Ghosh and Bandyopadhyay, 2020). Medical assistance Migrants must have the same access to routine care and pandemic services as local populations (Kusuma and Babu 2018; Nitika et al. 2014). A key component of ensuring that migrants may realize their rights is sustained advocacy for workers' rights, such as that provided by organizations like Aajeevika, SEWA, and more recently, new networks as indicated above, as well as effective representation by trade unions.

CONCLUSION

The lack of information and data regarding the number of migrant employees who live and work outside of their place of residency is one manifestation of the deep-rooted marginalization of migrant workers in India which has a long historical background and continuity from the colonial period. Urban planners and employers have persisted in taking the circular migratory pattern for granted by giving their employees inadequate facilities and security, which only serves to reinforce the migrants' sense of disconnection and ability to establish themselves with their families. The unique outrage that COVID-19 implied, but also—and this is essential—the government's response, which included a lockdown and very little support for the tens of millions of migrant workers, revealed how severe this neglect is and the potential costs not only to the migrants themselves but also to the health system and the economy as a whole. Crises provide opportunities for "building back better" in the case of migrant workers, these include providing immediate social protection, which is crucial, as well as addressing systemic inequalities that keep workers in marginalized positions and making the migrants invisible after they were once again assimilated by their home villages, both of which are much more difficult tasks.

At least in the early months of the pandemic, there was a lot of coverage of this incident of neglecting migrant workers in India. The quick review of the sources used to construct this paper indicates that there has been significantly less reporting in other regions of the world; this may be an instance of under-reporting or indicative of the unique and pervasive vulnerability of migrants in India. International migrants have seen both new supportive measures and increased marginalization and discrimination in response to shocks. It is crucial to investigate the many responses as well as the laws and advocacy efforts that can resolve the long-standing injustices that migrant workers experience.

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