

COVID INDUCED REVERSE MIGRATION AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT: A STUDY OF THE APPROACH OF GOVERNMENT OF BIHAR

Dr. Saddam Hussain

Assistant Professor, Department of Geography

S.B. College, Ara (Bhojpur), VKS University, Ara, Bihar

Email: sadhussain93@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Migration is the movement of people away from their birthplace of last place of residence. This is necessary for the growth and development of society. However due to some unforeseen conditions, the migrants may be forced to migrate back to their hometown or away from the place to which they had migrated. This is due to different reasons, the pandemic and the subsequent lockdown being one of them. This movement has been termed reverse migration. The onset and spread of Covid 19 Pandemic had a deadly impact on the society and economy. With the contamination and death toll rising, governments across the world were forced to take immediate steps to contain the virus. India resorted to a sudden 21-day lockdown which was then further extended, to stop the spread of the virus. The situation became dire with millions of migrant laborers, student, pilgrims and other people stuck at various places with no means of return. This lockdown also brought to the forefront the pitiful conditions of the migrant workers across the states and nations who make up the backbone of society. With no money in hand and fear of dying of foreign soil, the migrants walked thousands of kilometers to reach their home states till other arrangements were made by the states. Subsequently, there arose the problems of reintegrating these migrants walked thousands of kilometers to reach their home states till other arrangements were made by the states. Subsequently, there arose the problem of reintegrating these migrants back into the economy. The students faced problems as institutions began to shut down. Tourists were stranded in foreign soil. The migrant population was in dire need of an intervention by the government of Bihar for safe return of the migrants and subsequent welfare interventions and designing livelihood interventions for returning workers.

Keywords: Covid 19, reverse migration, reintegration, migrants, migration

INTRODUCTION

Migration is the movement of people away from their usual place of residence, across either internal (within a country) or international (across countries) borders. (Iyer,2020) This movement over territories is a characteristic feature of all human populations irrespective of their Stage of development. Migration, migrant, and other related terms have been defined differently by various authors and governing bodies.

UN Convention on the Rights of Migrants defines Migration in terms of migrant workers as “a person who is to be engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a state of which he or she is not a national”(United Nations convention on Migrants’ Rights,2003).India has a large number of internal and International Migrants. International Migration 2020 Highlights, released by the Population Division of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), places India at the top of the list of countries with the largest diaspora in 2020, with about 18 million Indians living as migrants (UNDESA,2020)Census of India 2011, defines Migration in terms of place of birth and residence. Census 2011 states that a person is considered a migrant by place in which he/she is enumerated during the census is other than the place of his/her birth. Similarly, a person considered a migrant by the place of last residence

if the place in which he/she is enumerated during the census is other than his/her place of immediate last residence outside the village or town and not simply in another house or locality in the same village or town (census of India,2011)According to the census 2011, the total number internal migrants in the country (inter- and intra-state movement)was 139 million. **The Economic Survey of India 2017** estimates that the magnitude of inter- state migration in India was close 9 million annually between 2011 and 2016.The Fourth periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data was released by the National Statistical Office (NSO), On June 14, 2022. 'Migration in India 2020-21' report, giving out data on Covid/lockdown-induced migration based on a sample survey of 1,00,344 households consisting of 4,10,818¹ persons of whom 1,13,998 were migrants. (Shrivastav and Hussain, 2022)

India's migrant population is driven by different causes. The main drivers of migration, both internal as well as international, are unemployment, the desire for a better livelihood prospect in the destination country, and marriage among a few , Both, distress, as well as benefit-oriented migration, can be seen here. Migration has a three-fold impact on the area of out-migration, the area of in-migration, and the migrants themselves. The population of the area of outmigration decreases whereas the population of the areas of immigration increases. The status quo is maintained unless an external event causes a change in the stream of migration from the area of the workplace to the area of birth or last residence. This movement is termed Reverse migration. Reverse migration is defined as the movement of people from their place of employment to their native homes. The term 'reverse migration' refers to process of internal and international Migrants returning to their place of origin from the destination state/country. The term 'origin' and 'destination' refers to one's native place and work respectively. (Khan and Arokkiarai, 2021) Usually, reverse migration is due to some negative conditions and is considered a distress migration rather than opportunity-driven migration.

