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Migrants and Policy Response during Covid-19 in India

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Abstract

*Covid-19 has made unprecedented changes in the lives of migrants. Both internal and international migrants have faced similar challenges like, job loss, lockdowns, wage-cut, and stigmatization; further they have witnessed inadequate policy response in terms of managing the crisis that has again stressed the lives of migrants. Considering these facts into account the attempt of this study is to understand the lives of migrants during the Covid-19 crisis. The study would employ secondary data and publically available documents to understand the migration process of India and how the lives of migrants have changed during the crisis. The study would focus on Indian migrants.*

Keywords: Covid-19, migrants, out-migration, crisis, transportation, husband, economic distress, vulnerable community.

**1. Introduction**

The advent of Covid-19 has brought unprecedented difficulties to the migrants. In their response, the governments across the world have close down the national borders and suspended transportation. This closure has resulted in fall of economies across the world. The loss of employment and economic distress are the common experience of migrants during Covid-19 crisis. Those who do not loss jobs have witnessed wage cut and wage theft. This challenging situation makes migrants most vulnerable community of society. The substandard living conditions, limited access to social security and closure of transportation during lockdown put migrants' lives at additional risk.

Considering these facts into account the objective of this study is to understand the lives of migrants during the covid-19 crisis and policy response against it. The study has been organized under four sections. Section 1 is about the introduction of the study, section 2 is about the out-migration; where we have discussed about internal and international migration from India. We have used Census, 2011 data to show the out-migration destination and main reasons of migration. Section 3 of the study is about the policy response towards the

migrants. This section is further categorized into three sub-sections. Section 4, concludes the study.

### 1.1 Data

The main source of migration data on Indian migrants are Census, NSSO-Data and IHDS-Surveys. Each data source has some distinct features. The Census data is collected for the entire population of India under the Ministry of Home Affairs, Government of India. The Census helps us to understand the migration in totality. The latest Census data is available for 2011. In this study, we have used D-2 and D-3 tables of the Census, 2011 to understand the migration process in Indian context. Apart from this we have used data and information published by leading newspapers in India.

## 2. Out migration

India has old history of migration. According to the Census (2011), 37.6 per cent of populations are migrants. Out of total 37 per cent people who have migrated internally or within the country and 0.5 per cent population or 1.2 per cent migrants have migrated to another country. Table 1 shows the out-migration distribution across the geographical region. The out migration across the geographical region is distributed as a proportion of total migrant population of India. India's internal migration is skewed towards the females; they mostly migrate due to marriages. While in context of cross border migration the most preferred destination of Indian migrants is Asia which is followed by America, Africa, Europe and the Oceania region. In this cross country migration the out-migration is dominated by male.

Table 1 Out-migration distribution across the region

Region	Person	Male	Female
India *	37.64	23.45	52.70
Beyond India	1.20	1.72	0.96
Asia	0.99	1.47	0.76
Europe	0.023	0.027	0.022
Africa	0.084	0.086	0.083
America	0.088	0.11	0.076
Oceania	0.020	0.023	0.19

