Covid-19 and Circular Migration in India

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Introduction

The lockdown in India in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was total and sudden. We do not have evidence in the public domain on the consultations that preceded it, either on public health containment strategies or the impact on the economy and workers. Workers in the informal economy, 93 per cent of all workers, suffered a loss of employment and incomes in the first phase of the lockdown, during which the entire economy, both agricultural and non-agricultural, ground to a halt. The country entered the third phase of the lockdown after May 3, during which there was a complete shutdown in the red-zone districts, including nearly all the growth centres and urban agglomerations, and a fourth and fifth phase from May 17 and June 1, in which several activities were allowed to resume, except in containment areas.

Informal workers, especially migrant labour from rural areas working in urban and peri-urban areas, have borne the major impact of the lockdown. Their loss of employment and incomes threatened access to food and non-food essential items, notably rented accommodation. In many cases, they were denied wage arrears for past work and lost their accommodation at their worksites. Circular migrants, who have a weak or no foothold in urban areas and the destinations where they work, began to leave urban centres in large numbers even before the start of the formal lockdown. After a few days of the lockdown, they emerged on the roads in large numbers out of hunger and dire desperation. The Central Government then issued new guidelines on the closure of State and district borders and pushed migrants to shelters and quarantine facilities.

In the first several weeks of lockdown, horrendous descriptions of the distress and hunger among these migrant labourers emerged, of how they attempted to travel thousands of miles on foot, on handcarts, on cycles, and inside containers and cement mixers. There are news reports of migrants dying on roads and rail tracks, of suicides, and of having been lathi-charged and tear-gassed when they came out on the streets

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in frustration and desperation; being mistreated en route to their home villages by the police; and made to feel unwelcome upon reaching them. Measures of support did not reach most or were inadequate (Jan Sahas 2020; SWAN 2020a; SWAN 2020b).

It is clear that the Central Government failed to understand the scale and nature of the problem faced by migrants despite two previous Commissions having analysed their issues and recommended measures (NCEUS 2007; GoI 2017). It further chose, in important instances, to interpret and deal with the issue of migrants as a law and order problem arising from what it considered the spread of misinformation and conspiracy.[1] At the same time, the government's response, which we explore in this paper, clearly establishes that its strategy was to cancel inter-State public transport, which severely restricted the means by which migrant workers could go home. In addition, labour laws were altered in the interests of capital.

Understanding the Nature of Rural–Urban Migration

Rural–urban migration primarily results from rural–urban differentials in growth and higher productivity and incomes in the urban industrial sector; this has been theorised by development economists for more than half a century (Lewis 1954; Harris and Todaro 1970; Todaro 1976). However, the vast movement of people from rural areas, within and across countries, has been structured by several factors other than voluntary forces at the household or individual level as envisaged in mainstream migration literature.

During the colonial era, large movements of people were structured by the pattern of colonial demand for labour in agriculture, mines, industry, armed forces, and infrastructure development (Srivastava and Sasikumar 2005). In the post-colonial period, the pattern of rural–urban migration has been structured by the nature of unequal development of capitalism in India. Unequal development has become significantly more pronounced in the post-liberalisation phase, exacerbating the gap between rural and urban areas and between laggard and rapidly growing regions. The most pronounced growth has occurred in agglomerated growth centres in and around large urban centres, mostly located in the northern, western, and southern regions of the country. It is these areas of growth around urban centres, along with the persistent lack of livelihoods in the hinterlands that are the major drivers of labour migration today (Srivastava 2011b).

The unequal pattern of development across regions is increasingly reinforced by demographic factors. As Srivastava *et al.* (2020) have shown, most receiving areas have low rates of growth of the potential labour force in the working age group, whereas the case is reversed for most sending areas; this pattern will be exacerbated in the coming years.

[1] Submission by the Home Secretary in the Supreme Court on March 31, 2020 (available at https://main.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2020/10789/10789_2020_0_1_21581_Order_31-Mar-2020.pdf, viewed on April 7, 2020).

