

# Policy Brief

## Migrants' Vulnerabilities in India During the Pandemic

### Summary

Migration promotes agglomeration of economic activity in more productive locations and improves employment opportunities for households in less-developed regions, alleviating poverty and boosting shared prosperity through remittances. Most internal migrants' livelihoods are characterised by circular mobility, mandatory physical presence at work, temporary or seasonal nature of work, and informality. Beside their temporary residential status and lack of access to government welfare schemes, most migrants are vulnerable workers. The Covid-19 pandemic made them more vulnerable due to its mobility restrictions and total shutdown of the economy during lockdown. The extent of precarity migrants faced depended on existing policies, and how agile policymakers were in responding to the crisis and introducing new policies to protect vulnerable migrants.

### Key messages

- **The 2011 Census enumerated 450 million internal migrants in India (37% of the population).** Among them, migrants who gave economic reasons for migration comprised 10.5 per cent of the workforce. Census migration data is limited in its ability to capture circular migration and female migration for work. Alternative estimates suggest that the share of migrants in the workforce was 17–29% (Ministry of Finance 2017); and that before the pandemic, these migrants were mainly informally employed in urban centres.
- The lockdown in March 2020 **ignored the entirely predictable consequences for migrants** and informal workers.
- The government has recognised that **data on migrants needs significant improvement** to

avoid such neglect reoccurring. Development of the eSHRAM portal<sup>1</sup> and National Tribal Migration Support Portal<sup>2</sup> for self-registration are commendable initiatives, though migrants may need support.

- The government also recognises that **migrants' rights to government welfare schemes need to be portable**, and that

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.eshram.gov.in/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://shramshakti.tribal.gov.in/>

urban low-income households, including those of migrants, urgently need access to better and affordable housing – these rights need to be made real within a limited timeframe.

- Migrants also need **greater appreciation from society**, and enhanced political rights to vote and be represented in their places of residence rather than their places of origin.

## Covid-19 policy response: the sudden lockdown

In response to the growing threat from Covid-19, the Government of India imposed a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, starting on 25 March 2020, which was extended until 31 May in multiple phases (for 70 days in total). With the sudden announcement of a complete lockdown and no immediate plan for the transportation of migrant workers from their places of work to their places of origin, hundreds of thousands attempted to travel home on foot. In most cases, this Herculean effort resulted in them taking shelter in relief camps hastily set up as a last-minute response to the migrant crisis. All workplaces were shut down, with increasing uncertainty about whether and when they would reopen. Displaced migrant workers feared that recession in the aftermath of the pandemic would result in major layoffs.

About 40 days after announcing the lockdown, from 1 May 2020 the central government started operating *Shramik* special trains and also buses to transport hundreds of thousands of migrants, who had been stranded in different urban centres without work, to their places of origin. The special trains were limited in number and only operated between certain states, based on the requests of state governments. Even with this lifeline presented to some stranded migrant workers, many of them had difficulty finding the train fare to

avail themselves of the much-needed service, since the central government did not waive train fares for overnight sleeper-class trains. The Supreme Court of India intervened on 28 May 2020, ordering the central and state governments not to charge migrant workers either a train fare or bus fee.

### Impact on migrants

This policy brief reflects on a larger report on pandemic poverty in India, compiled using a combination of original qualitative data collected from a small number of affected people in India; interviews with local leaders, community development actors and policymakers; and secondary data from a range of sources, including survey data and other published articles and reports (Pramanik *et al.* 2022).

The sudden imposition of lockdown, with little preparation, meant that migrant workers were stranded in different cities and towns without an income and uncertain about whether and how to travel home. The poor quality of the relief camps, with their meagre rations and lack of facilities, caused distress to women and children in particular. There was an urgent need for on-the-ground support in the areas of humanitarian aid and health care (Suresh *et al.* 2020).

The mismanagement of the lockdown announcement and arrangements for homeward travel severely impacted the health and lives of migrant workers. There were numerous media reports of migrant workers travelling to their places of origin, far from where they had moved for work, by walking or cycling. Fear and distress accompanied the migrants who travelled to their places of origin and at the same time deterred others from going back. Many died during their journey or after reaching their destination (Kumar *et al.* 2020). Many studies also found that series of unfortunate events left them psychologically disturbed and agitated, and led to various psychosocial issues among this vulnerable section of the population (Jesline *et al.* 2021; Kumar *et al.* 2020; Singh 2020a, 2020b).

