

**Understanding Circular Migration in India:  
Its Nature and Dimensions, the Crisis under  
Lockdown and the Response of the State**

Ravi Srivastava





WP 04/2020

# **Understanding Circular Migration in India: Its Nature and Dimensions, the Crisis under Lockdown and the Response of the State**

RAVI SRIVASTAVA



INSTITUTE FOR  
HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

[www.ihdindia.org](http://www.ihdindia.org)

*Published by:*

**INSTITUTE FOR HUMAN DEVELOPMENT**

84, Functional Industrial Estate (FIE)

Patparganj, Delhi-110092

Tel: +91 11 22159148, 22159149

E-mail: [mail@ihdindia.org](mailto:mail@ihdindia.org)

Website: [www.ihdindia.org](http://www.ihdindia.org)

ISBN: 978-81-88315-73-4

Subscription Amount Rs. 50/- (US \$10)

# **Understanding Circular Migration in India: Its Nature and Dimensions, the Crisis under Lockdown and the Response of the State**

Ravi Srivastava\*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The stringent lock-down in India in response to the Corona pandemic was announced at a notice of about four hours. No public evidence has emerged so far revealing the nature of consultations which preceded it within government, or between the Central government and state governments and experts, either on the public health containment strategies or the impact on the economy and the workers. The loss in employment and incomes of the workers in the informal economy, some 93 percent of all workers, was almost complete in the first phase of the lockdown, when the entire economy, both agricultural and non-agricultural, ground to a halt. The country entered the third phase of the lockdown after May 3, with a complete shut down in the red zone districts which include nearly all the growth centres and urban agglomerations, and a fourth and fifth phase from May 17 and June 1 respectively in which several activities have been allowed to resume in almost all zones, except in a few highly endemic areas.

As soon as the lock-down was imposed, its major impact was felt by urban informal workers. The loss in employment and incomes immediately threatened their access to food and non-food essential items, rented accommodation and shelter. The most significant impact was felt by migrant labour from rural areas working in urban and peri-urban areas. In addition to the loss of jobs, in many cases, they were also denied wage arrears for past work and loss of accommodation, which is usually their worksites. Circular migrants, who have a weak or no foothold

\* Professor and Director, Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi, Ravi.srivastava@ihdindia.org

Last revised on June 3, 2020. The author is grateful to Balakrushna Padhi for research support.

in urban areas and destinations where they work, started moving back from urban centres in large numbers even before the start of formal lock-down. After a few days of the lockdown, they came out on the roads in large numbers, in hunger and dire desperation.<sup>1</sup> The Central government issued new and harsh guidelines on closure of state and district borders, and push-back of migrants to shelters, quarantines, and ordered the prosecution of migrants for violation of the Disaster Management Act, if they still insisted on moving.<sup>2</sup>

In the first few weeks of lock-down horrendous descriptions have emerged of the distress and hunger among these migrant labourers, of how they have attempted to travel thousands of miles on foot on hand-carts, and cycles, and inside containers and cement mixers. There are news reports of migrants dying on the road and rail tracks, of suicides; of their being lathi-charged and tear-gassed when in frustration and desperation they have come out on the streets; being mistreated en-route; and made to feel unwelcome in their home villages. Measures of support announced by the Central and State governments did not reach most of them or were grossly inadequate (Jan Sahas 2020; SWAN 2020a; 2020b)

It is abundantly clear that the Central government failed to understand the scale and nature of the problem faced by migrants although two commissions/committees had flagged issues and the road ahead (NCEUS, 2007; GoI, 2017). It further chose to interpret and deal with the urgent issues as a law and order problem arising due to what it considered were planned spread of misinformation, as well as conspiracies.<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, as we explore in this paper, government's response has been tilted in favour of the supposed interest of employers, without taking into account the huge humanitarian costs to the migrant labourers, and objectives of both short-term and long-term inclusive development.

