

# Conceptualizing Causes and Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Migration Patterns in India: A Comprehensive Review

## ABSTRACT-

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on migration patterns in India. The pandemic-induced lockdowns and travel restrictions led to a massive reverse migration of labourers from urban centres back to rural areas, disrupting both livelihoods and regional economies. About 91 per cent of the total workforce in the country is from the informal sector, which include mostly daily wage workers such as agricultural labourers, migrant and other workers. According to the Indian government's data, close to 263 million people are involved in the agriculture sector and more than half of them are part of agricultural labour who do not own farmland but work on others for farm owners, wages, harvest the crops and support the sale of the crops at the mandis (market place). This vulnerable section of people experienced the worst situations during this pandemic of COVID-19 global insurgence. The paper therefore, focuses on the review of the conceptual framework of migration and its triggering causes, as well as highlights the impact of the pandemic on migration. Furthermore, the paper examines the immediate challenges faced by migrants and labourers, including loss of employment, lack of access to social services, and heightened health risks.

**Keywords-** COVID-19, Pandemic, Migration, Labour, India.

## INTRODUCTION-

Migration is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has shaped human societies throughout history. It involves the permanent or semi-permanent movement of individuals or groups from one geographical location to another, driven by a variety of social, economic, political, and environmental factors. According to Census 2011, Government of India, the nation has 1210.19 million people, of which 833.1 million (68.84%) living in rural areas and 377.1 million (31.16%) living in urban areas. Out of total population, 623.72 million (51.54%)

are men and 586.46 million (48.46%) are women. The country is having 68.84% of rural population out of which 37.8% of population are migrants; 56.6% of workers depend on agriculture and allied activities (Census 2011).

SL. NO	OCCUPATION CATEGORIES	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
1.	Legislators, senior officials professionals and managers	11.42	6.02	9.69
.2	Technicians, associate professionals and clerks	12.13	9.98	11.44
3.	Service workers and shop and market sales workers	19.3	8.8	15.92
4.	Skilled agricultural and fishery workers	2.35	16.59	6.91
5.	Craft and related trades and plant and machine operators/assemblers	50.22	44.4	48.34
6.	Elementary occupations and workers not classified by occupation	4.62	14.2	7.7
	<b>TOTAL PERCENTAGE</b>	100	100	100
1.	Number of migrant workers (non-agri) (in million)	44.04	20.92	64.96

Table 1. Migrant Workers (other than cultivators and agricultural labourers) in India by Occupation (percentage) (Source- Census 2011).

The Census 2011 data show that, in India, a large proportion of migration of the workers is within the district and to the other districts within the state (Figure 1). Around one-fourth of

the total migration is to the other state. The migration of workers is more in urban areas due to the availability of educational and employment opportunities.

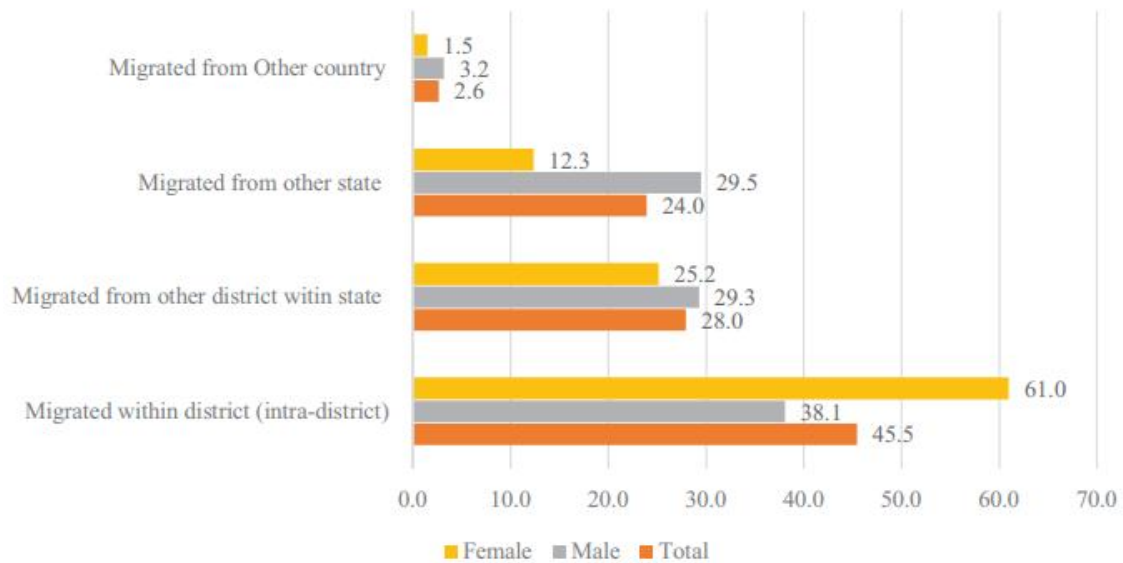


Figure 1. Percent distribution of migrant workers by type of migration (Source- Census 2011).