Another aspect missed by mainstream development theory is that most rural populations are differentiated by class and social categories and this differentiation is closely associated with the distribution of land and physical assets on the one hand and human capital on the other. Out-migration from rural areas follows a U-shaped pattern in relation to the migrants' initial physical, educational, and social attributes, as described by Connell *et al.* (1976), which in turn leads to further stratification in terms of types of migration and job status in the destination areas (Srivastava 2011a). The socio-economic groups at the bottom of the rural pyramid face discrimination and continue to work at the most precarious jobs in segmented labour markets when they migrate to destinations (Srivastava 2019).

The precarity of labour is not only a function of the lack of endowments or specific attributes of workers but also follows from the way labour markets function. Labour markets are segmented and fragmented, with high control over the labour process and low wages. Contrary to what is normally believed and suggested by the overarching spatial patterns of labour migration, import of migrant labour and the expulsion of local labour are two sides of the same coin in many situations, making labour circulation, discussed below, a more complex spatial process than previously recognised (Breman 1985; Breman1994; Srivastava 1998; Srivastava 2011a).

Another important issue is the increasing recognition that rural–urban migration is no longer a one-way street. For decades, seasonal and circular migrants return to their villages after they expend labour in destination areas (Connell *et al.* 1976; Mukhopadhyay 1987; Breman 1985; Breman 1996; Standing 1985). Initially, most circular migration was associated with seasonal activities (Breman 2013). The National Commission of Rural Labour (NCRL) estimated that by 1990, there were already more than 10 million seasonal or circular migrants working in construction, brick kilns, quarries and mines, and spinning and rice mills (NCRL 1991). The NCRL also pointed out that estimates of migrants from the Census and the migration surveys by the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), both designed to estimate sedentary populations, failed to satisfactorily measure the number of seasonal or circular migrants. Breman's extensive work has documented how circular migrants can move from destination to destination for irregular periods, before returning to their area of origin (Breman 1985; Breman 1994; Breman 1996; Breman 2013).

The growth of circular migration is closely intertwined with the growth of informal employment in rural and urban areas.[2] In the context of India's low road to capitalist development, informality, circular migration, the labour market, and social discrimination and segmentation go hand in hand (Srivastava 2019).

Informality and labour circulation is a strategy by which capitalists raise profits through lower wage costs and higher absolute surpluses from labour (Breman 2013;

[2] See Srivastava (2011b); Srivastava (2016a); and Srivastava (2016b).

Srivastava 2011b). Indeed labour circulation is the key to understanding this arrested transition to formal employment. As capital has accelerated the use of flexible and informalised labour, it has taken advantage of existing inequalities and has fostered and encouraged the use of circular migrant labour. These migrants and their families draw partial subsistence from the rural areas so that capital does not have to provide them the full cost of subsistence. The state and capital continue to increase the cost of urban land and housing, creating a model of exclusionary urbanisation (Kundu 2009; Kundu and Saraswati 2016). Apart from resident labour, which comprises both long-term permanent and long-term circular migrants, growth centres have been able to use a pool of commuting and short-term circular migrants, who originate in rural areas but work in the urban areas as and when required. One implication of this is that the share of the urban and peri-urban workforce is much higher than what is conveyed by the distribution of the rural–urban population.[3] The precarious and vulnerable part of this workforce comprises the short-term circular migrants, the vast majority of the long-term circular migrants, and a section of the permanent migrants.