---

1. See for instance: <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/coronavirus-india-lockdown-week-1-highlights-migrants-6342355/> viewed on April 1, 2020, and

[https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia\\_pacific/india-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers/2020/03/27/a62df166-6f7d-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/india-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers/2020/03/27/a62df166-6f7d-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html), viewed on April 1, 2020

2. All notifications issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) are available on the Government of India website. Guidelines and notifications issued by the Ministry of Railways on the movement of migrants by train are available on the Ministry website.

3. Submission by the Home Secretary in the Supreme Court, March 31, 2020 (<https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Status%20Report%20COVID19.pdf> viewed on April 10, 2020)

## 2. Understanding the Nature of Rural-urban Migration

Rural-urban migration, in the first instance, results from rural-urban differentials in growth processes and higher productivity and incomes in the urban/industrial sector. This has been theorized by development economists for more than half a century (Lewis, 1954; Harris, John and Todaro, 1970; Todar, 1976). But the vast movement of people from rural areas, within and across countries, has been structured by several factors other than the voluntary forces at the household or individual level envisaged in mainstream migration literature.

During the colonial era, the large movements of people were structured by the pattern of colonial demand for labour in agriculture, mines, industry, armed forces, and infrastructure development (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2005). In the post-colonial period, the pattern of rural-urban migration has been structured by the nature of unequal development promoted by the pattern of capitalist development in India. Unequal development has become significantly more pronounced in the post-liberalisation phase, exacerbating the gap between rural and urban areas, and between laggard and rapidly growing regions, with the most pronounced growth occurring in agglomerated growth centres, in and around, large urban centres, mostly located in the North, West, and Southern regions of the country. It is these growth centres, around urban centres, which, along with the persistent lack of livelihood growth in hinterlands, which are the major drivers of labour migration today (Srivastava, 2011b).

However, while the pattern of development across regions is an important determinant of the pattern of inter-regional migration, this is now increasingly reinforced by demographic factors. As Srivastava et. al. (2020) have shown, most receiving areas have low rates of growth of the potential labour force in the working age group, whereas the case is reverse for most sending areas. The study argues that this pattern will exacerbate in the years to come (ibid.).

Another fact, missed by mainstream development theory, is that most rural populations are differentiated in class and social terms and this differentiation is closely associated with the distribution of land and physical assets on the one hand, and human capital, on the other. Outmigration from rural areas does not only take a U shape in relation to these factors, as described by Connell et al., (1976), but migrants are also stratified in terms of types of migration and job status in destination areas, depending upon their initial physical, educational and social attributes (Srivastava, 2011a). The socio-economic groups at the bottom of the

rural pyramid face discrimination and continue to retain the most precarious jobs in segmented labour markets when they migrate to destinations (Srivastava, 2019).

It must also be emphasized that the precarity of labour at the bottom is not only a function of the lack of their endowments or their specific attributes. It follows from the way labour markets function. Segmentation and fragmentation is one key aspect of the functioning of labour markets. In wage labour markets, control over the labour process is another key dimension. Both also lead to lower wage costs. Contrary to what is normally believed and suggested by the overarching spatial patterns of labour migration, import of labour migrants and the expulsion of local labour are two sides of the same coin in many situations, making labour circulation, discussed below, a more complex spatial process than ordinarily recognized (Breman, 1985; Breman, 1994; Srivastava, 1998; Srivastava, 2011a).

Another important issue is the increasing recognition in the literature that rural-urban migration is no longer a one-way street. We have known for several decades that seasonal and circular migration brings back migrants to their areas of origin in rural areas after they have expended labour in other destination areas (Conell et al., 1976; Mukhopadhyay, 1985; Breman, 1985; Standing, 1985). Initially, most circular migration was associated with seasonal activities (Breman, 2013). The National Commission of Rural Labour estimated that by 1990, there were already more than ten million seasonal/circular migrants working in construction, brick-kilns, quarries and mines, spinning and rice mills and so on (NCRL, 1991). The NCRL also pointed out that estimates of migrants from the Census and the NSS, both designed to estimate sedentary populations, failed to satisfactorily measure seasonal/circular migrants. This has been reiterated in a number of other studies (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2005; Srivastava, 2011a). Breman's extensive work on the issue has documented how the circular migrant can move from destination to destination for irregular periods, before returning to her/his area of origin (Breman 1985, 1994, 1996, 2013).

