



Migrant Agricultural Workers in India and the COVID-19 lockdown

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Abstract: *The population of 100 million internal migrant workers, who are estimated to form 20 percent of India's workforce, have been the worst sufferers in the unplanned lockdown that started on march 25. They have been stranded in the cities and other locations of work, without wages, money and food. The images of migrant workers walking hundreds of kilometers of reach their villages during the lockdown brought this otherwise invisibilised population under public eye.*

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis comes at a time when the Indian economy was already reeling under and extended period of stagnation, and fall in demand. The slump in consumption was most evident in rural India in the months leading up to the pandemic, all through last year with the same trend continuing well into this year, showing no signs of recovery. This demand crises has been attributed prominently to the fall in days of employment available to manual workers along with a slowing down of the wage rates. Research shows that real wage growth for rural labourers plunged from 14.6 percent in 2014 to a mere 1.1 percent in 2019. Women labourers fared even worse receiving four fifths of the wages that were paid out to men in the harvest and post harvest agricultural operations.

To meet the load on agriculture and to ensure sustainable farm and allied products, including best rural practices, agro-scientific research output and agri-technology deployment are being considered as an effective response through the Covid-19 agriculture track, they said.

Key Words: population, internal, workers, estimated, workforce, sufferers, lockdown, locations .

States such as Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh have done a detailed study on the skills of the migrants who have returned. In MP, nearly 50% of the migrants (36.9 million) were found to be engaged in the unorganized sector while 30% of them (22.2 million) were involved in construction and building activities and only 19% (13.7 million) were engaged in factories or industries.

About 51% (37.5 million) of the migrants who returned to MP are in the 18-30 age group. In UP, nearly 1.7 million returning migrants are unskilled labourers, a survey has shown.



The agricultural sector gained a respectable place as an agent of economic development only

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after the success of the green revolution in developing countries. This is mainly because of several perceived shortcomings of the agricultural sector, such as its high dependence on natural resources to generate low-value products and susceptibility to economic fluctuations. Other reasons included low price, income elasticity of demand, poor linkage with other sector.

However, new agricultural technologies helped negate these arguments because they were scale-natural and input-intensive. Agro-processing has now emerged as a major economic activity worldwide. The role of agricultural growth in lifting people out of poverty is also well-recognised, and rural infrastructure and agriculture research are key drivers of this.





The dual economy models of economists like Ragnar Nurkse, Arthur Lewis, John C.H. Fei and Gustav Ranis largely took this line. Gradually, the commercialisation of the agricultural sector would see rising competition between agricultural and industrial sectors because these sectors compete with each other due to rise in wages. In the Fei-Ranis model, the duo visualized technology in the agricultural sector as a way to improve productivity.

India's agricultural sector depends on migrant labourers for several operations. Now, an estimated 50 million migrant labourers (of India's 140 million) are expected to have returned to their native places from cities following the nationwide lockdown from March 24. They account for about 11% of the non-self-employed labour force. Many migrant labourers, mainly from eastern states, are working in agricultural fields in the country's west and north. They are also significantly employed in marine fishing, post-harvest activities, managing livestock, in marketing, and in the creation of agricultural infrastructure.

Another fallout would be the reduced capacity of the sector to generate savings, affecting demand for inputs like fertilisers, ramifications for industrial growth. Ensuring sufficient flow of institutional credit to agriculture and small-scale industrial sectors is of critical importance now. While labourers who had migrated to cities were instrumental for urban development, their own welfare was largely neglected. The low credit-deposit ratio in rural areas also helped develop cities. However, the backward linkage to India's hinterlands and rural areas is weak. This requires several mitigation strategies; a long-term one is to develop rural areas by ploughing.

Reverse migration due to COVID-19 provides an opportunity for hinterland administration to engage the returned labourers in gainful employment, and the sole short-term option is to leverage the potential of agricultural. Especially labour-intensive sectors like livestock, fisheries and food processing have not developed over the years,

and the labourers who have returned can be used to reverse this trend. Labourers can also be involved in creation and revamping of rural infrastructure (both farm and non-farm), godowns, water management and in food and fodder processing. The labor has to substitute for the probably reduced input application in agriculture to help maintain the production level, resulting in increased factor share of labour in the agricultural sector.

