



Pandemic and the Predicament of Labour Migration: The Indian Experience of Mitigating the Multifaceted Dimensions of a Humanitarian Catastrophe

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ABSTRACT: The COVID-19 Pandemic has accentuated pre-existing global conflicts and fissures tremendously, and India has been plagued with multifaceted challenges from skyrocketing unemployment, demand and public debt crisis to the predicament of labour migration, characterized by a plethora of economic, sociological, political and humanitarian ramifications. The rudimentary objective of this paper is to offer a normative teleological insight into the de facto migrant labour crisis in India, while holistically juxtaposing myriad ontological and epistemological indicators, with an emphasis on the economic and human rights dimension of Pandemic-induced intra-state and inter-state labour migration. While assessing a series of macro-societal and cyclical developments, ranging from “Push and Pull” factors of labour migration, reactionary decision-making of the political establishment to the repercussions of cyclical lockdowns, the attitudinal and ideational component of the social order towards migrant labourers has been highlighted, when a virulent contagion has propelled systemic racial discrimination, cognitive biases, ethnocentrism, xenophobia and institutionalized otherization vis-à-vis the instruments of statecraft, during the pyrrhic rise of mobilization on the closures of borders. While the notion of physical and social distancing is antithetical to the rationale behind society and politics as collective decision-making arenas, the current health crisis has compelled to turn the lens back on the struggles and vast array of insecurities of migration and settlement. Additionally, this paper throws light on the immediate contours and trajectories of forced and voluntary labour migration, processes of assimilation and acculturation, how networks and kinship ties that migrant labourers bring with them shape the magnitude of internal and international migration by adding to the changing global demography. A series of speculative policy prescriptions have been suggested, advancing an ethos of care and respect.

KEYWORDS: Snowball effect, labour migration, ontological indicators, racial discrimination, human rights.

INTRODUCTION

Almost resonating with an Orwellian dystopia, the comprehensive debilitation brought forth by a disease of mass destruction in the form of COVID-19, has engulfed every single nook and corner of the globe, ushering in a seismic paradigmatic shift vis-à-vis myriad cyclical and structural transformations – from re-balancing power equations in the international system to paralyzing global economies, businesses and workers as a kind of perverse revenge of nature against the gross anthropocentric abuses made by mankind. In this context, one of the most pertinent dimensions of paramount importance has to be the international migrant labour crisis, and the multifaceted ramifications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on their lives and livelihoods.

According to International Labour Organization’s (ILO) estimate, approximately 2.2 billion workers, who represent 68 percent of the global workforce, reside in nation-states with recommended or required workplace closures, and migrant labourers represent 4.7 percent of this global labour pool comprising 164 million workers, with nearly half being women. Constituting a pivotal component of India’s economic establishment, migrant labourers serve on the front lines carrying out essential jobs in health care, transportation, service sector, construction, agriculture and agro-food processing to name a few, and almost the entire segment is concentrated in the strata of the economy with high levels of temporary, informal or unprotected work, characterized by low wages devoid of social protection. Ever since the Indian central and state governments have imposed cyclical lockdowns to curb the transmission of the Novel Corona virus, along with a host of other social distancing norms, the informal and unorganized sector consisting of migrant labourers, who form the backbone of the economy and are mostly undocumented daily wage earners, have been critically impacted



with far-reaching repercussions for their existence and subsistence. The government induced shutdowns has contributed to a plethora of hardships to businesses and job-goers, with the migrant labourers being the worst affected and most vulnerable section of the Indian society. Inter-state migration and intra-state migration is a massive phenomenon in the country, on account of push and pull factors related to the flow of migrants, and following the Pandemic, these migrant labourers thrive on rootless existence with no proper place to reside and establish themselves. The government-imposed lockdown has completely dislocated the migrant population, and recently owing to the sudden shutdown of public transportation, hundreds and thousands of migrant labourers were compelled to walk miles after miles in order to reach their native places of origin in the rural areas, with most of the migrant labourers, their wives and children dying on their way back to their home journey.