Reverse migration or return migration as termed by some scholars may be brought about due to many reasons. A study done by Stark et al. presented 12 reasons for return migration based on a comprehensive study spanning over three and a half decades. He states that the return of migrants to their places of origin is not because of the migrants' preferences or desires, or as a consequence of a particular type of behavior, rather it is due to the following 12 reasons: purchasing power, strategic accumulation of human capital, occupational status and social prestige; asymmetric information, social comparisons: ordinal preferences, relative deprivation ; cardinal preferences, matching in the marriage market and divorce, receipt of inheritance; meeting a target, shocks at home; costly separation caused by migration, failure.(stark, Helmenstein and Yagorsov,1997).

Apart from these reasons, a study of past events reveals the existence of a correlation between the pandemic and migration. Invasions, trades, wars, pilgrimages, and the movement of people, in general, have resulted in the spread of many diseases. Likewise, the eruption of epidemics and pandemics have brought about a sense of uncertainty' among the people and have led to their migration either back to their birthplace or away from their last place on residence as per the situation. The Black Death of the 14th century, originating in central Asia, Turkey and Europe, the Spanish flu during the World War, etc. Have not only affected the society and the economy but have also caused havoc among people forcing them to migrate, to seek a safer place of refuge, sometimes to even far off parts of the globe. A study of the concept of reverse migration and the steps taken by the government to deal with the issues arising out of Covid-induced reverse migration is necessary keeping in mind the future. The paper studies the steps taken by the Government of Bihar to deal with the Covid-induced reverse migration due to nationwide lockdown.

STUDY AREA

The study area Bihar, is a state in Eastern India. It extends from 24°20'18" N Latitude to 27° 31' 15" N Latitude and 83°19' 50" E Longitude to 88°17' 40" E Longitude. The North South extension of Bihar is about 345Km and East West extension is 483Km. It covers an area of 94163 Km. sq. i.e. 2.8% of country. About 8.4% of India's population resides here. The state is bounded by Nepal in the north, West Bengal in the east , Jharkhand in this South, and Uttar Pradesh in the west. The state has one of the highest outmigration in the country and hence was greatly affected by the problems arising out of Covid induced reverse migration.

RETURN MIGRATION AND STEPS TAKEN BY THE GOVERNMENT OF BIHAR

Following the steady and swift spread of the Novel Corona Virus, the government of India imposed a lockdown and subsequent restrictions on mobility and means of transportation to stall the spread of the virus. The migrants were faced with the loss of employment in their workplace as many work place shut down and many more refused to give the workers any remuneration. With no money and hand, an uncertain future in sight, and fear of a possible impending death should they choose to stay, the migrant workers took to foot to travel back to their states. The heart-wrenching scenes of people walking thousands of miles to reach their birthplace and the problems faced by them were brought to the notice of the government. Their plight led to many arrangements being made by the governments. The government had to deal with many problems due to reverse migration, ranging from providing immediate relief to ensuring the safe passage of the migrants and ensuring a smooth of disease. Bihar too had these challenges and the government worked with many organizations and departments to bring relief in the wake of reverse migration.

During the nationwide lockdown, policy, and Development Advisory Group (PDAG), the Chief Minister's Office - Government of Bihar Home Department of Labour, Employment, Training & Skill Development to develop a collective action approach for:

1. Ensuring the safe return of migrant workers to the state through state-funded trains, special flights, and buses.
2. Provisioning of welfare interventions and designing livelihood interventions for returning workers.
3. The Government of Bihar issued followings directions in this regard.
 - a) Ensure availability of 100 extra ventilators in the government hospitals.
 - b) Arrange for testing of Covid 19 in AIIMS Patna PMCH Patna hospital.
 - c) Cancel leaves of all employees of Health department.
 - d) Strengthen screening of travellers entering through Bihar, Nepal Border.
 - e) Treatment cost of Covid19 for residence of Bihar will be sponsored from the Chief Minister medical assistant fund.
 - f) To provide direct cash transfer in place of the food provided under the mid de mil skim of school and Aganbari center.
4. An e-shram portal was been created by the government for the protection of the migrant laborers of the state. The migrant laborers were to register themselves on the portal so that the state government could provide them with immediate help should a calamity occur.