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Maintaining food security both at household and intra-household levels will be challenging. The presence of additional member(s) in the household without income and contribution to food production could worsen the nutritional security of households in the short term. This has a gender dimension too, as women could become further marginalized.

The solution lies largely with the state and the community. While community's role is critical, its operational success depends on the benevolence of the state in terms of food supply. The public distribution system has a critical role.

Long-term strategies should be qualitatively different, focusing more on other sectors. Nonetheless, agro-based activities and enterprises would be a key element. Improving the labour and land productivity would be a critical strategy. For this, changes in the organisation of land, land and water development, food processing and value addition and rural industries will be important. Models that harness economies of scale in rural areas and mass absorption of labourers need to be evaluated and adopted. The having a negative impact on agriculturally developed regions like Punjab, with the proximate cause being the harvest of important rabi crops like wheat and mustard, resulting in a higher production cost. If the



lockdown continues without adequate mitigation efforts, even the kharif crop could be affected. Unless compensated for the loss of labour force, many marine fishing and fish processing activities will also be impacted.

However, intra-household food insecurity is better addressed by generating awareness and targeting women and children who are out of anganwadis now. Income transfer measures could also be very helpful in reviving rural demand. Activities under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act should be promoted in this context.

But before we get there, you need to appreciate the contrasting economic situation prevailing in the last quarter of 2019 before the pandemic, and the pre-2008 crisis situation. Before 2008, all engines of growth were firing.

Our investment-to-GDP ratio was at an all time. GDP growth was 8-9% per annum and because of that the job growth was very rapid. We had five million unskilled workers leaving agriculture for the first time in Indian history because non-agri jobs were growing.

Nanasaheb Patil, farmer leader said that the year 2020 is very tough for several reasons. "The shortage of labour can hamper agriculture productions. More than 50 lakh migrant workers have left Maharashtra in fear of COVID-19." "We got local labour but that is not sufficient. Besides, the local labour works as per their terms and conditions. The shortage of labour has also resulted in a rise in daily wages," he added.

The agriculture sector is not alone that is facing the labour shortage, the construction sector is another sector where developers are not able to start the construction activities despite easing lockdown and permission in place. We used to get labour mostly from Madhya Pradesh, but this year they are not coming due to travel restrictions," Patil said.

Patil is not alone. The same story has been shared by the majority of large landholding farmers

in Maharashtra. They used to engage the migrant workers from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Madhya Pradesh as the agriculture labour for farm activities. Kudumbashree model of Kerala is worth examining in this context.

A countryside survey of rural households during the lockdown confirms widespread distress and reaffirms the importance of public provisioning of food and other essentials, and of the urgent need for cash payments to stricken households.

Two patterns have emerged in respect of the impact of the lockdown on agriculture. In rainfed villages, this is normally the lean season and there is no standing crop, so there is little direct effect on agricultural operations and production. In Siresandra in Kolar district of Karnataka, where there is employment in vegetable cultivation during the lean period, Aparna, an agricultural worker, says she would normally have been labouring out "but there is no work now as cultivators are using their The despicable work and living conditions that the migrant agricultural labourers are subject to are not unique to India. This pandemic crisis has made the policy makers confront with the essential work of the migrant farmhands who keep agricultural production running. The food and agricultural Organisation noted in one of its policy briefs, "Migrants play a substantial role in the agri-food systems. Measures affecting the affecting the movement of people (internally and internationally) and resulting labour shortages will have and impact on agricultural value chains, affecting food availability and market prices globally. COVID-19 could reinvent the importance of the agriculture sector as the one on which our labour force can fall upon at a time of crisis. Reviving this sector will be the key in the post-COVID-19 phase of the Indian economy. Other sector and its extensive nature of cultivation.





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