Finally, as Breman (*ibid.*) has pointed out circular migration is closely intertwined with the growth of informal employment in rural and urban areas (Srivastava, 2011b). Informal employment has grown in India in the heart of the economy viz. the organized sector (Srivastava, 2016a; Srivastava, 2016b). Circular migration has also grown in tandem. Srivastava (2019) has shown how, in the context of India's low road to capitalist development, informality, circular migration, labour market and social discrimination, and segmentation go hand in hand (Srivastava, 2019).



### 3. Circular Migration in India

The Census identifies people as migrants if they are enumerated in a place other than the Place of Birth (PoB) or have changed their Usual Place of Residence (PoLR). To qualify for enumeration, the person should have ordinarily been living in the place of enumeration for six months or more – with some exceptions. The “place” is an administrative jurisdiction defined as a village or town/Urban Area. The NSS only uses the second definition (PoLR) to enumerate migrants.

The Census and the NSS are likely to provide an accurate enumeration of stable populations, missing out on those who live on the fringes or those who migrate temporarily. As pointed out earlier, migration is not a one way street. People who migrate to other destinations may do so for a period of time, after which they may return to their areas of origin. In earlier work, we have made a distinction between permanent migration, semi-permanent or long-term circular migration, and short-term seasonal or circular migration (Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2005; Srivastava, 2011a, 2012a). Permanent migrants are those who no longer have a strong link with the areas from which they migrated, while semi-permanent migrants are those who still have strong links with their areas of origin). The long term status of the latter is potentially reversible and we also call them long-term circular migrants.

We have argued elsewhere that the Census provides a satisfactory measure of permanent migration, and imperfectly measures long-term semi-permanent circular migration but it is not designed to measure short-term circular migration (*ibid.*). However, the NSS Employment-Unemployment and Migration Surveys in 1999-00 (55<sup>th</sup> Round) and 2007-08 (64<sup>th</sup> Round) have attempted to estimate persons migrating out for short-durations for employment.<sup>4</sup> But it has been pointed out that efforts by the National Sample Survey did not capture the magnitude of short-term seasonal or circular migrants (Srivastava, 2011a, 2012a). This was principally

---

4. Various surveys conducted by the NSSO, starting from the 9th round (May-August, 1955), have collected data on migration as part of its employment and unemployment enquiries (NSSO 2010). In the sixth quinquennial survey on employment and unemployment during NSS 55th round (July, 1999-June, 2000) information on migration particulars was collected through the employment-unemployment schedule. In the 64th round (July 2007-June 2008) of NSS, information on various facets of employment and unemployment as well as on migration in India was collected through the employment-unemployment schedule (schedule 10.2) of the survey (*ibid.*). In this paper, unit data from this survey (referred to as the NSS Migration Survey, 2007-08) has been used to estimate different types of migration. Since, 1999-00, the National Sample Survey Office has carried out two surveys combining collection of information on employment-unemployment and migration.

because most seasonal and circular migrants, other than those in agriculture, migrate for longer periods than six months which was taken in these surveys as the upper limit for the duration of short-term migration (*ibid.*). The IHDS, which also estimated seasonal migration also came up with a low figure (Srivastava et al., 2020).

Seasonal or short-term circular migrants differ from the first two categories in having no footing in the destinations where they work. Most reside at work-sites or in the open, while a small percentage live in crowded tenanted places. Some may eventually join the ranks of long-term circular migrants. These migrants are a part of the informal economy and form the underbelly of the labour market, mostly as casual or contract workers.

The short-term circular migrants are no doubt also heterogenous in terms of their characteristics, with a stratum of semi-skilled and self-employed workers. But Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes are over-represented among them (Srivastava, 2012a). In contra-distinction to long-term migrants, they are from poorer and landless groups (Srivastava, 2012a). Other than those in services or the self-employed, a large majority of the wage employed among them are recruited through a chain of intermediaries (*ibid.*). The India Human Development Survey shows that nearly half of all short duration circular migrants are recruited through contractors. The starting point of their recruitment is an advance, which immobilizes them for the duration of employment. In a number of sectors such as construction, brick-kilns, quarries, contractors give them a subsistence allowance and their full wages are only adjusted against advances at the end of their employment period (Srivastava, 2009).

