



COVID-19 and India's Labour Migrant Crisis

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The primary purpose of this study is to examine the plight of India's interstate/intrastate labour migrants that surfaced a few days after the Government of India announced the lockdown on 24 March 2020. Based on secondary literature and using GIS techniques, the study will critically analyse the D-series Census of India data to probe the predicaments of internal labour migrants (especially semi-skilled and unskilled) during the outbreak of a pandemic like COVID-19 who are primarily engaged in the informal sector. In doing so, it will try to probe whether the impact of COVID-19 would unlock positive opportunities for these migrants — generation of a government-mandated database and reformation of the labour laws securing social protection of the workers of the informal economy.

Key words: *COVID-19; Labour Laws; Migrant Labour Crisis; India.*

Introduction

A 12-year-old reading in Class 8 broke her piggy bank containing INR 48000 to help three migrants fly back to Jharkhand. Although this is only one example, staggering evidence suggests that thousands of migrants walked home on foot for thousands of miles, often accompanied by women and small children. This signals the plight of the internal labour migrants, who contribute about 10% of the GDP but remain invisible (Deshingkar, 2020).

It remains well documented that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a colossal (short-, medium- and long-term) impact on the Indian economy (Das & Das, 2020; Nath 2020). The sudden announcement of lockdown on 24 March 2020 aimed at preventing the spread of the virus has indeed caused unprecedented exacerbation of collateral damages in multifarious forms (Das & Das, 2020; Nath 2020) — unemployment, business loss, surge in domestic violence and many more including the gruesome plight of millions of the lowly skilled and semi-skilled migrant workers (child labours and pregnant women), who are engaged primarily in the informal economy. It is important to note here that approximately 93% of India's workforce (Chapter 10: Social Infrastructure, Employment and Human Development) is engaged in the informal sector. Interestingly, “a large number of India's enterprises operate”

informally (The Economic Survey, 2019-20: 28). Using secondary data in triangulation with the D-series Census of India (2011) data and GIS techniques and a review of a range of literature linked to migration and migrant crisis, this study attempts to address India’s labour migrant crisis working in the informal sector amid the Covid-19 pandemic. The first question that arises here is who do we call as a migrant labour in India?

Who are these migrants?

The migrant workforce (including child labour) includes domestic workers (who either work part-time or live-in either middle class or elite homes), rickshaw pullers, security guards, taxi drivers, delivery boys, toilet cleaners, construction industry workers (brick-kilns, stone quarries and mines), small-scale industry (leather accessories diamond cutting, garment factories, textiles, jewellery-making etc.), and agricultural workers (sugarcane cutting, chilli factory, crop transplanting, rickshaw-pulling, food processing (including fish and prawn processing), salt panning, sex work, small hotels and roadside restaurants/tea shops, beauty parlours, saloons, and street vending and others. They left their native homes mainly for economic reasons. Some of these migrants also moved for social reasons—marriage, and moving with households and other social reasons (business, education). The share of the migrant workforce among the total workforce in the major sectors are shown in Table 1, which indicates that in all the sectors, the percentage share of women is greater when compared to their male counterparts.

Table 1: Share of the Migrant Workforce among the Total Workforce in the Major Sectors (in percentage)

| Sector | Rural | | Urban | |
|-----------------------------|-------|--------|-------|-----------|
| | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Primary | 4 | 75 | 20 | 65 |
| Manufacturing | 13 | 59 | 38 | 51 |
| Public Services | 16 | 69 | 40 | 56 |
| Construction | 8 | 73 | 32 | 67 |
| Traditional Services | 10 | 65 | 29 | 55 |
| Modern Services | 16 | 66 | 40 | 52 |
| Total | 6 | 73 | 33 | 56 |

Source: Report of the Working Group on Migration (2017, January). Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty, Government of India. <http://mohua.gov.in/upload/uploadfiles/files/1566.pdf>

Defied of the magnitude of unparalleled crisis —shutting down of workplace, without any form of social (insurance) protection and job security prospects (Nath, 2020; Sharma, 2020) — hundreds and thousands of migrant workers who lived on daily work and wage were compelled

to return to their native homes on foot for hundreds of miles in the scorching heat, where about 300 migrant workers (including children) succumbed to their lives before reaching the final destinations (Deshingkar, 2020; Pal & Siddiqui, 2020; Sainath, 2020). Noted economists, Jean Drèze addressed this crisis as "almost a death sentence" (Nanda, 2020).