The COVID-19 with its increasing rate day by day have an enormous effect on the migration pattern of rural households besides their health point of view. The global lockdowns and restrictions of human activities imposed to curb the spread of the pandemic led to the abrupt halting of both internal and international migration flows. This situation exposed the vulnerabilities of labour migration. Millions of migrant workers, who are integral to various sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and agriculture, found themselves stranded without work or resources. Internal migration, which involves movement within the country, was dramatically affected by the lockdown measures and economic disruptions. Millions of migrant workers, who typically moved from rural areas to urban centers for employment, found themselves stranded as industries were shut down and transportation links were halted. This led to a significant and often chaotic reverse migration, with workers returning to their home states, facing hardships along the way.

The worst outcome was faced by the rural poor who had arrived at the more industrialized and affluent parts of the country to toil as wage labourers, often receiving small, uncertain, and irregular incomes. During the lockdown, an estimated 14 crore (140 million) people lost employment while salaries were cut for many others. More than 45% of households across the nation have reported an income drop as compared to the previous year. (Dev & Sengupta,2020).

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS-**

The study was conducted based on the review of past literature and documents with the help of several scholarly databases and online sources. The primary databases such as Web of Science, Peer-reviewed articles, conference papers and different sources such as journals, articles, books, newspaper articles, websites etc. pertinent to concept of migration, its causes and impact of covid-19 on migration were referred in order to get insight into different facets of migration.

## **MIGRATION: A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING -**

Migration is defined as a move of some specified minimum distance that was made during a given migration interval and that involved a change of residence (United Nation, 1970). It can also mean the permanent departure of a collectivity known as migrants from one geographical area to another, preceded by the migrants' decision-making based on a hierarchically ordered set of values and valued ends, which modifies the migrants' interactional system (Mangalam,2014). It is also defined as a movement of people from 'low opportunity' areas to 'high opportunity' areas for betterment in life. It is customary to club the drivers of migration into two categories, namely pull, and push factors (Kurane&Topno ,2006). "Migration can also be defined in physiological terms that it is a movement of people from one place or location to another, which is not of a casual nature, as a visit or a tour rather" (Sundari,2005). Migration is necessarily a pre-emptive move that drives humans to seek better prospects. Castles (2008) defined "migration as embedded in political, ethnic, familial and communal relationships which including complex social networks and relationships that strengthen collective agency among migrants and their communities, and

that influence and mediate the dynamic interaction between structure and agency in migration processes. It is also defined as a contractual system or a system of co-insurance, where the extended family bears the costs both economic and social for education, migration, loss of productive member, social support at home in return for remittances, savings, higher social status and diversification of livelihoods and treated migration as a component of rational markets which is tending towards equilibrium and driven by (rational) economic decision-making of individual migrants and/or their households" (De Hann,2003).

"Migration is motivated by a desire to seek skill and that leads to development, urbanization, and socio-economic transformation" (Saxena,1977). Fawcett in his study "Networks, linkages, and migration systems" described and explained the nature, magnitude, destinations and the driving forces of migration. "Networks are defined as a self-determining system, which reduces the cost and risk by enhancing physical and psychological support of migrants at the destination. These supports may, in turn, increase the probability of a migrant's decision to move to that particular place and enlarge the network further. After gathering a size, the network would be self-sufficient to eventually propagate migration without the need for primary economic reasons. Dominant theory suggests that both 'push' factors such as low wages or high unemployment at source (the HT framework), and 'pull' factors such as chronic and unavoidable need of workforces at destinations are 'causal' to the migration process" (Stark,1991).