Being the voiceless section of the Indian social order, whose body of rights and liberties remain eclipsed due to the chronic lack of timely governmental action and societal empathy, the historically pitiable condition of migrant labourers has deteriorated even considerably. As each day's economic productivity decides the amount of wages they receive, during the lockdown, since such workers became economically unproductive and were thrown out of their work, they failed to receive any payment to sustain them. With meagre or almost no savings and earnings at hand, a massive exodus of migrant labourers took place since the inception of the lockdown. As per the ILO reports, there has been documented evidence of alarmingly rising levels of social and racial discrimination, ostracism, xenophobia against the migrant labourers, and in most of the cases, they have been harshly subjected to food insecurity, layoffs, worsening working conditions including reduction or non-payment of wages, cramped or inadequate living conditions, and increased restrictions on movements or forced returns (where they may be stigmatized as the carriers of the virus). Several Human Rights groups and organizations fear rising levels of violence and domestic abuse among this stratum, particularly for those where women workers predominate. As India has been plagued with multipronged challenges after the COVID-19 lockdowns, most of them have turned out to be really thorny, especially the challenge of how to revive and rejuvenate the dilapidating economy characterized by a negative growth rate of 23.9 percent in the last fiscal quarter, and how to address the multiple problems faced by the migrant labourers, and migrant labourers here consist of those who have fled the cities and predominantly urban areas that had been their homes, places of work, of education and entertainment for a number of years, and those who happen to be stranded and are held up in shelter camps and roadsides. One of the most unfortunate sociological developments in this regard has to be the creation of barriers that has prompted the "us versus them" binarization in the society and sharpened the division between haves and have-nots, shedding all canons of cooperative federalism and getting added as a new dimension to India's cultural demography.

From getting sprayed with disinfectants in a barbaric fashion to becoming victims of police brutality, from getting crushed to death by trains while sleeping on railway tracks to dying fatigued while getting stranded covering hundreds of miles on foot, the rueful and grotesque condition of migrant labourers in India during the Pandemic has revealed how the language of securitization and an oppressive competitive authoritarian state has made a mockery out of human rights and basic civil liberties. The recent dilution of labour laws in few states for the bizarre justification of economic recovery by the coercive state apparatus has made it crystal clear that the cumulative picture is of a blatant disjunction between the existential realities of the migrant labourers and the governmental policies adopted to tackle the predicament of the "labour question." Although the central government in India had announced a headline-grabbing 260 billion dollar economic stimulus package as part of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana in March to protect the migrant labourers and other vulnerable sections of the Indian populace from the impact of the COVID-19, which included providing monetary stimulus to specific central banks or bailouts to specific industrial sectors, it is increasingly disillusioning and opaque about how much will be dedicated to social protection at the present stage. While a combination of cash transfers through pre-existing governmental programmes and food aid through the Public Distribution System (PDS) has been announced, but boosting and expanding them both, given the limited resources that the government is working with in the limited fiscal space, along with the inadequate ineffective economic architecture, makes it highly unlikely that the government will get maintain a harmonious balance between cash and food and pull the migrant labourers out of destitution.

MACROSCOPIC INDIAN LANDSCAPE AND MULTIPLE ISSUE AREAS

It is a well established fact that millions of migrant labourers and informal sector workers were immediately left jobless after the announcement of the government induced lockdowns, and tens of millions have no ration cards to access food aid and can connect through financial institutions, prompting a mass exodus of migrant labourers, who have been fleeing cities to go back to their villages



