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### RESEARCH ARTICLE

#### COVID- 19 AND THE CHALLENGES FACED BY THE MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

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#### Abstract

COVID-19 Pandemic has affected the global economy. The government of India is only concerned with saving the lives of people while no emphasis is being laid on the distorted situation of corers of Migrant workers who are stranded in different states of their work due to the loss of their employment since the lock- down was declared in haste, leading toshut- down of almost all the productive sectors which gave these migrant workers employment. Hence, turning out to be one of the darkest periods in the history of mankind. With Zero productive activity it proved difficult for the employers of the migrant workers to provide them livelihood in one hand and on the other hand the inability to earn the minimum wage for survival and shut – down of all the public transport the migrants were left with nothing to do and no-where to go lading to mouth widening Chaos in the entire nation. In this paper a descriptive study is done on what challenges the migrant workers of India are facing due to the pandemic in nation and how can we counteract these challenges. The study on migrants is based on secondary data taken from census of India, 2011.

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#### Introduction:-

The Covid-19 Pandemic spread started from the Wuhun district of China with epicenter in Hubui province. Its spread worldwide is also the cause of Migration of people globally. This Pandemic has almost hit 197 countries of the world and has large implications for human survival. A crisis of food, shelter, and safety has lead the entire world to great loss and uncertainty. Global lockdown, shutting down of all production-manufacturing units, retail market, and lapse of the self-employed and daily-wage sector has pushed a large number of people deep into existential crisis. However, in India, the epidemics of the past was hardly concerned with migration and livelihood during the colonial India, although major Indian cities like Kolkata (Calcutta), Mumbai (Bombay), Chennai (Madras) and many other urban places hugely suffered from influenza, smallpox, plague, malaria and cholera (Davis, 1951; Banthia and Dyson, 1999; Hill, 2011). Although, epidemics in India has led to flight of people from cities in the past, the lock down announced on 24th March, 2020 in the wake of corona virus outbreak created an unprecedented exodus of migrant workers from various cities of India reminiscent of the mass migration during the time of partition in 1947. The pandemic has been affecting the industrial production, manufacturing, market, and various other services gravely leading to mass unemployment of the migrant workers and making them plight back to their home. Fearing that these returning migrant workers may spread infections in the rural areas, authorities prevented their flight but many walked to their destinations. Those who have managed to return are suffering from hunger, lack of resources, and the threat to the survival of their families. Insecurity has clouded their minds which will ultimately prohibit them to resume working. A large number of them lost their livelihood, stranded in the city or

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on the way living in camps or make-shift shelters provided by the government (BBC, 2020). When migrants flee from the city they not only lose their livelihood but they may carry the infections to their native places (BBC, 2020). Migrants are greatly stigmatized as a carrier of the disease and considered to be a population at risk.

There is great contribution of migrants in economic growth, innovation, skill development and entrepreneurship in building cities and the nation. On the other hand, policies and programmes of urban development and planning in India hardly launched any specific programmes for the migrants as they were not considered as a part of the urban community. Failure to recognize migrants as an important part in urban development is one of the biggest mistakes in achieving urban sustainability and realizing the goals of sustainable development in India. It is to be noted that migrants are not a victimizer, nor a victim, but they are vulnerable. Access to social security programmes, access to health care and other benefits are denied to many migrant workers due to lack of their inclusion in urban society. Many of them because of being away at the time of election from their home constituency and are not able to vote.

The Working Group on Migration (2017) set up by the Ministry of Urban Housing and Poverty alleviation of India, has examined the plight of the migrant workers in the country and submitted its report to Central Government in 2017. However, any steps and action on the report is still awaited. In the meantime, sudden eruption of migration crisis resulting from the out-break of COVID-19 again reminds us the urgency of the matter. This paper presents how COVID-19 has impacted the lives of Migrant workers and the challenges they are dealing with, which could be helpful in designing a strategy of economic and social use to improve their living condition post COVID-19 pandemic.