Circular Migration in India

Rounds 55 and 64 of the National Sample Surveys (NSS) on Employment-Unemployment and Migration, pertaining to the years 1999-2000 and 2007-08 attempted to gather information on short duration outmigration for employment. But these surveys could not fully capture the magnitude of short-term seasonal or circular migrants as most of them, other than those in agriculture, migrate for periods longer than six months (this was taken as the upper limit for the duration of short-term migration in the NSS).[4] The Census provides a satisfactory measure of permanent and semi-permanent migration, but is not designed to measure short-term circular migration (Srivastava and Sasikumar 2005; Srivastava 2011a; Srivastava 2012b).[5]

Long-term circular migrants are thus those migrants who still consider their areas of origin as their primary or secondary homes. Seasonal or short-term circular migrants differ from permanent migrants and long-term circular migrants in having no footing in the destinations where they work. Most reside at their worksites or in

[3] The National Statistical Organisation (NSO) (previously NSSO) surveys on employment provide estimates of the workforce residing in rural and urban areas. They also provide estimates of the workforce by place of work reported by them (rural, urban, or no fixed place). By place of enumeration, the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017–18 date estimates indicate that 48.8 percent of non-agricultural workers were resident in rural areas, and 51.2 percent in urban areas. When adjustment is made for place of work, then only 39.7 percent workers report working in rural areas, and 51.4 percent in urban areas, while 8.9 percent workers report having no fixed place of work (rural or urban).

[4] The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) also estimated seasonal migration, but came up with a low figure (Srivastava *et al.* 2020).

[5] Migrants who have moved to urban areas on a permanent basis with little or no links to their areas of origin are considered to be permanent migrants; migrants who have moved to urban areas but retain links with their areas of origin and could return to these areas are considered to be semi-permanent or long-term circular migrants.

the open, whereas a small percentage lives in crowded rental spaces. Some may eventually join the ranks of long-term circular migrants.

Short-term circular migrants are heterogenous in terms of employment conditions, modes of recruitment, and other characteristics, and largely unskilled, but with a section of semi-skilled and self-employed workers. Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes are over-represented among them. In contradistinction to permanent migrants, they are from poorer landless households. Other than those in services or the self-employed, a large majority of the wage employed are recruited through a chain of intermediaries (Srivastava 2012b). The India Human Development Survey (IHDS) shows that nearly half of all short-term circular migrants are recruited through contractors. The starting point of their recruitment is a cash advance, which immobilises them for the duration of employment. In a number of sectors such as construction, brick kilns, and quarries, contractors give workers a subsistence allowance and adjust their full wages against advances at the end of their period of employment (Srivastava 2009).

These migrants enjoy a tenuous relation with their home villages and have no civic rights or entitlements in the areas where they work. This includes lack of access to the public distribution system (PDS) and even to banks (Srivastava 2012b; Srivastava 2012a). In this paper, the concern is with short-term and long-term circular migrants, i.e., those who still consider their areas of origin as their primary or secondary home.

Estimates of Vulnerable Circular Migrants

We define vulnerable migrants as *all* short-term circular migrants plus those long-term circular and permanent migrants in urban areas who are vulnerable because of the nature of their employment or level of consumption.[6]

Short-Term Circular Migrant Workers

Using the estimates based on the NSS Migration Survey, 2007–08,[7] of the industry-wise composition and magnitude of short-term migrants by industry, and independent estimates of circular migration in the construction industry,[8] we are able to estimate

[6] In Srivastava (2011a), we carefully assessed the industry-wise incidence of short-term circular migration and concluded that there were about 40 million such migrant workers. We then considered all migrants in lower monthly per capita expenditure deciles and concluded that there were a total of about 80 to 90 million vulnerable migrant workers in the Indian economy, that is, one in every five workers was a vulnerable migrant worker.

[7] These estimates are made from unit records of information gathered in Schedule 10 of the India - Employment, Unemployment and Migration Survey: NSS 64th Round, July 2007–June 2008.

[8] In a recent study (Srivastava 2018), we estimated that a quarter of all construction workers were short-term, interstate circular workers, whereas 50 to 60 per cent were short-term circular migrants including intrastate migrants. About 30 to 40 per cent of the construction workers were commuting or non-migrants, and 10 per cent were long-term migrants (Srivastava 2018). This would imply a circular migrant workforce of at least 24.9 million in 2011 and 26.4 million in 2017–18 in the construction industry alone.