\* Migrants share as a proportion of total population

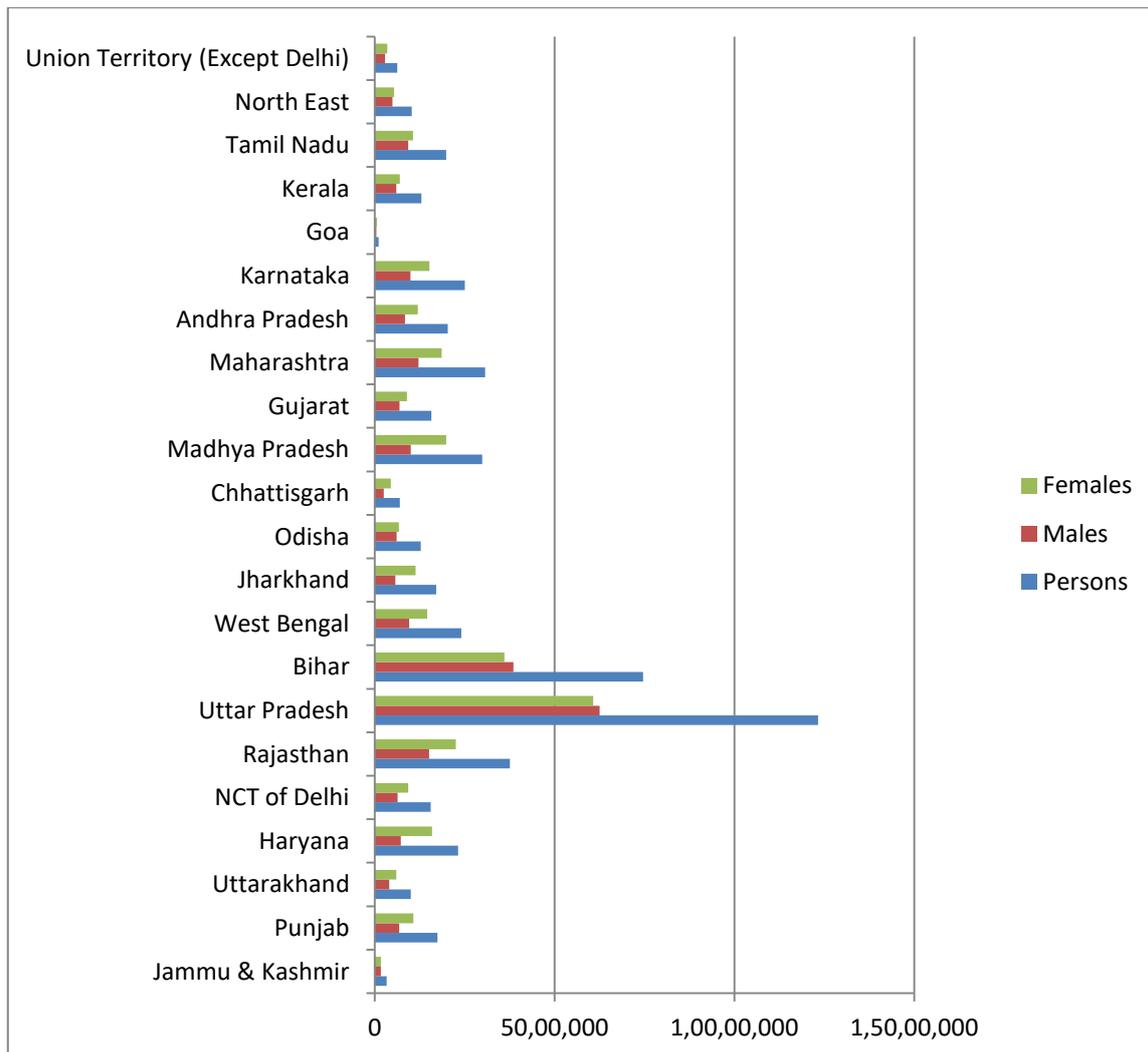
Migration beyond India is shown as a share of total migrant population of India

Source: Census, 2011

The internal migration in India is dominated by female migration. The state of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar has highest proportion of migrants; their share in total migrants is 2.7 per cent and 1.6 per cent respectively. These two states are among the most populous states in India. The figure 1 shows the origin state of migrants and their numbers. The Northeastern

states have low level of out migration in comparison to Indian states; altogether these state accounts for 0.23 per cent of total migrants. Among these states Assam has highest out-migration. The Union territory of India (except Delhi) accounts for 0.14 per cent of total migrants. The developed states of India such as Kerala, Punjab, Haryana, Gujarat and Maharashtra etc. have lower number of migrants in comparison to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These developed states are major migration destination of inter-state migrants. The out migration in India is dominated by marriages where female leaves their home and settles in the home of husband. Exceptions to these rituals are found in some North-Eastern states where women do not leave home.