Wages and moving costs also influence the choice of destinations of migration (Berger & Blomquist, 1992). The New Economics of Labour Migration (NELM) saw labour migration as a strategy to reduce household risk, increase income and at the same time to overcome the constraints created by market imperfection (De Haan,1999). When workers do not get any option for livelihood and employment and there is expectation in higher economic improvement in the place of origin, labour migration takes place (Lall, Selod and Shalizi ,2006). In most of the cases, external determinants such as income differentials, distance, population density, social proximity, and amenities effect the migration (Fafchamps& Shilpi,2008).

Rowthorn (2010) examines "the external forces of migration and suggests that migration of rural population is not only caused by poverty, land reforms, division of land, lack of

employment opportunities, and natural calamities but also due to unequal development among regions, policy-level changes affecting poor people by enhanced risk in one hand, and creation of opportunity on the other". De Haas (2010) explained that "the migration of a specific area is also determined by the migrant's social network". "The contemporary theories of migration suggest that decisions to move or stay and the overall patterns of movement are closely related to economic conditions in places of destination and origin, relationships that connect people between origins and destinations and the accumulated experiences at destinations among individuals and members of their community" (Haas,2012).

Male migration to urban areas has been mainly due to lack of employment opportunities, agricultural crisis and small landholdings in rural areas and better opportunities in urban areas (Keshri& Bhagat ,2013). 'Population displacement' is often found to be related to environment-induced migration and is another external cause of migration (Gemenne& Brucker ,2015). Zhou & Li (2016) explained a recent research trend called 'cross-space consumption' which expounds a form of transnational practice, which suggests that a motive of migration could be enhancing the utility of consumption where the value difference of money comes from spatial differences.

Ravenstein listed seven laws of migration – the majority of migrants go only a short distance; it proceeds in stages; the process of dispersion is the inverse of that of absorption; each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current; migrants proceeding long distances prefer the great centres of commerce or industry; the town dwellers are less migratory than rural people, and females are more migratory than males (Biagi & Dotzel,2018).

### **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON MIGRATION PATTERN-**

"The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted migration patterns and the lives of migrants worldwide, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and creating new challenges. It is reported that when a disease has an epicentre, the marginal migrant imposes a net negative externality and economic crisis in the destination reduces the number of migrations, reduces remittances, and disrupts migrant system" (Mesnard& Seabright,2009, Curran et al., 2016). "Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, GOI (2019) stated that

the most vulnerable section would be those migrant workers who are employed in informal sector. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) estimates that about 92% of India's informal labor force is drawn significantly from migrant labor" (NCEUS, 2007). "It has been reported that the effects of the lockdown have been particularly severe on India's migrant workers. The crisis exposed the vulnerable conditions under which migrants live and work, their lack of access to social protection programmes and the paucity of official information on their numbers. Migrant helplines across the country have reported more than 100,000 distress calls from people stranded at their places of work without any food or money to buy basic essentials" (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020).

"As a result of this COVID-19 pandemic, migrants also want to return home as a result of the closure of a number of industries, factories where they have worked. In the initial phase, these migrant workers were very precarious as they remained away from their families and were mentally and emotionally disturbed" (Maji, Sushma, & Choudhari, 2020). "The outbreak of the disease led to more than 200,000 people fleeing the city making it one of the largest post-independence migrations in the country (Leo, 2020). It has been reported that more than 40 million internal migrants have been affected due to COVID-19 and around 50,000–60,000 individuals migrated from urban to rural areas of origin in a period of few days" (World bank, 2020). "During pandemic, the fear of loss of livelihood sparked into the mass exodus of millions of these migrant labourers in some parts of country, who started on a long 'barefoot' journey with their families, in the absence of the transportation facilities, to their native places" (Bindra and Sharma, 2020). The abrupt implementation of lockdowns resulted in a significant loss of employment, with migrant workers suffering the most because of their informal employed status. Many were left without a means of subsistence, food, or housing, which prompted a widespread reverse migration.

The article argues that the crisis revealed the precariousness of migrant livelihoods in India's metropolitan centres, underscoring the need for improved labour laws and social safety nets (Deshingkar et al., 2021). Caritas India (2020) revealed that "28.7 percent migrants do not want to come back to the cities, whereas 32.1 percent showed their willingness to return when the situation gets alright, other 31.3 percent are still in a dilemma. Another study on the impact of recession in Kerala indicated that more than one-fifth of the

emigrants returned home because they lost their jobs due to the financial crisis, while another 3.3 per cent came because they were compulsorily repatriated. Another 11.5 per cent of the emigrants reported that they returned home because their contract had expired and was not renewed. Adding up all, the total percentage of emigrants who returned home owing to the economic recession was around 36 per cent (about 63,000 emigrants) in the state of Kerala” (Zachariah & Rajan, 2010). Majority of 95.2 percent migrants has lost their means of livelihood and the around 10.6 per cent have lost their family members in the pandemic. Women were far less likely (24 percent) to retain employment than men, and disadvantaged caste groups more adversely impacted when compared to higher ranked caste groups (Deshpande,2020). “Around 40 to 50 million workers are seasonal migrant which are directly and harshly affected and moved back to their native places (reverse migration) due to lack of employment, income, shelter, and so forth” (Dev and Sengupta,2020).