Table 1 *Estimates of short-term circular migrant workers by destination, India, 2011–12 and 2017–18* in million

Year	Total	Rural	Urban
2011—12	51	11	40
2017—18	58	14	44

Source: Computations based on NSS 64th Round (2007–08), NSS 68th Round (2011–12), PLFS (2017–18), and Srivastava (2018).

the under-estimation in the largest industry employing the largest number of short-duration circular migrants. Assuming a similar underestimation in all sectors except agriculture in which most circular migrants are short-term, we estimate that there were about 51 million short-term circular migrants in 2011-12. This number would have gone up to 58 million in 2017-18. A breakdown of the estimated numbers of short-term circular migrants by major destination is given in Table 1. Of the 58 million estimated short-term circular migrants, 44 million migrated to urban areas.

Long-Term Circular Migrant Workers

The estimates of migration provided by the Census and the NSSO include both permanent and semi-permanent (long-term circular) migrants, however obtaining estimates only of the latter is more complicated. For this, we have used the information provided by the NSS Migration Survey (2007-08) on long-term out-migrants. The NSS Migration Survey of 2007-08 provides comprehensive data on four types of migration. Apart from in-migration based on the usual place of residence approach, the NSS Survey also provides information on short-duration employment-related migration (discussed above), migration by entire households, and non-resident out-migrating members of households. The latter is the most comprehensive description we have of long-term circular migration because it provides data on out-migrants who are perceived to be non-resident members of households, many of whom also continue to send money to their homes. These detailed estimates of out-migration and in-migration from the NSSO (2007–08) have been combined with 2001 and 2011 Census data and projected for recent years to obtain updated figures for long-term migration.[9]

Vulnerable Interstate Circular Migrants

All short-term circular migrants are defined as vulnerable because they are employed on a temporary or seasonal basis. We consider other workers to be vulnerable if (i) they

[9] The 2001 Census of India published 21 detailed migration tables. Due to the pandemic, at the time of writing this paper in May 2020 (one month after the house listing operations of the 2021 Census were to begin), the Registrar General of India has only published 11 migration tables for 2011. Crucially, two important tables – D-08 and D-09, which give the profile of migrant workers by place of last residence and industrial and occupational categories, respectively–have not yet been published. We have therefore assumed worker participation rates based on the 2001 Census. On the basis of reasonable assumptions and projections, the numbers of all vulnerable long-term circular migrant workers, whether intra-state or interstate, is estimated at 56 million in 2011 and 68 million in 2018.

Table 2 *Vulnerable interstate migrant workers, India, 2011 and 2018* in million

		2011	2018
Interstate (all)	Long-term circular	20	24
	Short-term circular	25	28
	Subtotal	45	52
Interstate urban	Long-term circular	15	19
	Short-term circular	22	24
	Subtotal	37	43

Note: Estimates of long-term circular migrants are based on computations from the NSS Migration Survey, 2007–08 and Census data for 2001 and 2011, and projections. Estimates of short-term circular migrants are based on estimates reported in Table 1.

are informal, (ii) in the bottom four quintiles in terms of their per capita consumption, or (iii) in lower occupational categories five to nine, as per the National Classification of Occupations (NCO) classification.[10] In this paper, occupational vulnerability as defined in (iii) is used as an indicator of worker vulnerability.

As far as vulnerable interstate migrant workers (both urban and rural) are concerned, we estimate 20 million long-term and 25 million short-term vulnerable migrant workers in 2011. These figures have been projected to increase to 24 and 28 million respectively (52 million in total) in 2018. Estimates are given in Table 2.

Among interstate urban migrant workers, there were an estimated 15 million long-term circular migrants and 22 million short-term circular migrant workers in 2011. These figures are projected to increase to 19 million and 24 million (total 43 million), respectively, in 2018 (Table 2).

Interstate circular migration is dominated by lower income states – Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, followed by West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha. Large, middle, and high income States such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu also draw on significant labour reserves from within their own boundaries. In recent years, there is also evidence to show increased migration from the eastern to southern states, which is not yet fully captured by the macro data.