Witnessing the plights of the migrants, many non-voluntary organisations and individuals (like the 12-year-old child of Noida) came forward. Mr Sonu Sood, the Bollywood actor, became popular too, as he embarked upon to help many migrant workers and their families return home safely. Mr Sood has also launched *Pravasi Rojgar* programme aimed at helping migrants not only find jobs but also train with necessary skills demanded by the employers (Sonu Sood Now Helping Migrants Get Jobs, 2020). For these migrants, these individuals emerged as *messiahs* (saviours). Amid vehement criticisms from different spectrums — political, media and the intellectuals — although lately, the Government of India apace with the state governments launched a number of strategies — established 37,978 relief camps and 26,225 food camps; National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) created a National Migrant Information System (NMIS), an online database to rationalise migrant movement as well as made transport arrangements — buses and *Shramik* special trains. Due to the lack of proper guidelines, there is evidence to suggest that it created confusion among the migrants. In addition, the behaviour and lackadaisical attitude towards the migrants by some of those in ‘some form of power’ demonstrated rudeness. As some of the migrants lamented:

In the cities they treat us like stray dogs, Why would they treat us any better now?
(Bhowmick, 2020)

We labourers have no life, we are just a cog in the wheel, spinning continuously until we run out of life.... The rich will get all the help, getting rescued and brought home in planes from abroad. But we poor migrant labourers have been left to fend for ourselves. That is the worth of our lives...*Hum mazdooron ka koi desh nahin hota* (We labourers don't belong to any country.

(Coronavirus lockdown | Image of a weeping Rampukar Pandit becomes symbol of India's migrant worker tragedy, 2020)

Arguably, the marginality of the migrant workers has further magnified their vulnerability by transforming their lives merely into ‘bare lives’ (naked lives). The notion ‘bare life’ was propounded by Giorgio Agamben (1998) to demonstrate how the human soul devoid of political significance is produced socially signalling oppression. Agamben (1998) drew his arguments from classical Greek philosophy that made an explicit distinction between *zoē* (a biological life) and *bios* (political life). In simple terms, Agamben (1998) locates ‘bare life’ at the intersection of biological and political life, where both political and legal attributes are stripped off (here, the migrant workers had been subjected to violence and death without any form of recrimination). In a slightly different context, these observation bear resonance to the findings put forward by Bhattacharyya (2018), where she demonstrates as to how the people



of North East India and Kashmir are living their everyday lives under the draconian legislation — Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958.

Turning on to the migrant crisis, the migrant workforce lives in densely populated urban slums submerged in filths; save money to remit for the left-behind families in the villages (Pal & Siddiqui, 2020). It is estimated that each year, an estimated \$30 billion is remitted from urban to rural areas (Pal & Siddiqui, 2020), yet their contribution to the economy is considered ‘insignificant’. The following section maps migration and migrant crisis.

Migration and Migrant Crisis: Calibration

Migration is a worldwide phenomenon. The Global Migration Indicators (2018) unravels that in 2017, globally, 258 million migrants are making 3.4% of the world population, out of which 150.3 million are migrant workers, and 4.8 million are international students. Global Commission on International Migration (2005) suggests that in 2005, the total migration figure stood at 32 million (Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Actions, 2005) which increased to 232 million in 2013 (World Migration in Figures).