Figure 1 Out-migration from the states in India



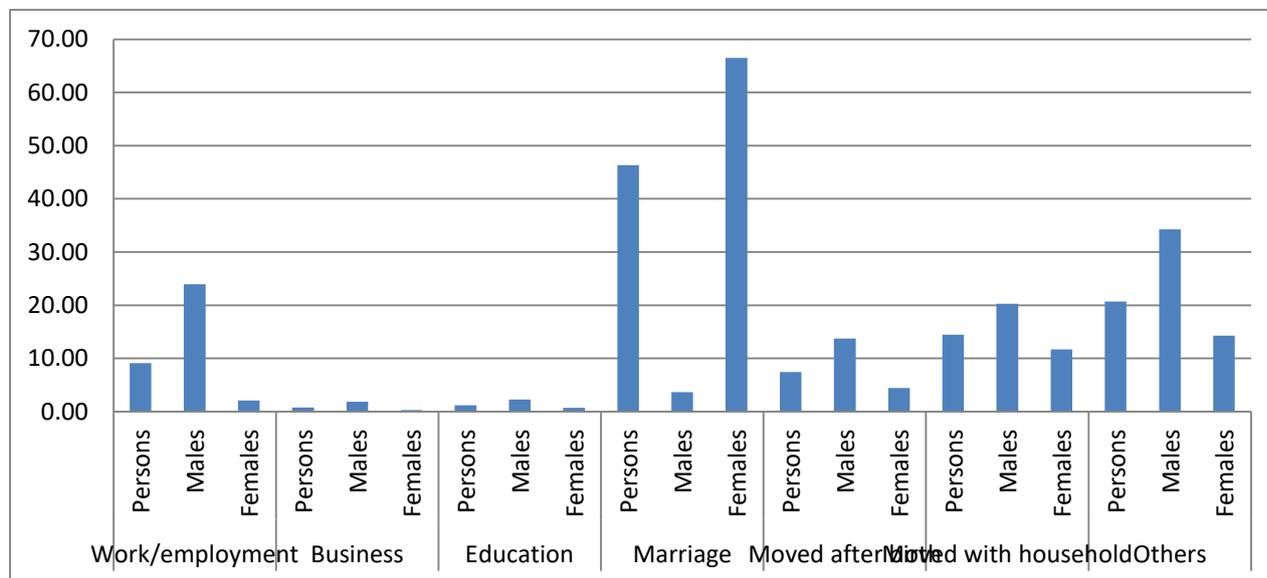
North East consist: Assam, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, and Meghalaya

Source: Census, 2011

The reason for out-migration from India is very diverse. The main reason for out-migration is marriage (46.33 per cent) which is followed by others category (20.69 per cent). The other important reason for migration is employment (9.09 per cent) and migration with the household (14.47 per cent). The gender dynamics of migration is very dissimilar; marriage migration dominates all other reasons of migration for female (66.48 per cent);

while work or employment related migration is dominated by males (23.96 per cent). Migration after marriage is high for men. Education related migration is 1.20 per cent of total migration. A total of 2.26 per cent males and 0.70 per cent females are migrating for education. In the category of migration for business the share of males are 1.84 per cent while it is 0.29 per cent for females.

Figure 2 reasons for out-migration



Source: Census, 2011

Table 1, figure 1 and figure 2 of the study is based on the data of Census of India, 2011. The census data is incomplete as it does not capture the circular or short-term migration in India. The labour from less developed regions such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh etc. migrate to developed region in the lean season of agriculture and they return during the harvesting season. In this way, they get employment in agricultural sector as well as in informal sectors of economies during the lean season. Despite its drawback the Census data is the latest available source of information on Indian migration.

### 3. Policy Response to Migration/ Migrants During Covid-19

Section 2 of the study has shown the out-migration behavior of India, which shows that 37.6 percent of populations are migrants and out of which less than one per cent are migrating abroad. Considering these facts we would look in to the issue of migrants during Covid-19 and policy response from the government.

#### 3.1 Health and Safety Measures

The ongoing crisis is originally a health crisis which has affected the nation in many ways. The first Covid-19 case was reported on 30<sup>th</sup> January where an Indian migrant was found infected with Covid-19. In the month of February, no significant rise in case was reported. In the first week of March, few cases were reported and state government across the India announced closure of academic institutions. Later international flights were terminated and nationwide lockdown was imposed on 24<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 to contain the spread of disease.

The lockdown imposed by India was very strict and it provided enough time to prepare against the disease. In this period, India has significantly increased its testing

capacity; however the result of this measure is not very good. Today India accounts for more than 75 lakh Covid-19 cases and more than one lakh deaths which put India on the second spot with highest Covid-19 cases (Covid-19india.org).