These migrants enjoy a tenuous relation with the villages from where they come and have no civic rights or entitlements in the areas where they work. This includes lack of access to the PDS and, in many cases, even to the banking system (Srivastava, 2012a, b).

The long-term circular migrants to cities negotiate their spaces with urban interlocutors over a protracted period, over the space of several years – acquiring some civic entitlements. But for most, even among this category, access to entitlements remains limited and the overwhelming majority of these migrants also work in the informal economy as informal wage workers or self-employed (Srivastava, 2012a). Compared to the short-term circular migrants, they may have stronger social networks and are less likely to be in adverse inter-locked employment

relationships, But whether in wage employment or self-employment most long-term circular migrants in the informal economy are also precariously placed. Like the short-term circular migrants, they retain a foothold in the rural areas from where they come, remitting income to their families in rural areas for consumption, working capital, or investment (ibid.).<sup>5</sup> These migrants periodically or cyclically revert to their areas of origin, particularly in times of distress, and send regular remittances to their families in villages, although many could eventually be absorbed in the urban landscape.

#### **4. Informality, Labour Migration and Vulnerability**

Indian workers are submerged in an ocean of informality. The transition from agriculture to industry and services has been slow although its pace increased in the last three decades. Nonetheless, the non-agricultural workforce has been engaged mostly in precarious informal employment, both as self-employed or as wage workers. Data analysed elsewhere shows that the organized sector of the economy has experienced growth but has rapidly informalized (Srivastava, 2016a, 2016b). The result is that the increase in the share in non-agricultural employment has not resulted in higher formal employment, belying the assumptions of structural change.

As Breman, has pointed out, informality and labour circulation is a strategy by which capitalists raise profits through lower wage costs and higher absolute surpluses from labour (Breman, 2013; Srivastava, 2011b). Indeed labour circulation is the key to understanding this arrested transition to formal employment. As capital has accelerated the use of flexible, informalised labour, it has taken advantage of the inequalities that exist and has fostered and encouraged the use of circular migrant labour. These migrants and their families draw part subsistence from the rural areas so that capital does not have to provide them with the full cost of subsistence. The State and capital continue to increase the cost of urban space and housing, creating a model of exclusionary urbanization (Kundu 2009; Kundu and Saraswati, 2016). Apart from resident labour, which comprises both long-term permanent migrants and long-term circular migrants, growth centres have able to able to utilize a pool of commuting and short-term circular migrants, who originate in rural areas but work, as and when required, in the urban areas. One implication of this is that the share of the urban and peri-urban workforce is much higher than what is conveyed

---

5. Among inter-state long term circular migrants, 76.6 percent continued to make remittances to their families in source states.

by the distribution of the rural-urban population.<sup>6</sup> The precarious and vulnerable part of this workforce comprises the short-term circular migrants), the vast majority of the long-term circular migrants, and a section of the permanent migrants.

## 5. Estimates of Vulnerable Circular Migrants

When the migrant crisis erupted at the end of March 2020, no official estimates were available to gauge the numbers of migrant workers affected by the lockdown. But it has quickly become clear that migrant informal workers were virtually the mainstay of the urban/industrial economy. Large-scale distress and exodus after the lockdown has been experienced by short-term and long-term circular migrants i.e. those who still consider their areas of origin as their primary or secondary homes. This section is an attempt to bring together broad estimates of circular migrants impacted.