There is indeed a gamut of studies on migration and development. The journal *Space and Culture, India*, a young journal in the academic landscape has already published a number of studies on India’s internal migrants delineating the varied socio-economic reasons and patterns of migrations, the challenges of the everyday lives of their left behind and accompanied families and children and the constraints at the destinations (Das & Das, 2014; Roy et al., 2015; Roy & Samanta, 2020; Saha et al., 2018; Saha & Goswami, 2020). Meticulous analysis of all these interstate/intrastate studies reveal that the push (famine, poverty, war, population pressure, political oppression/instability, religious intolerance) of the locations of origin and the pull factors (better living conditions, better economies of economically well off states, prosperous job opportunities) of the destination states govern interstate economic migrants. There is also emerging literature on COVID-19 and the large-scale exodus of migrants and the crisis that surfaced following the Government of India’s announcement of nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 (Editorials, EPW, 2020; Editorial, Lancet, 2020; Sengupta & Jha, 2020). These studies reveal that the consternation of returning home is not the fear of COVID-19 but the disquietude of battling hunger, which dried up work and wages. Now the question is from where they migrated to? The next section discusses about the geographical spaces from where these migrants originate and where they migrate to.

Where these migrants come from?

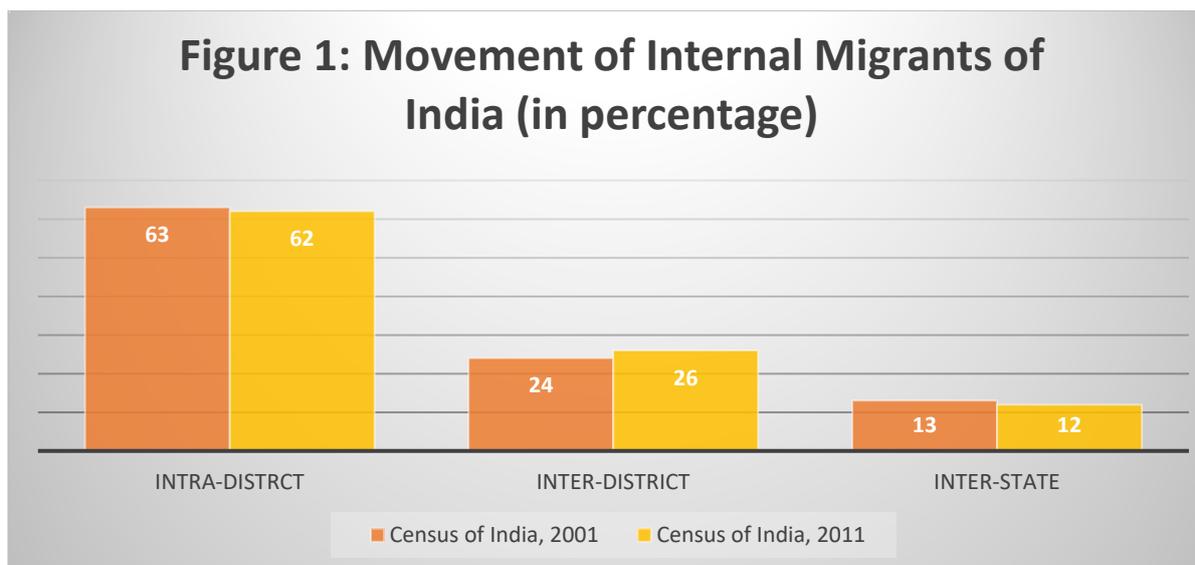
It is to be noted here that due to the lack of availability of latest reliable statistics, this study, as already mentioned above is based on the D-Series, Census of India (2001; 2011) data. According to the records of the Census of India (2001; 2011), the percentage of internal

migrants increased from 309 million in 2001 to 453.6 million in 2011— a surge of about 45% (Bansal, 2016; De, 2019). In 2016, this figure further escalated to approximately 500 million (Singh, 2020) signalling that 37% of the population as internal migrants (Bansal, 2016; De, 2019).