### **3.2 Containment of Covid-19**

Covid-19 is a contagious respiratory disease originated in Wuhan province of China in the last quarter of 2019. It is caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), which is a specific type of virus in the family of coronavirus. The Covid-19 spreads when an infected person comes in physical contact of another person or when the infected people breathe, sneeze, or talk. To contain the spread of the diseases the government announced nationwide lockdown on 24<sup>th</sup> March 2020. The lockdown continued in four phases and lasted on 31<sup>st</sup> May, 2020 (Singh et.al, 2020). After the nationwide lockdown few state governments imposed lockdowns on their own terms for example- Bihar, West Bengal, and Uttar Pradesh etc. These lockdowns put restriction on the movement of people and their usual routine. The factories to schools, super markets to local mandis all were closed only emergency services were allowed to do. This led to an economic crisis where people working in informal set up lost their jobs. Many migrants who lose their jobs find it difficult to survive as their savings were drying and there was no safety net to protect them.

In order to survive, they decided to return to their home. In the absence of any transportation system they moved on foot. The journey was not an easy one and a few migrants walked few hundred kilometers, while many walked thousand kilometers. Many people died in their journey which caused the loss of only earning members of their households.

Later the government started special trains in the month of May to send back the migrants. From 1<sup>st</sup> May to 31<sup>st</sup> August, 4621 Shramik Special Trains were operated between destination and source states of India and it carried 63.19 lakh migrants while 97 people died travelling on Shramik Special trains (Economic Times 2020b). For international migrants the normal flights were un-operational from the mid-March. However government operated special flights to bring back the stranded migrants from the abroad. According to Economic Times, 2020b government has operated 1873 international flights to bring back 17.22 lakh migrants from 25 countries from 9<sup>th</sup> May to 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020.

### **3.3 Relief Measures**

In response to the crisis caused by Covid-19, government of India announced an economic package in the month of May. The package focused on Aatmnirbhar Bharat (self-reliant India) where the objective of the government was to push the economy on the track. In the package, the measures were taken to provide food, LPG gas and employment under the MNREGA and relief to various sections of the society (Business World, 2020). However, it could not yield the expected result. The Impact of Covid-19 is visible on national economy which has registered a negative growth rate of 23.9 per cent in its GDP of Q1 (year to year basis). It is important here to note that the majority of migrants do not have ration cards at their destination to avail the benefit of food supply announced by the government. Further, the loss of employment made situation worse. According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) the monthly unemployment rate went as high as 23.5 per cent and 21.7 per cent in April and May respectively from 8.8 per cent in March.

In the discussion and relief packages announced by the government, reliefs to migrant were missing. An attempt towards employment was made through MNREGA where an

unskilled worker can expect employment for 100 days which is not true in most cases further the lockdown lasted for more than hundred days in one form or another (during unlocking the economy certain restrictions were there and institutions were running under half of their usual capacity).

In order to address the issue of unemployment a few states in India announced skill mapping of migrants in order to provide them employment opportunity locally and also to serve the need of MSME sector (Times of India 2020). A similar approach has been taken by central government where it has launched a pilot project to map the skill of migrants in 30 districts of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (New Indian Express, 2020).

#### **4. Conclusion and Way forward**

Indian states have grown differently and there exists a large scale inequality among the states. The unequal distribution of resources and expected income gap promotes large scale out-migration (Srivastava, et.al. 2020). The states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh are predominantly a poor state having poor infrastructure and limited industries altogether they do not create sufficient employment opportunities within the state boundary. The lack of quality education and financial assistance are other hindrance towards the self-employment. Under such condition, people go out in search of employment and breaking the cycle of poverty. Many migrants have improved their livings and it is reflected in the remittance related works and also in the NSSO report on migration.

The unprecedented outbreak of Covid-19 has put migrants' life in the risk. The loss of employment has made the situation worse. The inadequate response from the policymakers has restarted the return of migrants. However, we expect that a significant share of migrants may not go back. To improve the lives of migrants we suggest the following steps:

- a) Migrants should be assigned work in accordance with their skill and expertise: Bihar is the most backward state of India having the low infrastructure and poor transportation services. The skill mapping of return migrants suggests that we have sufficient manpower to build infrastructure; if we invest in these things than the employment will be created and the state will also enjoy better infrastructure that will help the state in many ways.
- b) Better monitoring of migrants data so that we can use the information in ensuring the well-being of migrants both at the origin and their out-migration destination. During the Covid-19 crisis, we lagged because of inadequate data availability. During the preparation we were not aware of how many migrants are there.
- c) Quality education and financial assistance are required so that the youth of the country can start their own business or startups locally. At present India has youngest population but in the absence of opportunities, the young people move out for work even without completing their education.

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