However, since even circular migrants, particularly those whom we have described as long-term circular migrants are heterogeneous, all such migrants would not be impacted severely by the lockdown. Hence, the notion of vulnerability introduced by us in earlier studies (Srivastava, 2011a), continues to be pertinent. Vulnerable migrants were considered as all short-term circular migrants, plus long-term circular migrants and permanent migrants in urban areas who are vulnerable because of the nature of their employment and/or consumption status. In Srivastava (2011a), we had carefully assessed industry-wise incidence of short-term circular migration and concluded that there were about 40 million such migrant workers. We then considered all migrants in lower MPCE deciles and concluded that there were a total of about 80 to 90 million vulnerable migrant workers in the Indian economy, or that one in every five workers was a vulnerable migrant worker. In this paper, we do not consider the category of vulnerable permanent migrants, and confine ourselves only to the circular migrant workers who are considered vulnerable.

In earlier studies, estimates of vulnerable long-term circular migrants (also called semi-permanent migrants) had not been separated from other vulnerable long-term migrants (permanent migrants). In this paper, we present separate estimates of

---

6. The National Statistical Organisation surveys on employment provide estimates of the workforce resident in rural and urban areas. They also provide estimates of the workforce by place of work reported by them (rural, urban, no fixed place). By place of enumeration, the Periodic Labour Force Survey for 2017-18 date estimates indicate that 48.8 percent of non-agricultural workers were resident in rural areas, and 51.2 percent in urban areas. When adjustment is made for place of work, then only 39.7 percent workers report working in rural areas, and 51.4 percent in urban areas, while 8.9 percent workers report having no fixed place of work (rural or urban).

short-term and vulnerable long-term circular migrants. A methodological note and data sources used are given in the Appendix. These estimates fill a data gap, given that direct information on these migrants is not available. *The results given are to treated as broad estimates which are contingent on assumptions described in the methodological note.*

### Short-term Circular Migrant Workers

We first turn to re-estimating the size of the short-term circular migrant workforce. Recently, we have estimated the size of the circular migrant workforce in the construction industry which has the largest segment of such migrants (Srivastava, 2018). We concluded that about a quarter of all construction workers were short-term inter-state circular workers, while 50 to 60 percent were short-term circular migrants including within-state migrants. About 30 to 40 percent of the construction workers were commuting or non-migrants and 10 percent were long-term migrants (ibid.). Based on our estimates of workers in the construction industry, this would imply a circular migrant workforce of at least 24.9 million in 2011 and 26.4 million in 2017-18 in the construction industry alone.

Using the NSS 2007-08 estimates of the composition of the other short-duration migrants by industry, and assuming a similar underestimation in all sectors, except in agriculture in which most circular migrants are short-term, we now estimate that there are about 51 million short-term circular migrants. Based on trends in seasonal migration of agricultural labourers, we estimate their numbers to be about 7.5 million in 2017-18.

A break-up of the estimated numbers of short-term circular migrants by major destinations for 2011-12 and 2017-18 is given in Table 1.

Table 1  
Estimate of Short Duration Circular Migrant Workers

Year	Total	Rural	Urban	Other State	Other State - Urban
2011-12	52	11	40	25	22
2017-18	59	14	44	28	24

Source: Computations based on NSS 2007-08, and Srivastava (2018)

### Estimates of Vulnerable Long-term Circular Migrants

We then turn to estimating the long-term (semi-permanent) circular migrant workforce. The migration numbers/estimates provided by the Census and the NSS include both permanent and semi-permanent (long-term circular) migrants,

but obtaining estimates only of the latter is even more complicated. For this, we have used the information provided by the NSS migration survey on long-term outmigrants. The NSS survey of 2007-08 provides comprehensive data on four types of migration. Apart from (in)migration based on the Usual Place of Residence (UPR) approach, the NSS also provides information on short duration employment related migration (discussed above); migration by complete households, and on non-resident out-migrating members of households, including their economic activity and those making remittances.<sup>7</sup> The last is the most comprehensive description that we have of long-term circular migration since it provides data on outmigrants who are perceived to be non-resident members of households, many of whom also continue send money to their homes. Further, we can also use this survey data to classify migrants by consumption quintiles and occupational category.<sup>8</sup> In the figures discussed below, we only include vulnerability by occupational category (workers in occupational categories 5 to 9).<sup>9</sup>

These detailed estimates and characteristics of out-migration and in-migration obtained from the NSS for 2007-08 have been combined with Census migration figures of 2001 and 2011, and projected for recent years to obtain updated figures for long-term migration, as given in the methodological note.<sup>10</sup> We have presented these estimates for up to March 2018 since employment data is currently available for 2017-18.

