

## **COVID-19-Unexpected Shocks for Migrant Workers and Students**

*Mansi Awasthi*<sup>1</sup>

The unprecedented pandemic brought about by COVID-19 has entailed enormous loss of human lives and virtually crippled economies worldwide. Economic activities have been halted partially or fully, disrupted all industries. The disastrous pandemic has resulted in massive erosion of jobs and livelihoods. If this catastrophe continues for some more months, the losses both in terms human lives and economic activities will be enormous. Economies whose dependence on informal economy is huge, overwhelmingly large workforce becomes the first victim of upheaval both in terms of human lives and economic activities. This is palpably being evident in India and elsewhere. Obviously, the discussion on lives or livelihoods is a stupid and myopic debate. Clearly, this is a non-binary issue as both have symbiotic and circular relationship.

It is estimated that over 91 million of these lost their employment in April 2020 and most hard hit among them are the informal and unorganized sector workers. The unemployment rate was at 27.1% in the week ending on May 3 and one in four employed lost job across India in March-April (Vyas, 2020).

Exports have fallen sharply over 35% during March alone (*Business Standard*, 2020). Gross Domestic Product is likely to fall drastically to and register of 1.9 percent in 2020 as per IMF (*Press Trust of India*, 2020). Some economists have projected negative growth rate in the first quarter of 2020-21 (Rangarajan, 2020). The gradual opening economy after 3.0 lockdown is

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<sup>1</sup> Economic & Policy Wing, Ministry of Skill Development & Entrepreneurship, New Delhi

regarded a highly welcome move. However, full scale opening of the economy may not be possible in the current situation hence huge losses of revenues for the governments is imminent and inescapable. The situation is likely to worsen in terms of job losses, incomes squeeze, hunger and destitution. Some suggest that since India's Debt-GDP ratio is lower (around 69%) compared to other countries and that provides enough fiscal space for financing the economy in such a difficult time.

Along with increased borrowing and the *fiscal deficit* can help boost a sluggish economy by pumping more money into the hands of people and supporting economic activities across sectors. The dilemma was clear before governments on how to stop the *outbreak* of the coronavirus on the one hand and restart the economic activities on the other. Clearly, a fine balance has been attempted by the governments despite the fears of spread of disease. In any case, this disease is likely to stay for some more time and therefore business activities can no longer be put off indefinitely and people need to learn gradually to live with it.

The sections below describe how COVID-19 induced nationwide pandemic has impacted the lives and livelihoods of the migrant workers and of the students in schools and colleges.

## **Impact on Migrant Workers**

The most vulnerable lot of workers are in the informal economy constituting about 217 million (non-farm) out of 465 million workforce. It was estimated that 60 to 65 million are vulnerable migrants, including periodic and seasonal migrants, in the informal economy. A large chunk of these vulnerable workers is engaged in numerous petty activities such as cart pullers, bicycle peddlers, rickshaw pullers, domestic workers, casual workers in construction, home-based women workers, street vendors, and workers in small business establishments. A huge chunk of

floating population come from poorer states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Orissa, West Bengal who sprung up temporarily in big cities and metro towns in a bid to earning livelihoods.

The ongoing pandemic has brought about enormous plight to the migrant workers as evident that thousands of migrant workers stuck in big cities who flocked from these states. The images of such a huge stranded influx of migrant workers faced with untold miseries that was manifested around the railway stations, bus stands and on the roads, who desperately wanted to go home. The forceful confinement of migrant workers was considered no longer a solution and the pressure was rightly mounting to liberate them. This was the moment of emotional bonding to kith and kin to their native places. Government took right step to send them back to their respective places and placate the situation. However, the decision to unbound them remains a challenge when economy is progressively being opened and need workers to resume manufacturing activities, running shops and establishments, construction activities, other production facilities and alike activities. These sectors of economy are likely to face huge shortage of manpower.

A palpable sense of double loss is imminently clear for migrants, losing the jobs in urban market on the one hand and no income and job opportunity in their native place on the other, thereby escalating their poverty, hunger and deprivation further. Many would likely fall well below the poverty line among the previously counted non-poor. This has serious implications on them and those depending on the main bread winners. This poses new challenges towards mitigation of the hardship of migrant workers. Clearly, there is an urgent need for developing strategies to lessen the vulnerabilities. Some possible short, medium- and long-term strategies stand out clearly to alleviate their miseries.