on foot – travelling hundreds of kilometers at 40 degrees heat, with many of them remaining trapped and stranded in cities, as inter-state trains and buses came to a halt. According to the researchers and analysts of the International Growth Centre (IGC), there is an urgent necessity to have an effective exit strategy involving an increase in the medical testing rates for the virus, along with the importance of a great deal of anticipatory analysis to investigate about the ramifications of the lockdown and which of the clusters of the population are likely to suffer more, while pathways are getting affected. IGC has stressed on the immediate need to develop efficacious protection mechanisms, health system preparation work, and there has been a consensus on massive shock to employment and to livelihoods, especially for the migrant labourers, majority of who are self-employed in petty businesses or are casual daily wage earners. Although the initial perception was that of a transitory economic shock following the lockdown, but as it has persisted for months and economic activities have shut down, migrant labourers have perceived it as a permanent reduction in their incomes, implying that it is an alarming instance of acute demand and debt crisis. For macro-prudential reasons, it is imperative for the policymakers to protect this extremely vulnerable section in terms of their severe income shock, through cash transfers and in-kind transfers and develop robust fiscal solutions to pull them out of abysmal poverty, stimulate the economic demand, as the economic turbulence has paved the ground for one of the biggest humanitarian catastrophes in the history of mankind. Additionally, along with the tremendous income shock, comes the issue of enormous amount of emotional and psychological shock, in the form of emotional tumultuousness, stress, depression and anxiety having potential repercussions on the productivity and subsistence of the migrant labourers, even if we one goes further in restarting and revamping the economy in terms of the productivity of the migrant labourers and informal sector workers. All of this anxiety and psychosocial burden is bound to have a spill-over effect on the migrant labourers willing to go back to rural areas out of situational compulsion. If the economic activities and financial transactions do not pick up their momentum, these medium-term and short-term shocks to income and earnings would have longer implications in reducing the overall supply of labour in urban areas, leading to saturation and excess supply of labour in the rural areas, where the agriculture sector does not have the capacity to absorb the additional surplus amount of labour, creating a massive differentials in labour supply. As the Pandemic has contributed to the disruption of supply chains and changed the working dynamics of the economic realm, there is an urgent necessity of a comprehensive long-term strategy in order to address the misallocation of labour and to protect the vulnerable section, and ensure that the migrants can return safely once again to the urban areas, and this requires a teleological vision in terms of having a longer perspective, while starting to attack these vital issues from the policy outlook as soon as possible.

Apart from the horrendous governmental response as exhibited in a series of human rights abuses demonstrating blatant humanitarian apathy, trust has been eroded significantly among the migrant labourers and most of them are reluctant and hopeless. Migrant labourers need to be provided with social protection measures in the rural areas itself, and Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) jobs can play a pivotal role, as there is not going to be much employment available in the agricultural sector to absorb everybody. Among the seasonal and permanent migrant labourers, there is an overarching perception that Corona is predominantly an urban malady and primarily spreading in urban areas, and due to the lack of communication as to what this disease entails and lack of communication on the mortality rates and fatality of this disease, it is imperative to develop very well thought out government communication programme and a very consistent societal message going, which will incentivize ideationally for the migrant labourers to come back, address the issue of trust deficit, while ensuring social protection measures that will provide an impetus to economic activities subsequently. Public health communication is very critical at this juncture and as it is realistically impossible to follow physical distancing and host of other social distancing norms for the destitute migrant labourers sans basic wherewithal in terms of infrastructure, housing, water or sanitation, which are the worrisome elements of rural transmissibility, it is a harsh reality that there are not enough houses where sick people can quarantine themselves and basic civic amenities' infrastructure is really compromised. Incorporating innovation, adaptation and lesson-building in policy prescriptions can add a dynamic and prudent dimension to governmental decision-making in a systematic way, and side by side, the research and academic community in India needs to be mobilized effectively, as big learning and research agendas are needed for quickly engaging with policy labs. The variability of health systems and social safety nets are important issues in this context, and as the overall psychological and sociological burden on the migrant labourers is going to be substantial with mental health issues and psychosocial problems crippling economic initiative and threatening lives and livelihoods, counseling lines and health centres are needed and essentially, the public health establishment of the country needs to be more vigilant, responsive and agile in their approach.