Qualitative interviews echoed that migrants had lost out the most during the pandemic, taking big cuts in earnings. Lockdown and movement restrictions affected the income of rural households, which were more reliant on migrants' income: reverse migration of workers led to sharp declines in remittance incomes for households. Even in normal circumstances, people migrating for work in India often face the following challenges: (1) lack of social security and health benefits, and poor implementation of minimum safety standards legislation in workplaces; (2) lack of portability of Public (Food) Distribution System (PDS) services across state lines; and (3) lack of access to affordable housing and basic amenities in urban areas (Iyer 2020). During the migrant crisis that the pandemic caused, food insecurity of migrant workers emerged as the most visible deprivation, along with lack of shelter (Irudaya Rajan and Bhagat 2022). In a rapid assessment conducted by ActionAid in 2020 on 177 returnee migrant workers in 15 districts of Bihar state, respondents reported that 89 per cent of the time they could not access government schemes because their national identification (Aadhaar) cards were not linked to bank accounts and other documents (Irudaya Rajan, Sivakumar and Srinivasan 2020).

In 2020/21, the central government spent Rs1,11,170 crore<sup>3</sup> (US \$ 13.5 billion) on the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) scheme. The amount was Rs 40,000 crore (approx. US\$4,878m) higher than the amount initially budgeted – a spike in demand caused by reverse migration of labourers from cities and towns to villages after the first lockdown drove the increased allocation. MGNREGA was hailed as an important safety net during the pandemic, but there were concerns around the availability of regular MGNREGA work, as found in our qualitative study. From 2015/16 to 2019/20, average demand from households registered under the scheme was 42 per cent (in the range of 40–43%). However, in 2020/21, demand for work under the scheme increased to 51 per cent of registered households. However, the proportion of households that were provided with employment compared with those demanding employment, reduced from 90 per cent in 2015/16 to 87 per cent in 2020/21 (Ministry of Rural Development 2021).

## Conclusion

Reliable data on the number of migrants and their locations is lacking in India, except for a few states such as Kerala (Box 1). Hence, the Government of India failed to gauge the extent of the damage that lockdown would cause migrants. The plan to transport migrant workers to their home towns or native villages should have been implemented immediately after the lockdown was announced. Some migrant workers had to leave their rented accommodation as they could not afford to pay rent. Having spent more than a month in crowded relief camps, it is likely that some of them contracted Covid-19 and then carried it to their places of origin. Some key informants mentioned that reverse migration into districts was the main reason for Covid-19 cases. Ironically, after surviving a horrifying month in urban centres without jobs and incomes, once migrant workers could finally return to their places of origin, they were not allowed to enter villages and were stigmatised for carrying the disease back to rural areas.

<sup>3</sup> 1 crore = 10 million

## Box 1: Migrant data in Kerala

Kerala's economy is known for its heavy reliance on migrant remittances, especially from the Arabian Gulf countries. But what distinguished Kerala from other parts of India was its access to reliable and readily available data on Keralites who lived abroad and were stranded outside in precarious conditions. Based on Kerala Migration Survey's (KMS) estimate of 2.1 million emigrants abroad, the Government of Kerala proactively carried out its COVID-19 response by facilitating their safe return and by setting up 250,000 hospital beds and quarantine facilities in April, 2020. This shows the importance of migration data in informing evidence-based policy solutions and preparedness in the context of an unprecedented global health crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. Informed by this innovative model's success, KMS was replicated in other Indian States such as Goa, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat and two other states such as Odisha and Jharkhand are in the process of conducting migration surveys in 2023 (Irudaya Rajan and Manasi 2022).

Migration has always been a low priority area for Indian policymakers. Usually, migrants' voting rights lie in their origin state; hence, they do not count in political parties' agendas. Urbanisation is considered to catalyse economic growth and alleviate poverty. But the process of urbanisation is incomplete without a wellthoughtout support system for migrants. Unless the government and policymakers acknowledge the importance of migration in the context of economic growth, migrants will remain neglected.

At both central and state levels there are advisors for economy, agriculture, industry,

health and education. But there is usually no such provision for migration-related issues, except in Kerala, which since 1996 has had a migration department, the Department of Non-Resident Keralite Affairs. This long-term neglect of the migrant welfare agenda at the central and state levels – in most states – exposes the larger issue of non-inclusive development in India. Even though migrants form an integral part of both urban and rural landscapes, their welfare has often been relegated to the periphery of policy discussions (Irudaya Rajan and Bhagat 2022).

## Policy recommendations

The gravity of the migration crisis during the pandemic rekindled discussions around the migrant welfare agenda among government, policymakers, researchers and activists around the country. Some of the most urgent policy recommendations are outlined below:

- **Include migrants in the legitimate political system** – Migrants are often only entitled to vote in their home constituency and not in their place of work; hence, their political clout is limited and therefore their voices are rarely heard (Deshingkar and Akter 2009). To present their demands and concerns to government agencies, they have to be a part of a legitimate political system that represents them wherever they are.