In 2001, the figure for internal migrants as a percentage of the total population stood at 30%. Interestingly, the movement of internal (interstate, intrastate and interdistrict) migrants changed very little when the 2001 and 2011 Census data are compared (Figure 1). Notably, one might argue that the figures (1 and 2) illustrated in this section bear no profound correlation to the current migrant crisis; however, the readers need to have an idea of economic migrants of the country.

Importantly, as per the Census of India (2011), only 4% of the total population constitutes interstate migrants. Based on the Census (2011) data, Figure 2 illustrates the economic migrants demonstrating the hotspots of interstate economic migrants of the country. The majority of the migrants hail from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, followed by Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan (Singh, 2020). Although Figure 2 is self-explanatory, it is, however, evident that there are five hubs of inter-state economic migrants — Maharashtra (9.1 million migrants); National Capital Territory of Delhi (6.3 million); Uttar Pradesh (4.1 million); followed by Gujarat (3.9 million) and Haryana (3.6 million). Indeed, the popular destinations of economic migrants are North-West India (Delhi, Ludhiana and Jaipur); Mumbai-Thane-Pune belt accommodates different forms of work-related migrants; while the coastal part of Andhra Pradesh regularly encounters inflow of migrants from neighbouring Telangana and Odisha, the southern part of Tamil Nadu witnessed large-scale intra-state migrants (Deshingkar, 2020).

Figure 1: Movement of Internal Migrants of India (in percentage)