Being a humanitarian, health and economic disaster of biblical proportions, the COVID-19 Pandemic has been perceived publicly as a greater threat to the Indian economy and the livelihoods of the people than their health, which make it necessary to carefully weigh the costs and benefits of government enforced shutdown. As millions of Indians are being thrown out of work, having no means of subsistence for a long period of time, it is imperative to pay more attention to the humanitarian consequences of this very harsh lockdown in India, and especially the dire consequences for the unorganized informal sector spearheaded by the migrant labourers. It is a chronic problem in public policy in India that the poor and vulnerable people count very little, as they do not have any significant access to any of the democratic institutions – whether it is the court or the media, and only in the case of voting, they have some sort of bargaining power, still for most of the impoverished masses, it is a bit of a shot in the dark. The sociopolitical ostracism, mass negligence, societal apathy, discrimination and ignorance with which the subaltern and impoverished majority of the Indian population has been subjected to for decades, has been only exacerbated by the Pandemic, and the COVID-19 Pandemic has exposed the dramatic way in which the migrant labourers were ignored and still are otherized for a considerable degree of time. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), more than 40 million migrant labourers have been stranded by the lockdown and 120 million Indians have lost their jobs during the Pandemic. When trains, buses and all means of public transportation were cancelled overnight, without batting an eyelid about the migrant labourers, who lost their livelihoods, had no place to stay without any sort of assistance, it reflected the collective ignorance and apathy of the state machinery towards the most vulnerable section of the population, that interestingly forms the backbone of the Indian economy. Several measures could have been adopted to make the lives and livelihoods of these migrant labourers easier – there were a lot of unused resources in this Pandemic situation that could have been utilized effectively, like empty buildings, enormous food grain reserves, public employees who did not have much to do due to sudden unemployment, and thus the government could have at least provided basic shelter, food and relief provisions to this section of the population. The acute governmental mismanagement has been demonstrated in the lack of any kind of advance relief plan at the time of imposition of the lockdown, and the way in which all forms of essential services were discontinued abruptly, like child immunization and inoculation programmes, or important departments in the health centres and employment guarantee work sites. Apart from having gigantic amount of food surplus in the nation, the centre has not been releasing adequate amount of food grains to the states to tide over the crisis, and the issue of food accounting, stalemate or chicken game between centre and the states has hindered the overall well-being of the most vulnerable section considerably.

It is an undeniable reality that migrant labourers are often first to be laid-off but last to gain access to medical testing or treatment in line with the nationals, and are unethically excluded from national COVID-19 policy responses, such as wage subsidies, unemployment benefits or social security and social protection measures. Where access to COVID-19 testing or medical treatment is available, they may not come forward due to the fear of detention or deportation, as their apprehension stem from their irregular status of employment. Domestic workers, home-based workers, agricultural workers and others in the informal economy are subjected to exclusion, owing to the fact that labour laws does not regard them as bona fide workers. Accompanied with severe travel restrictions and obstructions to mobility trapping and stranding the migrant labourers en masse, the layoffs of migrant labourers not only lead to income losses but also the expiration of work permits on contractual basis, putting a vast majority of them into undocumented or irregular status. Further irregular movements, potential debt bondage, human trafficking are immediate corollaries in this regard. Most of these migrant labourers work as construction workers, factory workers, drivers, maids, street vendors in the urban areas and as they have accidentally become the visible face of the problem due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, the families of these migrant labourers are still invisible from the societal lens. Since most of the migrant workers are young men in their youth employed as local casual labour, their pregnant wives, children, elderly relatives in their homes are even more vulnerable and are dependent on the frugal remittances that is nonexistent during the time of mass unemployment. Sociologically, these migrant labourers in terms of social groups are overrepresented by Scheduled Castes (SCs), Scheduled Tribes (STs), and Other Backward Classes (OBCs), tribal and other disadvantaged minorities and Dalits, who are mostly employed as seasonal and circular migrants and are treated as secondary citizens of the country due to their social status and occupational nature, suffering all forms of humiliation and discrimination. The impacts on women migrant workers appear to be compounded since they are overrepresented in the informal economy and are among the huge section of unorganized workers. Women migrant workers employed as front-line health and care workers are in a particularly high-risk group for COVID-19 and additionally, those who experience increased levels of violence or domestic abuse or sexual and physical harassment – in accommodation, at work places, in quarantine facilities or upon retrenchment and return home – now have much fewer options for support services. It is extremely tragic that many support



services for migrant workers and particularly addressing violence and abuse against women have been compelled to downscale, close or are online or phone-only models.