Circular migrants are spread across the construction, agricultural, manufacturing, mining, and service sectors, and the figures above convey that they form the mainstay of the urban and peri-urban workforce as well as the informal non-agricultural workforce as a whole. In absolute numbers, seasonal migrants are also important in agriculture and concentrated in vulnerable occupations in the informal

[10] The NCO 2004 puts the following groups of occupations in codes 5 to 9: 5. Service workers and shop and market sales workers. 6. Skilled agricultural and fishery workers. 7. Craft and related trades workers. 8. Plant and machinery operators and assemblers. 9. Elementary occupations.

economy. These workers, along with their accompanying family members, have been impelled to return to their villages because of the lack of food and wages, absence of accommodation or having cramped living conditions, or simply the desire to reunite with their families.[11] The Central Government has neither recognised the magnitude of labour migration nor its centrality in the labour process in growth centres.

The Pandemic and Circular Migrants

All populations, including circular migrants, were immobilised in the areas where they were located even before the Janata (People's) Curfew was announced by the Prime Minister on March 20. Trains began to be cancelled on March 19 and ceased to operate after March 21, and similarly, air travel reduced and then was halted on March 22. Migrants who wanted to return were stranded in destination areas. All work ceased with the lockdown, reducing incomes and employment of informal workers. Those who lost access to the sites in which they were living and working were stranded on the roads. As the lack of income hit the migrants, they attempted to return to their villages by any means possible.

As workers started leaving, the Centre issued orders on March 29, imposing strict State- and district-level lockdowns and directed that migrants on the road be sent to quarantine facilities and shelters. On April 19, the Central Government issued a fresh notification allowing migrants in shelters to be deployed for work *within the States* in which they were sheltered. In response to the increasing pressure, the Centre issued another notification on April 29 stating that stranded migrant labourers could travel home, subject to a strict protocol, but only by bus. These orders were clearly directed at restricting the long-distance movement of migrants from western and southern States to the eastern ones, while simultaneously utilising their labour as and when required in the States where they were stranded. The arrangements for travel were left to interstate negotiation, with the Centre sidestepping any responsibility for coordinating or financing travel. On May 1, the Ministry of Railways issued a notification with guidelines on the transportation of stranded migrants, making it the responsibility of the State Governments and the labourers themselves to bear the cost of travel. On May 3, the Central Government issued yet another notification that twisted and narrowed the definition of "stranded" migrant as one who had reached the destination area immediately before lockdown, thus effectively excluding all migrant labourers including circular

[11] It is not the contention of this paper that all circular migrants have been equally impelled to return to their native places. This depends on their circumstances before and during lockdown. Our investigation reveals that a number of interstate migrants returned to their native villages in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in early March due to the Holi festival and had remained there for the harvest season. Many others have continued to live in peripheral worksites and could not consider returning without the consent of their contractors/employers. Thus, the numbers who returned during lockdown or are still stranded at destinations can only be speculated upon, although even after the exodus that has been witnessed till the end of May, the number of those stranded still remains very large. In a recent averment to the Karnataka High Court, the State Government reported that less than one-third of those who had registered on the State's Seva Sindhu portal – 256,000 of 913,742 – had been able to return home on the special trains (Johnson 2020).

migrants from the definition of "stranded migrants." Even as the government launched a coordinated campaign to bring home stranded populations from abroad (students, migrant workers, and tourists), the same government did not allow for stranded circular migrants. On May 6, the Governments of Karnataka used this notification, under pressure from builders, to cancel train arrangements, to persuade migrants to remain in the States and work for the construction industry. This decision was later reversed after strong opposition from workers and other political parties claiming that the government wanted to hold workers in bondage (Sharma, Sareeen, and Dixit 2020).