As part of short-term measures, the following action points emerge clearly:

- (i) Mahatma Gandhi Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) should be expanded both in terms of budgetary allocation and days of employment. Some of the additional activities could be considered in its ambit to have wider coverage of activities. Wages needs to be increased to Rs. 225 to Rs. 250 or increase by 25% to existing wages. This is the easiest way to ease their distress and sufferings.
- (ii) Since most of the migrants belong to bottom income ladder of society, therefore, food security is paramount importance to ward off hunger and destitution. The free ration or highly subsidized ration for next three to six months be ensured to their family. Additionally, provision of doling out some cash should be made in case there is no job provided under MGNREGA or some alternative job opportunity arises.

Medium- and long-term measures essentially need to consider the following aspects:

Most of the informal sector workers are still deprived of social security network even though Government of India has enacted the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act 2008 that recommends formulation of social security schemes such as life and disability cover, health and maternity benefits, old age protection and other benefits. There is an urgent need to expand the network of social protection floors to ensure access to essential social security benefits with adequate portability entitlements.

Universal basic income should be implemented ensuring basic income guarantee, allowing financial freedom and

alleviating from the poverty. This would be an important move in such a national disaster situation where poor people are prone to fall in to poverty trap and destitution.

Typically, movements of people from poorer regions to relatively non-poor regions take place primarily because of the unequal development across regions. Clearly, there is an urgent need to fill the regional development gaps and provide better opportunities in such lagging regions to ward off distresses from of out-migration.

### **Impact on Education**

The pandemic has far reaching effects not only lives and livelihoods, particularly floating population and poor but also to every walk of life.

The education sector (primary secondary and tertiary sector) is critical for human capital formation. Education has enormous spill over beneficial effects to the society and industry and education, in particular secondary education is viewed as a means of improving skills required by jobs thrown up in the labour market. The education sector has also hit badly during pandemic. Students are struck at homes during long lock down period and without adequate mentoring, counselling and online provisioning of education, serious concerns are expressed to have long term adverse impacts on emotional, psychological, behavioral patterns on the student's community.

The students in higher education system are likely to enter the labour market or pursue further studies is the most critical factor for human capital and creating ideas and inventive capacity. The lock down has huge impact on higher education system both in terms of continuing education and research, disconnect from supervision and uncertainty of conducting examination and entering labour market or pursuing further education and research.

Already, there is huge disconnect between the demand and supply sides or what is being produced by educational and training institutions and what is being demanded in the different sectors of economy will further accentuate the serious distortion in the labour market.

Serious question arises how to engage students' community with university and its regulatory body and with that of ministry/ department which support these institutions. There is already huge disjoint among these entities and there are obvious emerging challenges in the higher education in the pandemic situation. Our higher education system is not geared to adapt new challenges that clearly shows lack of preparedness and response system. One of the fundamental reasons is lack of reforms that is pulling down the higher education system.

Some of the action points taken by China during lockdown period is worth considering with some modification as per the specific needs and requirements (Xu, 2020).

- i. Rapid adoption of online teaching and learning
- ii. Providing free advanced internet (with fiber optic and a 4G network) and setting up cloud-based education platform.
- iii. Online teaching and learning platforms developed by universities and local education authorities.
- iv. Delivering teaching via remote models and sensitizing very demanding parents and students.
- v. Coordinating the adaptation of resources to their local needs and coordinate with delivery system.
- vi. Optimum utilization of distance learning resources and crowdsourcing from the best teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Pandemic is likely to stay some more times and we need to live with it. Clearly, there is no ‘either- or’ scenario between lives and livelihoods both must go together in such difficult and uncertain times. Pandemic has impacted nearly all the economic activities and the informal sector and daily wage, and migrant workers are most severely hit. There is greater need for focusing on the key challenges and risks that these vulnerable lot are faced with. Pandemic has significantly disrupted the higher education sector and needs preparedness and response system. Obviously, there is a need for evolving sector specific policies and strategies toward rebuilding an economy ravaged by the pandemic.

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*Awasthi*  
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