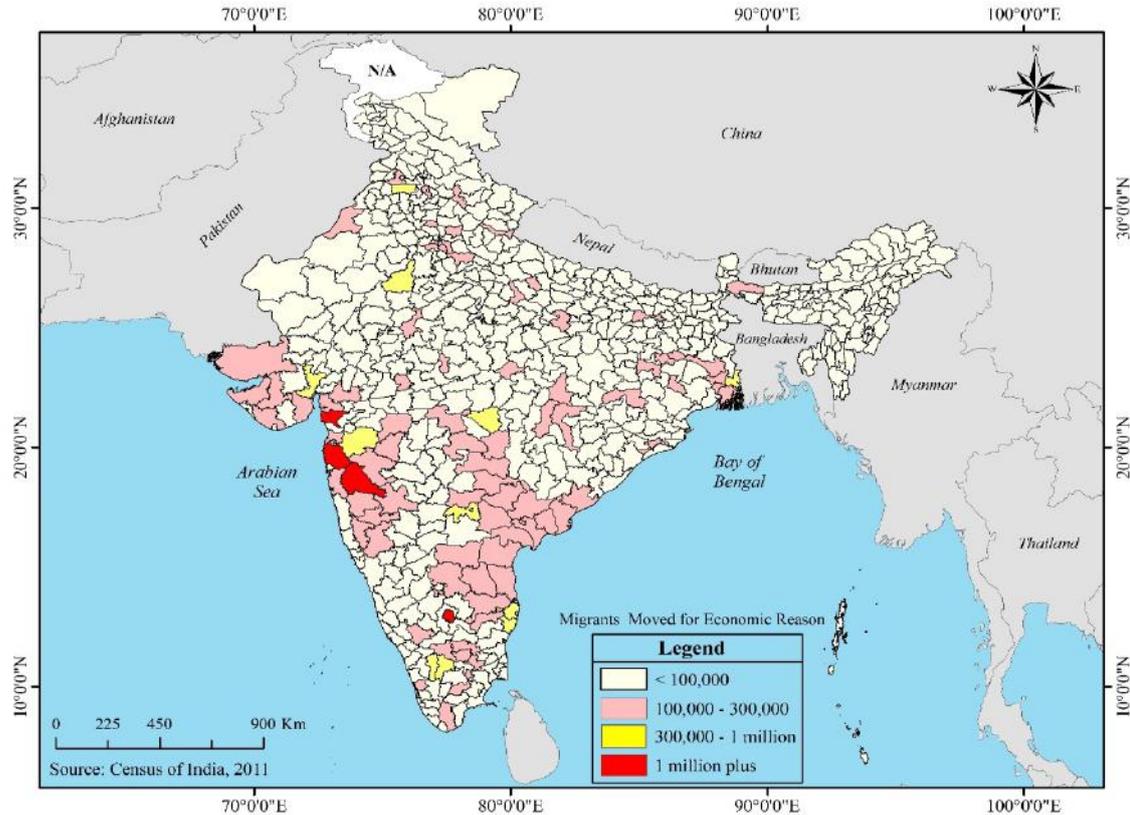


Figure 2: Concentration of Economic Migrants

Source: Created by the Authors using D-Series Census of India Data, 2011

It is crucial to note here that while these are documented migrants, there are innumerable undocumented migrants (especially young girls and children) who for several intertwined reasons — extreme forms of poverty, insurgency, communal conflicts, sale by parents, unemployment, loss of livelihood stemming from recurring floods, famine and rampant erosion — fall trap into the hands of the traffickers or kidnappers and arrive at different metropolitan cities, big towns of the country and even outside the country via clandestine (illicit) routes to engage in jobs — bonded labour, live-in domestic worker, sex work (where a young woman's body is readily made available in exchange of currency) (Bhattacharyya, 2017). This study is about the migrant labour crisis. The next section discusses the state of the economy during the lockdown.

COVID-19 and Economy

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CIME), during the first phase of the lockdown in India, an estimated 122 million became unemployed, out of which 75% were daily wage earners and small traders (Data | An estimated 12.2 crore Indians lost their jobs during

the coronavirus lockdown in April: CMIE, 2020). The current unemployment estimates of the country as per CIME, as of 20 August 2020 is 8.2% (urban: 9.5%, rural, 7.6%) (Unemployment Rate in India, CIME). It was estimated that by the first quarter of June 2020, the country would face a loss of \$26 billion and a significant plummeting of its GDP. *International Monetary Fund's, World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020* estimated that the real GDP growth rate of the economy shrank and stood at -4.5%, which is expected to rise to 6 percentage points in 2021 (IMF, World Economic Outlook Update, June 2020.). The shrinking of the economy in the current phase of the lockdown indicates degrowth and decline in employment (Figure 3).

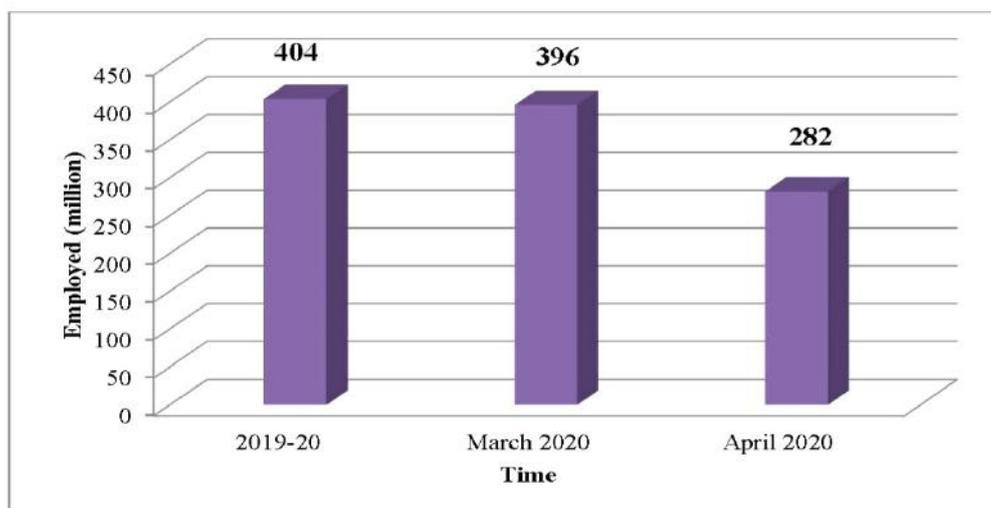


Figure 3: Decline in Employment During the Lockdown

Source: Created by the Authors from the data retrieved from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CIME)

Surprisingly, during the phase of the lockdown (April 2020), while the small traders, labours, entrepreneurs, salaried persons—a staggering percentage of them (especially small traders and labours) faced job losses. There has been a rise in farmers, which is perhaps the result of some of the returnee migrants taking up farming practices (Figure 4).