According to our estimates, just over one-third of all migrant workers enumerated in the NSS and the Census were long-term circular migrants. Their numbers were estimated at about 66 million in 2011 and 81 million in 2018. Out of

---

7. The survey also additionally seeks information on return migration, and nature of movement (whether temporary or permanent, whether for less than one year or more than one year).

8. We define workers as vulnerable if (i) they are in the bottom four quintiles in terms of their per capita consumption, or (2) if they are lower occupational categories 5 to 9, as per the NCO classification.

9. The NCO 2004 puts the following groups of occupations in codes 5 to 9: 5. Service workers and shop and market sales workers. 6. Skilled agricultural and fishery workers. 7. Craft and related trades workers. 8. Plant and machinery operators and assemblers. 9. Elementary occupations.

10. The Census 2001 published 21 detailed migration tables. At the time of writing this paper in May 2020, and one month after the house listing operations of the 2021 Census would have taken off had the pandemic not intervened, the Registrar General of India has only published 11 migration tables for 2011. Crucially, two important tables – D-08 and D-09 which give the profile of migrant workers by place of last residence, and industrial category and occupational category, respectively, have not yet been published. We have therefore made certain assumptions regarding worker participation rates based on the 2001 Census.

these workers, 56 million workers in 2011 and 69 million in 2018 were estimated as being vulnerable long-term circular migrant workers. Below, we provide estimates of urban migrants and inter-state migrants among the vulnerable long-term circular migrant workers.

### Vulnerability of Urban Migrants

In the table below (table 2), we have given estimates for 2011-12 and 2017-18 for urban migrant workers. Estimates of migrant workers for 2017-18 are based on projected growth rates between 2001 and 2011. Migrant workers as a percent of the urban workforce were 32 percent of the urban workforce in 2011-12, which at the projected growth rates could have increased to 51 percent of the urban workforce in 2017-18. Occupationally vulnerable long-term circular migrants (45 million) are estimated at 34 percent of all occupationally vulnerable workers in 2011-12, which could have increased to 67 million and 53 percent of all such workers by 2017-18. After adding the short-term circular migrant workers to the extended urban workforce, the total vulnerable circular migrant workforce is estimated at 85 million in 2011-12 and 111 million in 2017-18. As a percentage of all vulnerable workers in urban areas, this works out to be 49 and 65 percent of the total vulnerable urban workforce in urban areas in the two years respectively. These figures highlight the significant presence of circular migrants in the urban economy and among its vulnerable workforce.

Table 2  
Vulnerable Urban Migrant Workers

	2011-12	2017-18
1 Urban Total Workers (m)	209	194
2 Occupationally Vulnerable Workers (m)	134	125
3 Total Urban Migrant Workers (m)	68	98
4 Migrant Workers as % of Total Urban Workers	32	51
5 Long-term Vulnerable Migrants (m)	45	67
6 Short-term Circulatory Migrants (m)	40	44
7 % Long-term vulnerable migrants to Total Urban Vulnerable Workforce	34	53
8 % All Vulnerable Migrant Workers to Extended urban Vulnerable Workforce	49	65

*Note:* 1 and 2 are based on computations from the NSS Employment-Unemployment Survey of 2011-12 and the NSO PLFS Survey of 2017-18. 3 is based on Census figures and projections. 5 is based on estimates from the NSS Employment Survey of 2007-08 and Census figures and projections. 6 is based on estimates reported in the earlier section.

## Vulnerable Inter-state Circular Migrants

As far as vulnerable inter-state migrant workers (both urban and rural) are concerned, we estimate 20 million long-term and 25 million short-term vulnerable migrant workers in 2011. These figures have been projected to grow to 24 and 28 million respectively (52 million in all) in 2018.