In majority of the cases, the migrant workers are unaware about their principal employers and only know their contractors, and in most of the cases they work with petty producers, who are marginally better off than the migrant labourers. Having no knowledge of their employers' whereabouts, being absolutely defenceless and helpless, these migrant labourers have no formal contracts and historically this community has been impoverished, landless and marginalized, whose present condition is horrendous. Migrating historically both before and after the colonial period from rural to urban areas, these people have been physically displaced from their native places mostly due to developmental projects and environmental factors, rather than in search of better employment opportunities. Although perceived as very important human resources, migrant labourers are chronically underpaid, are weak and vulnerable, and the governmental policy framework has been consistently favourable, partial and astute in favour of creating an entitled middle class, which is self-contained and has become extremely apathetic and insensitive during the Pandemic towards the plight of the migrant labourers. The relief programmes and other governmental responses are tailor-made to suit the interests of the privileged strata, and coming to the economic domain, most of the commercial units are registered under the Shops and Establishments Act, and not under the Factory Act, which makes it evident how the denial of the basic rights for the migrant labourers stem from there. Additionally, the physical and social distancing norms are realistically impossible for the migrant labourers to maintain and are only a luxury of the privileged rich and middle classes. Most of the migrant labourers are undocumented and unrecorded, often with no access to bank accounts, lacking Aadhar and ration cards, and apart from the phenomenon of inter-state and intra-state migration, there has also been the issue of migrants with transits, and few states in India had to create shelter homes and special centres for in-transit migrants. While there has been a massive disruption in the supply chain in rural India during the lockdown, Panchayats in the villages have struggled with extremely limited resources, responding inadequately to the crisis and constantly looking for food and other provisions. They are unable to purchase basic protective and care equipment, ration supplies for Anganwadi workers, who are the foot soldiers in building awareness and containment of COVID-19. It has also led to the sudden halt in nutrition and immunization programmes, which is very critical for maternal health and child care, and evolving strategies are required for looking into distribution of protective equipments and gears, providing food relief, and supporting health and emergency services on the ground. It is important to navigate and prudently deal through challenges like lockdowns, quarantine and social distancing, and continue with relief response through the implementation of various activities like prevention programmes through front line leaders, doing community support by helping with dry ration and relief, supporting medical facilities and hospitals with adequate measures, especially during a pandemic of this magnitude where all systems and mechanisms are disrupted due to a plethora of challenges.

REFLECTIONS, SOLUTIONS AND THE FUTURE

As per the International Labour Organization's policy recommendations, gender-sensitive, rights-based policies and measures can help to prevent human and labour rights abuses in the immediate term, reduce the recovery cost for essential businesses and services when the economy will rebound, and preserve the livelihood and social benefits of migrant labourers and their families in the medium-to-long term. The International Labour Organization has recommended voluntary and active cooperation with Ministries of Labour and all relevant ministries and stakeholders and has advocated an inclusive pluralistic approach in including women and minority migrant workers in national COVID-19 response strategies, which will ensure better protection of the health and safety of all migrant labourers and front line workers and prevent the spread of the disease. Inclusion of migrant labourers will help to mitigate the risk that the migrants will be left further behind, once the Pandemic subsides. Three areas of action are rudimentary, namely: the inclusion of migrant labourers in national COVID-19 response mechanisms and strategies; bilateral cooperation between places or states of origin and destination; social dialogue and full involvement of employers' and workers' organizations in the development of COVID-19 responses, and these are also relevant to inform responses in the protection of refugees and other displaced persons. Migrant workers' inclusion in the national COVID-19 policy responses can help to ensure the effective realization of equality, social justice and strengthen the dimension of labour and human rights properly.