#### COVID-19 in India:

As per the reports of COVID-19 India tracker.org India has registered 3,09,621 confirmed cases as on 12<sup>th</sup> June, 2020, out of which 1,46,303 are active cases and 1,54,403 are recovered cases. The total number of Deceased are 8,893. The number of domestic migrants affected by Covid-19 in India, has been to be about 40 million within a month after imposing lockdown on 21<sup>st</sup> April, 2020. The approximate data of the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), says that, around 404 million people were employed till the end of the third week of March 2020 in India, which has fallen down to 285 million in the fourth week of March, 2020. The number of unemployed persons has crossed 122 million at present (CMIS survey; 2020), which includes 91.3 million small traders & labor and 17.8 million salaried labor & part-time workers. The Labour Participation Rate (LPR) has declined to 41.9% in March 2020, from 42.6% in February 2020. Survival of such large proportion of human resource is at stake due to a rise in the unemployment rate from 8.7% in March to 24.68% in the second week of May, with 25.98% in urban and 24.11% in rural areas. Eight States & Union Territories in country are facing relatively high unemployment rate than the national average 23.7% in April 2020; with Puducherry at the top with 75.85%, followed by Tamil Nadu 49.8%, Jharkhand 47.1%, Bihar 46.6%, Haryana 43.2%, Tripura 41.2%, Karnataka 29.8% and Orissa 23.8%. In regards to the economic implications of the pandemic, some sources estimate it up to US \$ 190 billion in India in a span of 47 days of the lockdown besides the 4% irrecoverable loss to India's GDP.

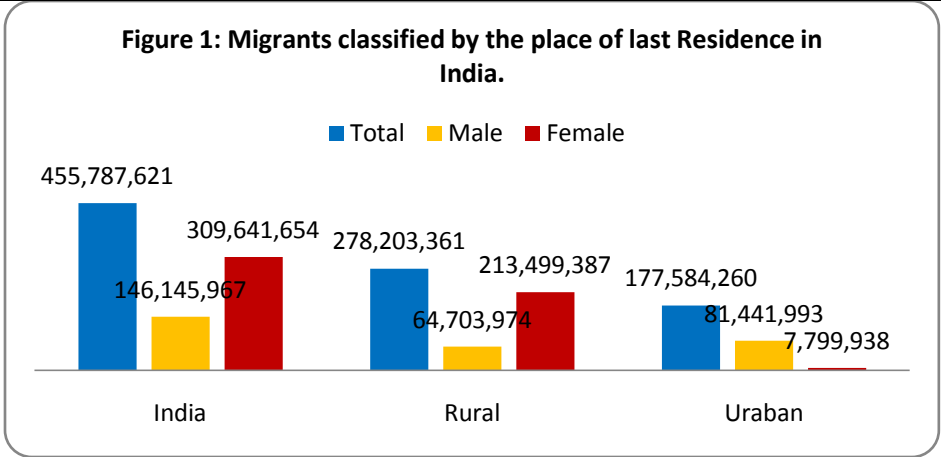
#### Migrants in India:

According to the website of the Registrar General & Census Commissioner, India, "When a person is enumerated in Census at a different place than his/her place of birth, she/he is considered a 'migrant'." Migration data began to be collected with the Census of 1872, but was not very detailed until 1961. Changes introduced in 1961 continued until 2001; in the Census of 2011, a more detailed format for collecting information on migrants was adopted. Over 45.58 crore Indians were found to be "migrants" for various reasons during the enumeration exercises of Census 2011. The previous Census (2001) had recorded the number of migrants at 31.45 crore more than 30% lower than the 2011 figure.

Marriage and employment are the major reasons for migration. Out of the total number of persons registered as "migrants" in the 2011 Census, only 11.91% (5.43 crore) had moved to one state from another, while nearly 39.57 crore had moved within their states.

**Table 1:-** Migrants Classified by the place of last Residence in India.

India	455,787,621	146,145,967	309,641,654	
Rural	278,203,361	64,703,974	213,499,387	
Urban	177,584,260	81,441,993	7,799,938	
Source: D2 Migration Table, Census of India, 2011.				