IMMEDIATE HELP THROUGH THE MIGRANT LABOUR CONTROL ROOM

Immediately after the nation imposition of the lockdown on 25th march 2020, the Government of Bihar set up the Migrant Labour Control Room with the sole aim to serve the interest of these migrants. The Control Room was instrumental in supporting the government's relief works as it maintained the database of the stranded people and coordinated the support structure in place initiated by the state government and coordinated with the other states and UT and also planned the evacuation and safe passage of the migrants. The control room on receiving a call, recorded vital information of the callers which included their names. Phone numbers, State / Union Territories and district where they were stranded, the number of people stranded with the lead person and the issues faced by them according to the criteria- food availability, ration duration, accommodation status, medical issues, and financial status. The stranded people included workers, seasonal workers, students, various professionals, tourists, and patients that were stranded in various parts of the country due to the 21-day lockdown and its extension. The details were then filled in their application software and shared with the Government of India and further shared with the concerned state/ union territories to provide instant relief to the migrants. This resulted in many people getting regular benefits like food, ration, shelter, and medical support till they had the means to return to their states. Apart from these efforts were also made to rescue the migrant laborers, ensuring the outstanding wages are paid to them, and also in case of any mishaps make arrangement for the dead bodies of the migrants to be brought back to their homeland.

The State Migrant Control Room also actively engaged in the registration, awareness, and publicity in each of the 38 districts of Bihar. The Government of Bihar issued directives to state Labour. There were also several additional actions being taken, such as connecting the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, Pension Scheme, and Ration Scheme benefits. This was to ensure that the migrants were given their rights and were connected to a host of benefits through the medium of various schemes being run for them. The government also planned to set up migration centers in various states additionally.

SPECIAL TRAINS AND BUSES TO ENSURE SAFE PASSAGE OF THE MIGRANTS

Close to 1 million laborers from Bihar were stranded in different parts of the Country due to the sudden lockdown. The Government took steps to bring them back. (Barik, 2020) With the go-ahead from the Centre to the inter-state movement of students, migrant workers, tourists, pilgrims, and other persons, states took measures to ensure the safe arrival of the migrants. The laborers were received by the Bihar Chief Minister himself and after the proper screening transported to their respective villages by 60 sanitized buses. Bihar government requested Indian Railways to arrange special trains to send migrant laborers home. The special trains was run as per the directions of the Ministry of Railways on request of the state Government of Bihar (Ray, 2020). Plans were made to bring back around thousands of students of Bihar who were stranded in Kota, Rajasthan by special trains. As part of the action plan to transport laborers in a phased manner, it was planned that buses would be send to West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, and Madhya Pradesh to bring them back.

SKILL MAPPING TO ENSURE PROPER REINTEGRATION OF THE MIGRANTS BACK INTO THE ECONOMY

Post return of the stranded migrants, the state government was faced with the issue of employing the returnees. The officials were directed by the Chief Minister to provide a separate plan that would deal with employment generation in both rural as well as urban areas. The Government resolved to take steps to ensure the employment of about 75% of local people in different industries. According to the decision taken in the meeting the government will take steps to ensure the employment of about 75% local people in different industries. The migrants that returned to Bihar were initially given job cards to help them find employment under NREGA. A monitoring cell was set up to find out how many of the returned migrants had been given jobs in 1 day. The returned migrants that wanted to stay back in the state and work were of 2 types: skilled and unskilled. They were allowed to receive training provided by various government tie-ups. The skilled workers had adequate experience in working in various sectors like trade, hotel business, etc. The government, to provide the migrant workers a livelihood according to their preference had survey conducted by the state Rural Development Department. Consequently, Skill mapping was done through the Bihar State Livelihood Promotion Society (BSLPS) to segregate them based on the trade they had been working on before integrating them into a skill development program where they received training to hone their skills followed by various employment opportunities. The major issue faced by the migrant workers with the employment offered in Bihar was the issue of wage difference. The wage offered in Bihar is not comparable to those in other bigger cities and the workers face a wage difference of as much as Rs. 300 per day. It was projected that this issue may cause the workers to again migrate to other cities to find better prospects i.e. making it a migration for better prospects rather than the migration due to Covid which was a distress migration. These funds make proper arrangements to bring the dead body back and bear the cost of the funeral.

CONCLUSION

The post lockdown reverse migration and the issues resulting from it were indeed daunting to say the least and put much pressure on the Centre and various state governments, Bihar being one of them. The Government of Bihar with the help of various departments and agencies was able to ensure safe passage and return of maximum migrant population back to the state. The government was also instrumental in setting up control rooms and other initiatives to cater to the needs of the migrants stranded outside the state. The government was successful in designing a detailed plan for the reintegration of the migrants back into the economy through a proper system that involved skill mapping and skill-based training followed by employment in related industries. The Government's systematic and planned management of the criticism the wake of the lockdown with the establishment of proper commissions and initiatives, use of apps for data storage, Skill mapping etc. was instrumental in dealing with the issues caused by the Covid induced reverse migration. A study of the steps taken by various other state governments of India and the world is necessary to ensure the development of a proper management system in case of worldwide crippling pandemic like Covid19.

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