Among inter-state urban migrant workers, there were an estimated 15 million long-term vulnerable circular migrants and 22 million short-term circular migrant workers in 2011. These figures are projected to increase to 19 million and 24 million respectively in 2018 (total 43 million).

These estimates are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3  
Vulnerable Inter-state Migrant Workers (in million)

	Type of Migration	2011	2018
Inter-state	Long-term Circular	20	24
	Short-term Circular	25	28
	Both	45	52
Inter-state Urban	Long-term Circular	15	19
	Short-term Circular	22	24
	Both	37	43

*Note:* Estimates of Long-term circular migrants are based on computations from the NSS Employment Survey of 2007-08 and Census figures and projections. Estimates of short-term circular migrants are based on estimates reported in Table 1

Since the pandemic has impacted most on vulnerable informal workers, these estimates show that circular migrants are a very large component of the vulnerable workforce outside agriculture, more so in urban areas. The proportion of such workers would naturally be higher for large urban agglomerations and growth centres where inter-state migrant workers are concentrated.

To conclude: circular migrants are spread across construction, agriculture, manufacturing, mining, and the services sector, and the figures above convey that they form the mainstay of the urban and peri-urban workforce and the informal non-agricultural workforce, as a whole. In absolute numbers, they are also important in agriculture. They are concentrated in vulnerable occupations in the informal economy. These workers, along with accompanying family members, have been impelled to return to their villages, because of lack of food and wages, absence of



accommodation and/or cramped living conditions, or simply the desire to reunite with their families.<sup>1112</sup>

As pointed out earlier, in the beginning, the Central government neither recognized the magnitude of labour migration, nor its centrality in the labour process in growth centres. Had the government recognized this centrality and the nature of vulnerabilities that circular migrants face at the outset, it may be speculated whether it would have paid greater attention to providing them more adequate support under lockdown.

## 6. Inter-state Migration: Origin and Destination States

The NSS 2007-08 and the Census data on inter-state migration provide a good indication of spatial patterns of in and out-migration. These results are presented in Table 4. Results from the NSS and the IHDS show that inter-state seasonal/circular migration is dominated by lower income states – Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, followed by Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Rajasthan, Chhatisgarh, Jharkhand and Odisha.<sup>13</sup> In recent years, there is also evidence to show increased migration from the Eastern to Southern states, which is not yet fully captured by the macro data.<sup>14</sup>

- 
11. The proportion of accompanying members to worker migrants is approximately 2.1 among long-term circular migrants. It is likely to be lower among short-term circular migrants.
  12. It is not the contention of this paper that all circular migrants have been equally impelled to return to their native places. This depends on their circumstances before, and during, lockdown. Our investigations reveal that a number of interstate migrants had gone back to their native villages in the Northern and Central Indian states in early March due to the festival of Holi and had stayed back for the harvest season. Many others have continued to live in peripheral worksites and cannot consider going back without the consent of their contractors/employers. A few would consider the prospect of businesses and employment soon after lock-down. Thus, the numbers who made it back during lock-down or are still stranded at destinations can only be speculated, although even after the exodus that has been witnessed, till the end of May, the latter numbers still remain very large. In a recent averment to the Karnataka High Court, the state government has reported that less than one-third – 256,000 of 913,742 people who had registered on the state's Seva Sindhu portal had been able to go home on the special trains (<https://indianexpress.com/article/india/karnataka-hc-questions-policy-to-choose-migrants-for-trains-6433777/> Viewed on May 30, 2020).
  13. But large middle and high income states such as Maharashtra, Andhra Pradesh, Gujarat, Karnataka, and Tamil Nadu also draw on significant labour reserves from regions within their own states to account for a significant chunk of intra-state circular migration.
  14. Some pointer to this is given by the net inter-state patterns of labour out-migration/in-migration estimated in Srivastava (2018). The largest net importers of construction workers are the states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, followed by Karnataka, Kerala, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh (undivided), and Tamil Nadu. The largest net exporters of construction workers are the states of UP, Rajasthan MP, Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, and West Bengal.