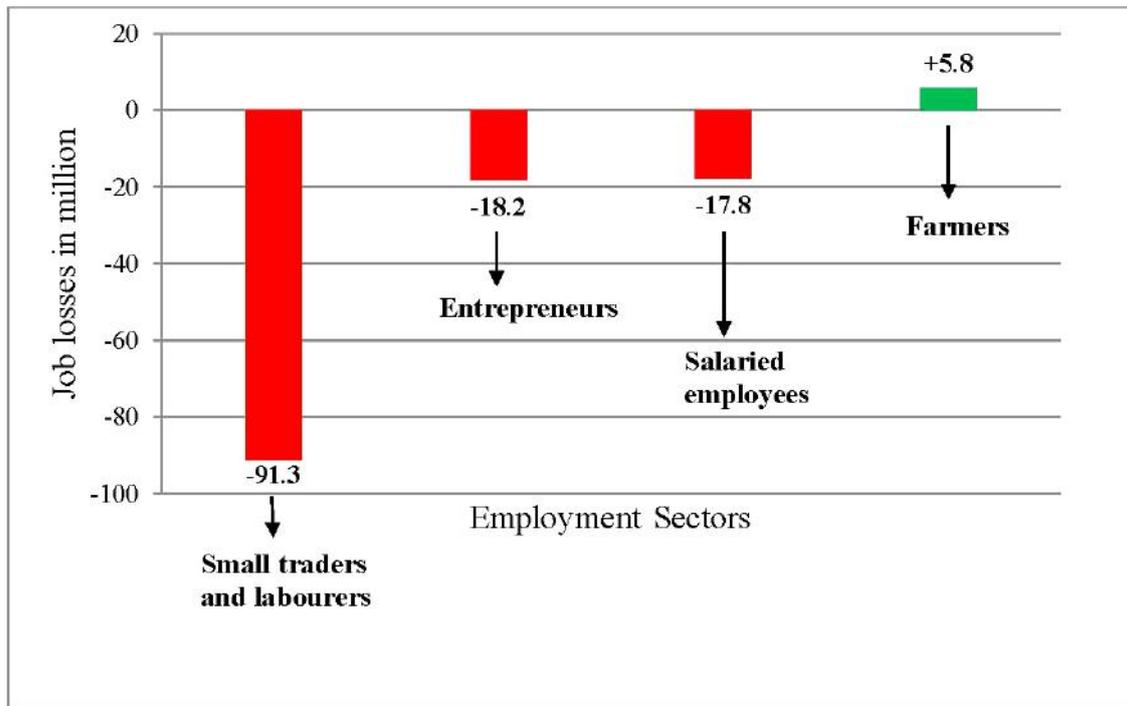


Figure 4: State of Job Losses in April 2020

Source: Created by the Authors from the data retrieved from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CIME)

It is apparent from Figure 5 that as of April 2020, unemployment against labour participation rate (those who are in employment plus those in search for jobs) presents a grim reminder representing that the southern state of Tamil Nadu faced high unemployment rate.

Earlier, in the last week of March, the Finance Minister of India announced a pro-poor spending package of INR 1700 billion (US\$24 billion) embracing cash transfers and food security. Following this announcement, the government released INR 110.92 billion to all the states and Union Territories aimed at helping the migrants with food and shelter. Subsequently, on 13 and 14 May 2020, there was a further allocation of INR 10 billion and INR 35 billion (US\$490 million) respectively from the PM CARES Fund and Finance Ministry designated for the migrant labours. However, to what extent these pro-migrant funds have reached the targeted group is yet to be confirmed.