“The relationship between migration and health is found to be multidimensional and bidirectional. Health status can drive a decision to migrate, but such relocation may in turn have an influence on health” (Ginsburg et al., 2020). International Labour Organization (2020) reported that more than 300 million full-time jobs are expected to be lost worldwide in the second quarter of 2020. “About 92.5% of labourers have already lost work ranging from one week to three weeks. They were evicted from their informal settlements or labour camps, and have been either unpaid or abandoned by their contractors, leaving them with no means for sustenance. This tyranny situation has forced migrant workers to walk on foot to reach their home villages finding no public transport” (Jan Sahas,2020).“It was also observed that although the return of workers initially increased labour availability in agriculture, the long-term effects were less favourable; increased competition for limited jobs led to a decline in wages, exacerbating rural poverty. The influx of returning migrants placed immense pressure on rural labour markets, which were already grappling with high levels of underemployment” (Narayanan and Saha ,2020).

“The migrants' fear of losing their jobs was as great as their longing to return home to their families. During the lockdown, millions of migratory workers who worked in a variety of industries, including manufacturing, transportation, agriculture, and construction, were stranded in their migrant locations. Due to their employment in vital services, even those

migrant labourers who were spared job loss had to put up with wage reductions from their employers. As a result, they were concerned about how they would pay for their normal expenses, which included rent, food, clothes, and medication. There was no job security for people who were absent from their workplace for multiple days at a time, which caused them to become increasingly anxious. However, many who lost their jobs also had to worry about whether or not they would be able to go back to their hometowns. There was no guarantee as to when or if they would be able to return due to the current travel restrictions and the lack of transportation facilities. It was undoubtedly traumatic for them to endure the worry of being abandoned by their employers and the nagging anxiety of being left without a job, pay, or place to reside" (Chander et al., 2020).

"Due to COVID-19 there is mass reverse migration due to limited employment opportunities, fear of more destruction due to the uncertainty of future crisis, financial crisis, health crisis, and so forth. The extent of this reverse migration was such that the efforts of government through policies could not match this crisis" (Mukhra, Krishan & Kanchan ,2020). Singh (2020) stated that "COVID-19 is going to affect the rural economy in both the short run and long run with reverse migration exerting excess pressure on the agriculture and rural economy that will significantly affect the poverty and will put a greater number of people into abject poverty. He also discusses that although the government is announcing schemes and helping in many ways. But mass corruption in the system is the biggest challenge in the effective implementation of plans". "Many migrants were excluded from government relief measures due to a lack of proper documentation and the portability of benefits. It is necessary to advocate for a universal and portable social security system that can provide migrants with healthcare and other essential services irrespective of their location. These measures are crucial for both crisis management and long-term support for migrant populations" (Rajan, Sivakumar, and Srinivasan, 2020).

## **CONCLUSION-**

The historical context and ongoing marginalisation of migrant workers in India dates back to the colonial era. It is seen in the lack of information regarding the number of migrant workers who work and live outside of their place of residence. The COVID-19 pandemic has

significantly reshaped migration patterns in India, revealing both vulnerabilities and opportunities for the future. The crisis underscored the precarious conditions faced by migrant workers and highlighted the need for comprehensive policy reforms to ensure better protection and support. The pandemic has thus not only highlighted the vulnerabilities of migrant populations but also spurred a re-evaluation of migration policies and support systems. The long-term effects of these disruptions are likely to influence India's migration landscape for years to come, shaping both the socioeconomic fabric of the country and its global connections. While the pandemic led to a temporary decline in internal migration and exposed systemic weaknesses, it also catalyzed discussions on more sustainable and inclusive migration practices. Addressing these challenges through improved social safety nets and equitable development strategies will be crucial for building resilience and fostering a more balanced migration framework in post-pandemic India.

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