**“Wage labour work is available in Maharashtra every day, but here in my village it’s only for 10–15 days a month.”**

- **PDS entitlements** – The current system excludes inter-state migrants from receiving PDS benefits unless they surrender the ration card from their state of origin and get a new one from the host state. It is imperative to ensure food security through the portability of ration cards in PDS schemes in the future. As a follow-up measure, the central government announced the ‘One Nation, One Ration Card’ scheme to ensure the portability of food security entitlements across India. Through this facility, at the same time as migrant beneficiaries are able to get rations at their destination, their families at home are also allowed to get their share of the entitlement. This needs to be implemented successfully across the country to ensure food security for migrants in need.
- **Availability of affordable housing and basic amenities in urban areas** – According to 2011 census data, migrants comprise almost half the urban population. However, the supply of low-income ownership and rental housing options is inadequate. This leads to the spread of informal settlements and slums, with poor infrastructure and resultant poor living conditions for most migrants. It is crucial to fulfil the goal of the central government scheme Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana-Urban (PMAY-U) to provide housing access for low-income households including slum dwellers. This should have been achieved by 2022, when India completed 75 years of independence. Moreover, as part of the Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (Self-Reliant India) Covid-19 assistance package, the central government announced a scheme for affordable rental housing complexes for migrant workers and urban poor people under PMAY-U. This long-term solution, if implemented, could go a long way in providing better living conditions to migrant workers, who make such a large contribution to the Indian economy and society.
- **Self-registration of migrants** – The lack of political will to solve the migrant workers’ crisis is evident from the absence of reliable real-time data on migrants in the country. An obvious way to ensure this in future is to have migrants voluntarily self-register at their destinations. To this end, the initiative taken by the government in launching the eSHRAM portal in August 2021 and the National Tribal Migration Support Portal in January 2022 is commendable. The data is supposed to be electronically available and visible via dashboards at village, block, district, state and national levels for different tiers of government authorities. The completeness and accuracy of such important administrative data could be useful in handling a similar migrant crisis in future. However, a support system is needed to help migrant workers to register themselves via the portals.
- **Strengthening the data ecosystem on migration** – Administrative data from the portals needs to be complemented by census and survey data to authenticate its accuracy and completeness. Use of data from the National Sample Survey rounds, which have migration modules, high-frequency Periodic Labour Force Surveys, Kerala Migration Survey (Rajan, Zacariah and Kumar 2020) and the India Human Development Survey (Vanneman *et al.* 2006) could help to gain a disaggregated temporal view of migration that includes seasonal and circular migration. The new initiative of the Labour Bureau in conducting the All India Survey on Migrant Workers is a welcome step in bridging the data gap. However, the government needs to improve its timeliness in releasing survey data and reports into the public domain.

“The pandemic was a health crisis, but through our policies we have converted the health crisis to a migration crisis.”

- **Pro-migrant attitudes in society** – Along with the recommendations mentioned above, there is an immediate need to push for a pro-migrant attitude in society in general and greater acknowledgement of migrants’ contribution to society (Jesline *et al.* 2021). Hopefully, the pandemic experience will lead to a new appreciation of their roles in cities by those who make use of their services and employ them.
- **Support system at grassroots level** – Migrants and their families need to be educated about safeguarding their labour rights, the benefits available to informal workers via various government schemes, the process of enrolling in schemes and registering via online portals. Moreover, there needs to be a grievance redressal system in place to attend to migrants’ needs, and the harassment and abuse they face, and take the necessary action. The government needs work with non-governmental and civil society organisations on the ground. For example, for the past 15 years civil society organisation Jan Sahas (‘People’s Courage’) has been working intensively with more than 1 million migrant communities to ensure their social protection and safe migration. In 2020, the organisation established the Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC), ‘a grassroots-led multi-stakeholder collaborative of nonprofit, philanthropic, and private sector actors focused on ensuring safety, security, and mobility for vulnerable [migrant families]’ across India (MRC n.d.). With government buy-in, such initiatives can help many more migrants in mainstreaming these support systems.

“Thanks to the pandemic even people in urban areas have started recognising the significance of migrants.”

#### Further reading

Irudaya Rajan, S. and Bhagat, R.B. (2022) ‘Internal Migration and the Covid-19 Pandemic in India’, *Migration and Pandemics*, 164: 227

Irudaya Rajan, S. and Manasi, A. (2022) ‘Data for Migration Governance: The Kerala Model’, *People Move*, World Bank

Jesline, J. *et al.* (2021) ‘The Plight of Migrants During Covid-19 and the Impact of Circular Migration in India: A Systematic Review’, *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, 8.1: 1–12

Pramanik, S. *et al.* (2022) *India Covid-19 Poverty Monitor Report: August 2022*, New Delhi: National Council of Applied Economic Research

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