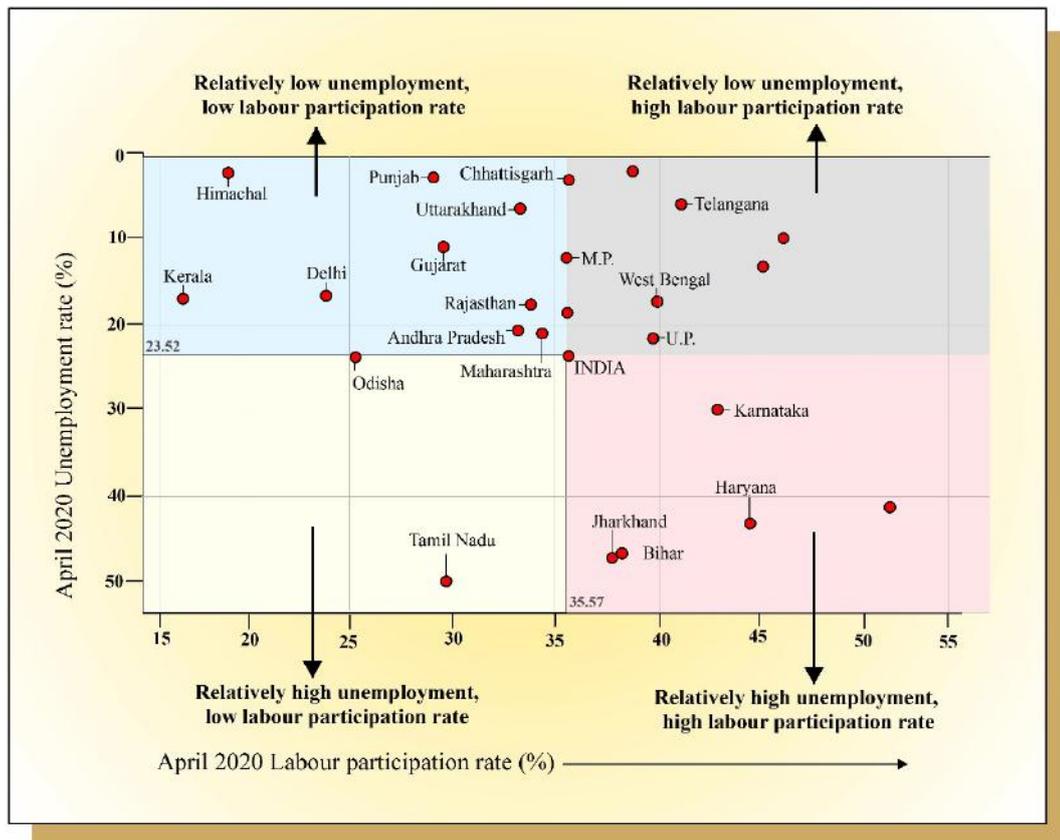


Figure 5: States Affected During Lockdown, April 2020

Source: Created by the Authors from the data retrieved from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CIME)

Indeed in the months of May and June 2020, Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), a flagship programme of the Government of India, witnessed a demand for jobs. MGNREGA is “a pro-poor anti-poverty employment generation programme” guaranteeing at least 100 days of paid employment to each household in a stipulated financial year (Bhattacharyya and Vauqueline, 2013: 84). It is arguable that although MGNREGA had failed to stop the flow of the migrant workforce, but during the lockdown, that is, post the return of the migrants, 33.3 million households worked under MGNREGA in May 2020, which further surged to 41 million in June 2020. The average daily wage under MGNREGA were escalated from INR 182 (US\$2.60) to INR 202 (US\$2.80) from 01 April 2020 (Centre releases Rs 4431 crore to clear pending wages under MGNREGA, to pay all dues by April 10, 2020). MGNREGA, indeed proved to be a saviour (*messiah*)— a lifeline (Bhattacharyya and Vauqueline, 2013) for the migrants. Keeping in tandem with MGNREGA, a similar programme— *Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyaan* (GKRA) has been launched on 20 June 2020 guaranteeing at least 125 days of paid employment targeting 670,000 rural migrant labours encompassing a financial package of INR 500 billion (US\$7.0 billion). Simultaneously, the