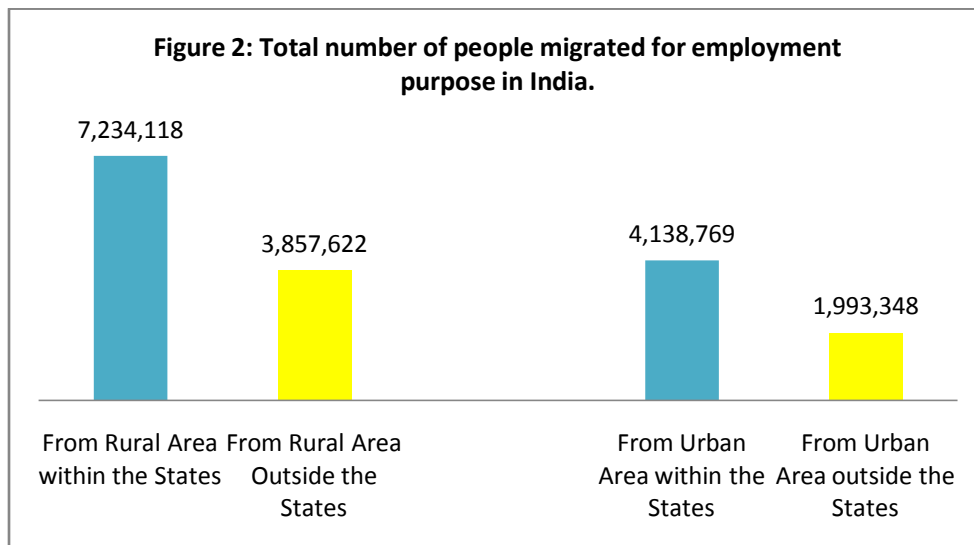


Source: Table 1.

Table 1 and Figure 1, represents that from approximately 1.3 billion population of India, approximately 45.5 crore people are migrants out of which approximately 27.8 crore are Rural and 17.7 crore are Urban. Here we can see that due to less employment opportunities in rural India most of the workers migrate to other states both rural and urban areas in search of employment mostly in case of male and because of marriage among females. We also see that migration rate is high among females in India than males. With this secondary data we can also predict how many and how much the migrants would have faced problems due to the pandemic COVID-19, which lead to complete lockdown of the economy and all the productive sectors where these migrants were employed and which helped them carry out their and their families living.

Table 2:- Total number of People Migrated for Employment Purpose in India.

From Rural Area within the States	7,234,118	5,785,325	1,448,793
From Rural Area Outside the States	3,857,622	3,450,788	406,834
From Urban Area within the States	4,138,769	3,409,077	729,692
From Urban Area outside the States	1,993,348	1,724,380	268,968
Source: D7 Migration Table, Census of India, 2011.			



Source: Table 2.

Table 2 and Figure 2, clearly speaks about the total number of people in India who clearly migrated for the purpose of employment either within the state or outside the state and we can see that migration for the purpose of employment is very high in India. From this we can say that the shut-down of economic activity in the nation due to the lockdown that was practiced in the entire nation because of Corona Virus Pandemic would have struck greatly to the migrant workers in terms of their livelihood, forcing them to face lots of unforeseen and unwanted challenges.

**Impact of the Pandemic COVID-19 on the Migrant Workers:**

The spread of Corona virus globally has forced the governments of all nations to enforce Lockdown, which brought unprecedented breakdown of our economic and social system. Migrants were most vulnerable to this pandemic. The first case of COVID-19 in India was registered on January 30, 2020, following the out-break of the virus and leading to the lock down in the entire country, which was announced on 24th March, 2020, for a period of 21days, which further extended till 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2020. Borders were sealed, transportation both public and private got stopped, factories, shops, restaurants and all type of the economic activities were shutdown, barring only the essential services.

This turned out to be a nightmare for hundreds of thousands of migrant workers, who lost their livelihoods overnight and became homeless.

The immediate challenges faced by these migrant workers were related to food, shelter, loss of wages, fear of getting infected by the virus and anxiety. As a result, thousands of them started fleeing from various cities to their native places. Many migrants choose to walk miles to go back to their native places. Many migrants lost their lives either due to hardship on the way, hunger, accident or comorbidity and some even committed suicide. A telephonic survey of more than 3000 migrants from north central India by Jan Sahas (2020) shows that majority of the workers were the daily wage earners and at the time of lockdown, 42% were left with no ration, one third was stuck at destination city with no access to food, water and money, 94% don't have worker's identity card (Jan Sahas, 2020).

Sudden lockdown also stranded many migrant workers in different cities of the country. Many were stuck up at stations or state or district borders. Many were forced to walk hundreds of miles on foot to reach their home villages finding no public transport. Those who reached their native villages were seen as potential carriers of the infection and were ill-treated by the police and locals. In one of the instances a group of returnees were sprayed with chemicals to disinfect them for which the local administration apologized (India Today, 2020). This is one of the biggest streams of mass return migration in the country. The very effort to stop the pandemic turned into one of the greatest human tragedy in India's recent history.