Railways claimed that about 3.5 million workers were able to avail travel on 2,600 special trains in the first 23 days and that they could transport another 3.6 million to their home States over the next 10 days (Jagannath 2020). The most vulnerable migrants, in peripheral locations and on worksites, are unlikely to either have the resources or the ability to fulfil the procedures laid down in the upcoming weeks. The mobility of many such workers is still being controlled by middlemen and contractors. The Central Government, in its submission to the Supreme Court of India on May 27, averred that 9.1 million migrants had been transported, out of which 4.1 million had been transported by buses. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were destination states for 80 percent of these migrants (HT Correspondent 2020).

Nevertheless, millions of migrant labourers, in desperation, trudged back to their villages since the beginning of the lockdown. There was been a steady stream of circular migrants walking back to their home States and villages, several thousands of miles away as soon as the second lockdown was announced. Migrants sold whatever they had, including mobile phones, to buy bicycles or used pushcarts or huddled dangerously inside containers and concrete mixers in the absence of transport. Several hundred did not survive the journey. On May 7, one such worker and his wife leaving Uttar Pradesh for Chhattisgarh on a purchased bicycle with their children, met with a fatal accident, leaving behind the children as survivors (Scroll Staff 2020). Sixteen others died on train tracks in Maharashtra while resting (Banerjee and Mahale 2020). Several hundred migrants have died in accidents, from suicides, or due to lack of food and water during travel since the lockdown. Despite this, large numbers of migrants did reach their villages, even after facing hostility from the local dominant elite. This is an urban exodus that India has never seen before.

Analysing the Response of the Central Government

In assessing the actions of the Central and State Governments from the start of the lockdown, several facts become clear. First, the Central Government may not have initially understood the scale, magnitude, and nature of the problem of stranded populations in general, and the issue of stranded migrant labour, in particular. This lack of understanding stemmed from the absence of consultations on the lockdown and its implications. Once the scale and implications of the problems became

clearer, the Centre's response was to direct State Governments to immobilise these workers and retain them in shelters and quarantine facilities. The successive notifications issued were unduly restrictive, and at each stage, placed barriers to migrants' repatriation. No other needs of the workers and their families were recognised by the Central Government. The requirement of payment of wages during the lockdown period was initially passed on to employers through a series of orders – impossible to implement – only to be summarily withdrawn. The Centre denied stranded workers any compensatory wages and/or emergency income support through income transfers as seen in its submissions to the Supreme Court. Protests and attempts at securing mobility by migrant workers were treated as violation of the law, and attempts by some to spread misinformation (Mumbai Mirror 2020).

Secondly, the Central Government has refused to take responsibility for providing assistance to migrants or to enlarge the meagre scope of assistance initially provided under the Prime Minister's Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). The latest announcement under the Rs 20 lakh crore package announced by the Prime Minister does not cover their urgent needs.[12] It has also steadfastly refused to take any responsibility for coordinating the interstate movement of migrant workers while simultaneously issuing detailed guidelines that have locked workers into an impossible bureaucratic imbroglio.

Government guidelines make it amply clear that its overriding concern was to provide a committed workforce to industry, leaving the responsibility to States to take care of the workers' distress. The May 6 meeting of the Minister and Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment with central trade unions confirmed that the Central Government did not want migrant workers to return to their homes but to wait in their destinations, at employers' beck and call, to be put to work when industrial employment picks up again (Nath 2020).

Response of the State Governments

The Centre left it to the States to bear the burden of implementing the lockdown and to protect citizens against its adverse economic impact. It has neither augmented the administrative capacity of States nor provided them additional financial resources other than limited amounts under the Special Disaster Relief Fund to meet the challenge of implementation.

States, on their own part, have followed variations of the strategy permitted by the central guidelines with respect to migrant workers. We must note that Kerala

[12] A single announcement of immediate importance is the provision of five kg of cereals per person and one kg of gram to each migrant family that does not have a PDS card. The implementation responsibility rests with the States. An additional budgetary allocation has also been made for Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS).

emerged as an outlier among States by announcing a comprehensive package for protection of livelihoods of workers, including migrants, soon after the lockdown began.