government has launched *Atmanirbhar Skilled Employer-Employee mapping portal* (Aatmanirbhar Skilled Employee Employer Mapping, 2020) aimed at providing jobs to the migrant workers. However, these programmes are at an embryonic state and do not qualify for debates at this stage. Nonetheless, during the post lockdown—the demands for jobs under MGNREGA has declined to 31 million in July 2020; this figure further plummeted to 13.8 million in mid-August 2020 signalling that the migrant workforce has begun returning to the cities (Ghildiyal, 2020) as a result of reopening of services and the crises of labour shortage faced by operating enterprises (including the construction industry). Now the critical question that stems here is —would the lockdown unlock some form of opportunities incubating social protection to the returnee migrant to the cities.

Towards Social Protection of the Migrant Workers

Central to this study was to examine the migrant labour crisis that surfaced as a consequence of the sudden announcement of the lockdown of the country on 24 March. This study is one of the first studies in India to address labour migrant crisis working in the informal sector critically. Strapped of cash, work, food and uncertainty — the everyday challenges encountered by the daily waged migrant labours is indeed defiance of the lockdown that impelled exodus. Hence, it remains paramount for the Government of India to address the lessons learned from this crisis and bestow social protection for the migrant labours by “prepar[ing] an efficient plan for a better tomorrow” (Nath, 2020). However, the question is how to do it? As already discussed in the introduction section that hundreds and thousands of enterprises function in the informal sector (Economic Survey, 2019-20: 28). Perhaps, formalisation of informal enterprises is one of the first steps to take into account. Evidence suggests that since 2017, the Government of India had been taking a few steps on the migrant workforce who constitute the lifeline of the labour market of the informal sector. Prior to the lockdown, there was news about the formulation of a database for the informal sector (Sharma, 2020). National Statistical Commission (NSC) has been delegated for this job. NSC will create a database using the Aadhaar number (Sharma, 2020). Aadhaar is a 12-digit identification number issued by the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) to all of its citizens (Unique Identification Authority of India). Figure 6 demonstrates the steps as to how the database would help the workforce. The intended database aims to add 5-10 million new workers every year.

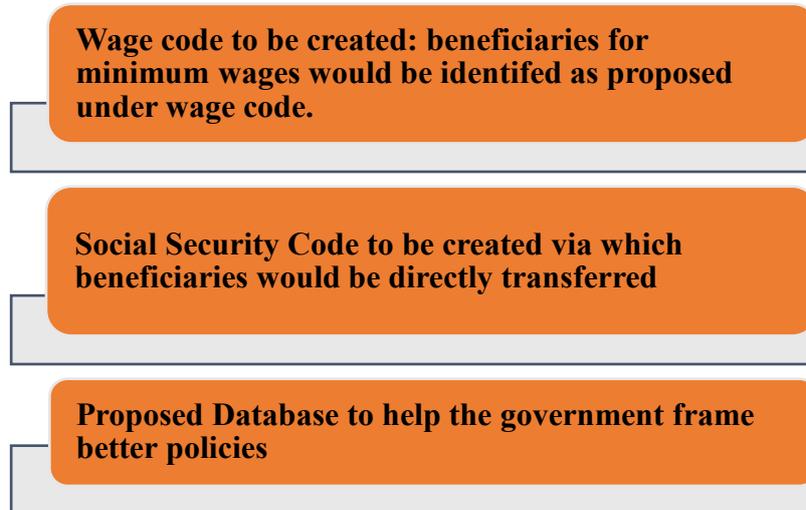


Figure 6: Process for Creation of National Database for Informal Sector Workforce

Source: Sharma (2020)

Alongside the generation of a government-mandated database, there has to be the incorporation of some stringent labour laws for the protection of the informal workforce—right at work for the employees, contract for work (regular/contractual), facilities provided by the employer, the number of hours at work, wages, and social security. All these steps would probably help the migrant workforce) gain somewhat meaningful protection.

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