**Challenges faced by the migrant workers of India Because of the pandemic COVID-19:**

There is no certainty to when the pandemic is going to stop or when is the vaccine being out for its cure, thus, leading to further uncertainty about how long this crisis will last and what damage it would do to the economy, livelihood of people. Thus, under lockdown the migrant workers face a lot of challenges for their survival and livelihood which are as follows:

1. Transfer migrants to their native places with safety : there were news of stranded migrants gathering in huge masses near stations and bus stops in Mumbai and Surat which may increase the risk of spread of the virus among them and also create mental stress which may turn them to be violent. So, making them reach their native place safely is one of the biggest challenges.
2. To provide the basic income support to migrants and their families who are not registered to the social schemes and depend on daily wages for survival.
3. To deal with the economic problem and stress of the migrant workers who have returned back to their hometown.
4. To deal with the unemployment problem of the migrant workers returning to their native places, without hampering the interests of the existing daily wage workers especially in rural areas.
5. To provide basic health care facilities and preventive kits (like mask, sanitizers, and gloves etc.)to the stranded migrants and also to the ones who have returned to their hometown.
6. To provide food and basic amenities at shelters by maintaining better hygiene and sanitation by providing soap, water, toilet, waste management to all of them.
7. To do the screening of the possibly infected Migrant workers and quarantine them separately, and ask the others to maintain social distancing fo to check the spread of infection among the migrants.

The above circumstances have to be considered seriously, only then the situation of migrant workers can improve and the economy can be brought on track. To improvise these steps, Government has to consider concrete plans, rather than baseless announcements for political vote bank. People should be given work to earn their livelihood.

### **Suggestions:-**

#### **for improving the conditions of the Migrant workers:**

Government of India is undertaking several strategies to bring the country back to track. One of the major plan that it came was that of 20 lakh crore relief Package by the government which was announced by our finance minister Mrs. Nirmala Sitharaman announced on 17<sup>th</sup> may, 2020, also known as “Atmanirbhar Bharat Package”, which is expected to boost the economy and its GDP and also improve the condition of the migrant workers.

The families of the migrant workers are being supported through various measures under Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana announced on 26th March 2020, It is also suggested that each stranded migrant worker in cities should be given Rs 6000 (i.e., minimum rate of Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) Rs 202 per day X 30 days) by the Central Government in addition to the financial support by the State Government per month for at least three months. The government has also issued the guideline for the movement of the migrant labourers on 19th April, 2020, which allows the movement of intra-state migrant labourers to carry economic activities outside the corona virus hotspot zones, the inter-state migrant labourers may also be transferred. Both the state governments at the place of origin and destination of migrants may coordinate with the central government and plan strategies to provide transportation to these migrants.

Some suggestions to improve the conditions of the worse hit migrants are:

1. Integration of migrants with development is the need of the hour. Government should seriously look into the recommendations UNESCO-UNICEF and the Working Group on Migration and implement them at the earliest (Bhagat, 2012; Working Group on Migration, 2017).
2. Food should be supplied on weekly basis to meet the food and nutritional needs of migrant workers and their families.
3. Public health care systems, particularly at the primary and secondary care need to be strengthened.
4. Starting of health insurance scheme for internal migrants may be helpful for the state government as well as migrants at the destination especially during any epidemic or pandemic. For instance, in Kerala, a health insurance scheme known as “Awaz Health Insurance Scheme”, is offered to support migrants. This scheme is also helpful to provide valid documents to migrants, and helps the government to have record of migrants.

### **Conclusion:-**

The Corona virus pandemic has led to massive unemployment and unproductively along with economic stagnation upon the country. Once this pandemic gets over, reviving of the economy and the adverse social consequences will turn out to be one of the greatest challenges of the nation. The government will have to initiate labor welfare centric plans, and provide a good alternative to the mass migration, which can be dealt with, by opening the industries and

Businesses within suitable restrictions. So, it is the responsibility of the government to provide better living conditions and income perspectives for migrant workers. Proclamations to leave industries open will not make economic progress; rather strategies to introduce avenues for employment in private & self employment sectors can prove fruitful in countering the web of uncertainties spun by this disaster.

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