States initially responded by tightening control on migrant movement and arranging shelter/quarantines and food for them. This was done either from a humanitarian perspective or from the perspective of implementing a coercive lockdown. Again, Kerala set up the largest proportion of shelters, though the State does not account for a significant percentage of circular migrants.[13]

State Governments also announced ex gratia payments from the Building and Other Construction Workers' Welfare Fund for workers registered under this fund. These payments have ranged from Rs 1,000–1,500 (16 States) to Rs 2,000–3,000 (8 States) and Rs 4,500 and above (5 States). In most States, interstate migrant workers are not even registered under the welfare boards, and a high proportion of them are employed in industries other than construction (Srivastava 2020). Telangana and Kerala announced an ex gratia payment for migrant workers early on in the second phase of the lockdown. Similarly, an initiative was taken by Jharkhand, followed by Bihar, which announced an ex gratia payment of Rs 1,000 per worker. Apart from these ex gratia payments, some States followed up with additional payments and provision of rations even to workers not registered in the PDS. As the migrant crisis escalated, origin States announced measures to support stranded migrant workers.

At the same time, there has been significant reluctance on the part of States to send or receive migrant workers. The procedures established for their return are hugely complex.[14] There has been a constant tussle between the sending and receiving States, and between these States and the Railways, reflecting lack of coordination, lack of consensus on sharing responsibility and costs, and ambivalence to send as well as receive migrants. On May 6, as pointed out earlier, Karnataka officially took the position that there would be no special trains so as to ply migrants on the plea that they were needed to service local industry. Although this order was withdrawn a day later, the same reticence can also be seen in several other States. On May 7, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, and Gujarat requested the Uttar Pradesh Government not to receive migrants (Hebbar 2020). These responses on the behalf of destination States are principally due to pressure from capital, which is threatened by the exodus of workers. On the other hand, receiving States too are worried about their capacity to meet the challenging situation posed by the return of migrants. On May 7, the High Court of Odisha threw a further spanner in the works by ordering

[13] In a submission to the Supreme Court on April 5, 2020, the Central Government stated that the Government of Kerala had set up 15,541 (68.9 per cent) out of 22,567 government shelters nationwide, accounting for 302,016 (47.8 per cent) of 631,109 migrants in government shelters.

[14] Bearing in mind that they have to meet them while living in red zones, where being seen on the streets can attract penalties.

that migrants be tested negative for Covid-19 before being received by the State – this order was stayed by the Supreme Court.

Implications for Migrants and the Rural and Urban Economies

The lockdown in India has had a huge negative impact on informal workers in both rural and urban areas (though somewhat less on agricultural workers). Among informal workers, migrant workers have been affected most adversely. Though short-term seasonal migrant workers, being hurtled into job loss and lack of access to food and shelter, have borne the brunt of the lockdown, many long-term circular migrants working in the urban informal economy have also been affected. The Prime Minister's relief package (PMGKY) and subsequent measures announced by States either did not reach most migrant workers or were grossly inadequate in supporting them and their families.

Migrant workers should have been given the time and opportunity to reach their homes at the beginning of the crisis. Now, they face a much greater risk of exposure to infection in the destination areas and have to overcome huge odds to be reunited with their families. None of this has deterred them from trying to return to their homes. Regardless of lukewarm responses by States, a steady stream of migrant workers left their destination States on foot and by every means possible to travel thousands of miles away to their villages. This has swelled the ranks of the pauperised rural labour force in the source area in the context of low real wage growth in rural areas in recent years (Das and Usami 2017). The return of migrants will affect wages and intra-household allocation of work and labour, further marginalising women's employment. On the other hand, a little over one-fifth of circular migrants work in agriculture, and about a quarter of them work as interstate labourers, according to the 2007–08 NSS data. So if migration is curtailed, it would affect labour supply in the regions using migrant labour in agriculture, causing local wages to rise in some receiving areas.