Eminent Development Economist Jean Drèze has recommended the consolidation and expansion of the existing Public Distribution System (PDS) in India, vis-à-vis the enormous supply of surplus food stock reserves and in order to deal effectively with the present humanitarian, health and economic catastrophe, he has suggested that it is very urgent to expand employment opportunities under



the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) as soon as possible, to generate large-scale employment ensuring that the disadvantaged and vulnerable people have adequate access to essential resources and basic civic amenities. As elderly people, even among the most disadvantaged migrant labourers are the most vulnerable segment to the health crisis, many of them being impoverished, many of them are widows who are dependent on the daily wage earning migrant labourers for their survival, Social Security measures and pre-existing welfare and pension schemes in the Indian states ought to be consolidated and expanded immediately. According to him, despite reforming the PDS, existing Income Guarantee Acts or Social Security and welfare schemes and pensions, there are still a significant number of people who fall through the cracks and are vulnerable to hunger, and for those people it is necessary to develop emergency facilities like local community kitchens in villages or Anganwadi centres in the rural areas, and it is not impossible to organize these provisions as there is a very functional school meal programme in every government school in India, coupled with feeding programmes in the child care centres. It is necessary to immediately add some kind of relief component to these pre-existing programmes and governmental schemes so that everyone can be relieved out of hunger and destitution. The presence of some foundational social security programmes in India could be utilized in good effect in this ongoing crisis to protect the most vulnerable section from malnourishment, hunger and destitution, and it requires quick action, fair amount of financial resources primarily from the central government and effective cooperation from the local community and administration. Macroscopically, there is an urgent need to amalgamate and unite the foundations of social security and the health care system in India, as the nation has been paying a very big price for chronic under investment in public health for several decades, as exhibited in the fact that till date, the level of public expenditure on health care as a proportion of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has been barely one percent. There has to be much greater investment in health care and in improving the structural architecture of the medical establishment, and a decisive move towards the principal of universal health care, that is, health care is a primarily a social responsibility and not a fixed subject for private profit-making.

While addressing the harrowing migrant labour crisis in India during the COVID-19 Pandemic, another huge tragedy needs to be recognized in this context, which is the shameful wastage of human resources, partly because most of the people are not in good health, malnourished with very little school education and social security facilities, and this is what is creating an enormous reserve army of labour today, that is marooned in the unorganized and informal sector, working for extremely low wages in very exploitative conditions, subjected to systemic, institutionalized and societal discrimination and presently having no employment at all. Under investment in human resources has to be reformed and replaced with effective utilization of manpower as a lesson-learning experience. It is also important to avoid any sort of authoritarian approach in policymaking and have much more participatory and inclusive handling of the crisis, where people are empowered to fight the COVID-19 Pandemic together in unison. Several experts and analysts have advocated the release of more food grains from the central government to the states, pursuing the universalization of the Public Distribution System or the PDS and making full use of it, while immediately expanding the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA), consolidating social security pension schemes, distributing food rations through Anganwadi centres, community kitchens, relying on existing feeding programmes, implementing cash and in-kind transfers, as policy recommendations. It is vital to be aware of the illusion that the structural architecture and infrastructural establishment for cash transfers in the country is in place, which in reality, is very patchy and inadequate with humongous crowds and chaotic mismanagement of the migrant labourers standing at long queues before banks, even before the relaxation of the lockdown. The existing Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana is inefficient to tide over the crisis, as 500 rupees per month allowance is not the "Be-all and End-all" solution to the migrant labour crisis, and it is necessary to be prepared to consider innovative cash dispersal schemes like even cash in hand programmes at the work sites or at the ration shops, which is quick, spares the people the logistical hardships and protects them from all the glitches in the current payment system. India needs to develop a very strong humanitarian mandate that ensures food, shelter, health and livelihood to the migrant labourers and all the vulnerable sections of the population, with the provision of immediate and urgent relief assistance without incoherent delays, technical glitches and governmental mismanagement.

A remarkably important area that has been left neglected among the migrant labourers, apart from their families, has to be the issue of education among the children during the pandemic and lockdowns. The loss of learning among the children due to closure of schools will have a ripple effect on their enrollment, especially for girls, and the overall situation has highlighted the stark digital divide between the rural and urban areas, and as state and central governments have issued directives for online education, the non-availability of supportive digital infrastructure and inadequate conditions has been a deterrent. Different state governments have launched portals of online education just after the commencement of the lockdown, but owing to the significantly less percentage



