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MIGRANT WORKER IN THE POST-COVID 19 ERA



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POLICY BRIEF

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Shamsher Singh*



PANDEMIC STUDIES UNIT



* Assistant Professor, Sociology, FLAME University, Pune, shamsherbham@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The crucial role that migrant workers play in keeping the wheels of the Indian economy running has been brought into sharp focus the year, the year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Livelihood-related migration tops the list of reasons for migration in India, a statistic brought to life in the mass exodus of migrants from city to village in wake of the March lockdown. The country is reported to have a migrant workforce of 482 million, dominated by men (Ministry of Finance, 2017 cited in Rajan and Sumeetha, 2020, p. 6). The structural changes in the post-liberalisation Indian economy have encouraged informal labour, which is where the overwhelming majority of the migrant workers are employed today. The employment and occupations they engage in are unskilled, highly precarious, physically taxing and often unsafe. Given that most of the migrant workforce is employed in the informal and unorganised sector, they are not entitled to social security provisions such as minimum wages, provident fund, pensions, paid leave and other allowances. Their poor bargaining power with their employers makes them vulnerable.

Another important aspect of the migrant workforce, especially of seasonal or circular migrants, is that the population from disadvantaged and marginalised social groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled and Nomadic Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Muslims, who usually comprise landless, small or marginal landholders, are over represented in this workforce (Srivastava 2020). Due to the relatively weak position they occupy in the socio-economic and political power structures, migrant workers are invisible in policy discourse and planning. This dimension enforces, along with class exploitation, social exclusion and oppression in the employment locations.

The nationwide lockdown imposed to curb the spread of the virus Corona brought out the vulnerability, insecurity, informality, highly exploitative working and dismal living conditions of migrant workers. Typically, these workers are hired in the cities or Urban Agglomerations (UA) in informal and casual employment in activities such as construction and infrastructure development, manufacturing units, hotels and restaurants, housekeeping, security, delivery services and other precarious jobs. Media reports and other independent studies have documented the plight of these workers. The lockdown caused the abrupt loss of livelihoods and denial and non-payment of wages, which in turn exacerbated other vulnerabilities like health-related anxieties and inability to buy basic items required for survival such as food and ration, medicines, and pay rent. (see ActionAid Association 2020; Kalhan, Singh and Moghe 2020; Srivastava 2020; SWAN 2020). All

this contributed to a mass exodus of the distressed and hungry migrant workers, who set out on foot, in rickshaws, handcarts, even containers, to reach their home towns and villages, covering hundreds and thousands of kilometers. A couple of hundred of them died on the way due to accidents, exhaustion, hunger, and suicide (Srivastava 2020).

Migration in India is typically from rural locations of backward or underdeveloped regions/states to urban centres or urban agglomerations of relatively more rich and developed states. The states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra account for more than half of the total interstate migrant workforce. Odisha, Jharkhand and West Bengal also contribute significantly in this (Census of India 2011). The inter-state, seasonal or circular, migrant workers were the worst hit by the lockdown. This section of the workers is differentially affected due to the absence of any domicile, kinship and local network support mechanisms. Not having any local residential proof and other documents leads to their exclusion from the existing social assistance and welfare schemes such as Public Distribution System (PDS), pensions and cash transfers. These conditions make their exclusion in the urban areas multi-dimensional. The lack of social and welfare support makes them rely heavily on the local contractors, more so in times of distress like this one.

These conditions demand multiple interventions and programmes from the government. In this document we discuss two policies recommendations.

Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme

Most of the migrant workforce in urban centres is engaged in informal and unorganised sector employment. The very nature of this kind of employment lacks security and recognition, and therefore there arises the need to have a demand-and-rights-based public employment guarantee scheme in urban areas. Such a scheme should ensure minimum employment and wage safety for the urban poor. The state of Kerala already has a scheme known as Ayyankali Urban Employment Guarantee Scheme (AUEGS) (<http://www.auegskerala.gov.in/>) which makes a provision of hundred days of employment in a year for adult members of households residing under urban administrative bodies. The Kerala scheme, with improvements, could serve as a workable model for the rest of the country. Such a scheme should ensure legal entitlement of a minimum of 200 days of employment on demand annually for each adult member of the urban population with

minimum daily wages. It should be designed to adapt to a wide variety of urban contexts and requirements. One of the significant additions or departures in the urban scheme from its rural counterpart (MGNREGA), as suggested by Unni and Panwar 2019, could be the provision of skill training and gainful self-employment, suiting the requirements of an urban workforce and economy.

One Nation One Ration Card

This is a scheme that was launched in June 2019, but needs to be streamlined and strengthened. The disastrous consequences of exclusion of migrant workers from subsidised food grain entitlements on account of being physically located in a state other than their home state were brought to the forefront by the Covid-19 pandemic. The ‘One Nation, One Ration Card’ (ONORC) scheme is an important intervention as it aims to ensure the delivery of food security entitlements to all beneficiaries covered under the National Food Security Act (NFSA), 2013, irrespective of physical location. The scheme is aimed at bringing inter-state portability of ration to all PDS beneficiaries, making it easier for migrant workers to access their ration entitlements in the place of their residence. As of now 28 States and Union Territories have been brought under the national portability of ration cards, and with the remaining States and UTs coming on board, it is expected to be implemented at national level by March 2021. As of now, there exists large-scale exclusion and under-coverage of the legally entitled food beneficiaries and ration card holders under the NFSA 2013 (see Khera and Somanchi 2020), and the ONORC must address this exclusion. In fact, the initial experience of the scheme has raised some serious questions about the operational aspects, e.g. lack of clarity on how the consistency between list of items and pricing will be ensured between the home State and the ration providing State. Another major concern is the exclusion caused due to the mandatory condition of seeding Aadhaar card with beneficiary's ration card through Aadhaar-based biometric authentication (ABBA) (see Panda and Kumar 2020).[†]

[†] Unfair exclusion, corruption and malpractices as a result of excessive technocratisation and heavy reliance on IT in the existing PDS system have already been noted (see Prakash and Masiero 2015; Hundal, Jajani and Chaudhari 2020).

It is critical that the concerns regarding the exclusion and under-coverage of PDS beneficiaries be addressed under the One Nation, One Ration Card scheme, and the long-standing demands of food rights campaigns of many activists for food security, universalising the PDS should be met. The mandatory condition of seeding Aadhaar cards with ration cards in the Integrated Management of Public Distribution System (IMPDS) should be done away with, as it leads to exclusion of a large section of beneficiaries. In addition to the above, Fair Price Shops should be opened in all localities where workers reside and should be easily accessible. Sufficient funds to be made available to provide a wide range of daily use items in these shops.

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