Source States are now making plans for registration, skill mapping, and employment of migrant workers. In most cases, concrete plans have yet to be established. Odisha is the first major State to announce a plan of Rs 17,000 crores for rural development and the revival and growth of micro, small, and medium enterprises so as to provide employment to returnee migrants, among others (Express News Service 2020).

In the destination areas, the situation continues to be complicated. As the economies begin to open up, there is restricted demand for workers from industry, which cannot absorb the entire erstwhile migrant labour force. Many migrants are stranded in their worksites, and there are reports that some are being held back with a combination of coercive measures and the promise of future employment. Eventually, some of them may be absorbed as activities revive, but for many others

the desperate situation in facing the compounded challenges of infection risk in crowded living conditions and unemployment will continue for some time.

The complete withdrawal of the Central Government from offering any help to distressed migrants is an astonishing, but not unexpected, part of the story. The Central Government, despite its constitutional and financial obligations, has held on to its purse strings and even maintained a tight control over relief funds, which should have been used to alleviate the distress of the migrants. Only Rs 33,300 crores were initially sanctioned for MGNREGS till June 2020, which included Rs 20,225 crores to meet wage arrears, compared to an actual expenditure on MGNREGS in 2019–20 of Rs 71,000 crores.[15] An additional Rs 40,000 crores has been allocated as part of the package of measures announced in the third week of May 2020. However, no relaxation has been made to the rules to expand operations under the scheme.

Although States, particularly source States, are constrained in terms of administrative and fiscal capacity, they too are generally not doing enough, with some exceptions. This is mainly because migrants form the most invisible core of the workforce and are at the bottom of the pyramid. At the same time, States led by those with the same political dispensation as the Centre also announced that they would bypass all labour regulations. This move is part of an action plan promoted by the Central Government to encourage industry and foreign investment during this deep crisis.

Thus, the only coherent strategy that can thus be discerned across several States and the Centre is that the state and capital are hoping to utilise the pauperised mass of labour to their own advantage by increasing the extraction of absolute surplus through lengthening of working time and lowering of wages. However, this view is myopic. The destination areas are growth centres that require these workers and their acquired skills. Some sectors have begun to feel an acute shortage of workers. In the medium term, despite their acute distress and psychological aversion to their recent destination areas, most migrant labourers may return to these areas because they no longer have an attachment to rural work and the underlying differential in employment and wages between rural and urban areas would eventually assert itself. So, the mismatch between labour demand and supply in destination regions could be made short and temporary, reducing economic costs of recovery, only if employers and the state are able to implement strategies for decent work and living conditions for workers. In the meanwhile, given that this still implies that the rural labour force may temporarily expand, source States will need a strategy of rural regeneration to absorb these workers. If this strategy can also reduce acute regional imbalances, it can also play an important part in reducing the asymmetric costs of migration.

[15] Press release, available at https://rural.nic.in/press-release/minister-rural-development-panchayati-raj-and-agriculture-farmers%E2%80%99-welfare, viewed on May 12, 2020.

The pandemic has provided us several other lessons. First, when the state and capital invest in workers' health, including housing and access to basic amenities, public health is an important externality.

Secondly, the devastating circumstances of the migrants remind us that labour market segmentation needs to be addressed with registration and formalisation of the workforce and greater job security for informal workers, including the circular migrants. However, the state has so far moved inexorably in a reverse direction, removing existing labour and employment protections and further informalising the entire workforce.

Thirdly, the grim situation of the migrant workers reinforces the need to institute an adequate social protection floor for all workers. There is an immediate requirement for income transfer for a few months to compensate informal workers for their income losses during lockdown.

At the macro level, this neglect of workers is bound to exacerbate the problem of aggregate demand and decelerate eventual recovery. The pandemic should have provided an opportunity to gear the economy for more equitable and inclusive development. Instead, within a short period, it appears that the state and capital have decided to continue on the low road to capitalist development.

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