of mobile penetration in the rural areas, the already vulnerable section would not be able to benefit from this initiative due to inaccessibility and logistical constraints. Additionally, what is happening with regard to the child helpline number 1098 is that, there has been innumerable instances of calls from children seeking help and protection from violence and domestic abuse, and it is a well known fact that physical and domestic abuse within the households has nearly doubled during the lockdown, and quarantine, social distancing, preventive isolation due to lockdowns has intensified myriad mental health issues. Also, while the new academic session has commenced, disadvantaged children from the families of migrant labourers in the rural and urban areas cumulatively are left without academic resources, and this disruption in guidance will lead to increase in the drop-out rates, particularly for that of the adolescent girls, who may have to face early and forced marriages. With severe resource constraint and lot of discontent on the ground, economic stress on the families of migrant labourers have put the children on a greater risk of increased rate of physical and psychological exploitation, and it is imperative to break the cycle of child migration and labour, and create positive life stories. As nutritional schemes, vaccination and immunization programmes are non-functional, it will negatively impact maternal health and child care, and as humongous number of children have fallen behind on education due to the closures of schools, and adequate financial support is required to raise the levels of learning. It is necessary to support the continuation of education of girl child from migrant families and to take them to schools with proper scholarship support. The COVID-19 Pandemic has brought to the fore the difference in digital infrastructure in rural and urban areas, and it is an essential requirement to bridge the digital divide in the long-term and universalize online education effectively. By creating sustainable income generation, rural-urban continuum, focusing on employability and entrepreneurship, disaster preparedness, a robust architectonic system can be created to tide over the crisis. Several models and paradigms should emerge at the local levels to stop forcible migration, support lives and livelihoods through bright opportunities.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), civil society organizations, altruistic individuals, volunteers and public-private partnerships like the American India Foundation (AIF) have been engaging proactively at the grassroots level to combat the debilitating pandemic and provide the necessary relief response to the migrant labourers and other vulnerable people, especially in the aftermath of the government enforced lockdown. The identification and documentation of migrant families in the urban areas would assist the governments concerned in detecting and estimating the extent of outward migration, apart from identifying the number of children that are going to be affected and simultaneously planning for their education. There needs to be effective strategies of creating state-specific migration monitoring cells to address migration, and institutions like these would facilitate inter-state collaboration, which will ensure the visibility of migrant labourers and address their comprehensive development. For instance, introducing Migrant Workers' Dashboard Registration, where building and other construction workers will be registered, to improve conditions of labour intensive industries to provide social security, health security, educational, financial benefits under many governmental schemes and programmes. Organizations like the AIF have been instrumental in proposing novel ideas and strategies to combat the migrant labour crisis in India, especially with the combination of Livelihood Advancement of Marginalized Populations (LAMP) and new Livelihoods Programme, which stands for Integrated Learning Employability and Entrepreneurship Advancement Programme. It is a four-way approach which starts at career guidance for school-going children, employability and entrepreneurship, financial literacy, finance and technical resource center for a larger community. The AIF has envisaged that by using existing learning resource centres run under LAMP in communities, where communities also participate and facilitate all these components – education for children during a particular time with career guidance for them, entrepreneurship for youth and women, financial training for a community, the community can use it as specific services, and it will be a cost-effective model that will reach out to many in danger.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, tangible and dynamic project work needs to be done at the local level with community, youth and migrant workers' participation, in order to enhance their lives and livelihoods and to ensure that they do not have to engage in distress seasonal migration in the future. Most vital long-term policy measure as an urgent prophylactic against prevailing migrant labour crisis, is to improve and correct all the structural norms at the macro and micro levels, viz. improve the urban infrastructure of poor people, invest substantially in community housing, invest in development of the areas where they live, provide them decent kind of housing and access to all the basic kind of civic amenities that are required for a healthy living, apart from stressing on the necessity of universalization of the Public Distribution System (PDS), that will make policies and programmes that will support migrant workers,



and lastly, implement some of the important stringent labour laws, which were meant to support the rights and liberties of the migrant labourers.

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Cite this Article: Abhigyan Guha (2021). Pandemic and the Predicament of Labour Migration: The Indian Experience of Mitigating the Multifaceted Dimensions of a Humanitarian Catastrophe. International Journal of Current Science Research and Review, 4(3), 234-241