Long-term out-migration is also primarily from low income states, with UP having the highest share, followed by Bihar, Rajasthan, West Bengal and Odisha. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar comprise nearly fifty percent of both short-duration and long-duration circular migrants. The share of low income states is also high in total inter-state out-migration but here middle and high income states also have a higher share.

Table 4  
Inter-state Migration

<i>States/UT</i>	<i>NSS 2007-08</i>		<i>Census 2011</i>	
	<i>% to Total Short-Duration Outmigrants for Employment</i>	<i>% to Total Outmigrants</i>	<i>% to Total Gross Inter-state Out-migrants</i>	<i>% to Total Gross In-migrants</i>
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Bihar	31.51	18.05	13.74	2.05
Uttar Pradesh	18.99	31.82	22.70	7.49
West Bengal	10.02	6.91	4.43	4.39
Madhya Pradesh	7.84	1.81	5.49	5.06
Jharkhand	6.70	2.45	3.14	4.05
Rajasthan	5.53	7.69	6.92	4.80
Odisha	3.08	6.10	2.34	1.58
Chhattisgarh	2.76	1.26	1.28	2.34
Andhra Pradesh	2.52	3.25	3.74	2.93
Tamil Nadu	2.50	3.03	3.66	3.04
Maharashtra	1.94	2.41	5.65	16.75
Karnataka	1.67	2.12	4.61	5.98
Punjab	1.01	0.94	3.21	4.59
Jammu & Kashmir	0.89	0.55	0.61	0.29
Assam	0.86	0.86	1.22	0.91
Gujarat	0.62	0.68	2.90	7.22
Haryana	0.48	2.04	4.27	6.68
Uttaranchal	0.30	2.10	1.83	2.30
Kerala	0.29	3.83	2.38	1.21
Himachal Pradesh	0.13	1.55	0.99	0.73
Delhi	0.01	0.08	2.87	11.67
Other States & UTs	0.38	0.48	2.03	3.97

*Note:* Cols. 2 and 3 are computed from the NSS 2007-08 unit data. Cols. 4 and 5 are computed from the Census of India 2001, Table D3.

In-migration data can only be gleaned from the Census. Gross inter-state migration is highest in Maharashtra, followed by Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Haryana, Karnataka, Punjab and Rajasthan. Several of these states (UP, Haryana

and Rajasthan) are close to Delhi and fall in the National Capital Region. Inter-district migration trends can only be mapped for 2001 as the data for 2011 is still not available. However, the available data along with several largescale surveys carried out in recent years provide sufficient pointers to the direction of migration flows, and hence also could have been used to map reverse migration which happened during the lockdown in India.

## 7. The Corona Pandemic and the Circular Migrants

The entire population, including the circular migrants, were immobilized in the areas where they were located even before the Janata (People's) Curfew was announced by the Prime Minister for March 20. Trains started being cancelled from March 18, and ceased to operate after March 21. Air travel reduced and then stopped from March 22. Migrants who wanted to get back were stranded in destination areas. All work ceased with the lockdown stopping incomes, employment and subsistence allowance to informal workers. Those who lost access to the sites in which they were living and working were on the roads. As the lack of income hit the migrants, they started attempting to get back to their villages, by any means possible.

As workers started leaving after lockdown, the Centre issued orders, imposing strict state and district level lockdowns, and directed that migrants on the road be sent to shelters and quarantines. The Government of India's March 31 Status Report to the Supreme Court outlines the measures taken and orders issued by the government related to restrictions on the movement of the migrants taken in the first few days after lockdown, steps taken to deal with the movement of migrants, as well as the government's understanding of the nature and magnitude of the exodus that occurred immediately after lockdown. The government stated that in view of its assistance package – the Prime Minister's Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) announced on March 26, 2020, there was “no need for the migration of workers to rush to their villages... “ (para 40). However, “due to some fake and/or misleading news / social media messages, a panic was created..” (para 41). It, however, goes on to note that out of a figure of 4.14 crore migrants who had migrated for work, the present barefoot migration involved only 5 to 6 lakh migrants. Orders issued by the Government of India on March 27, 28 and 29 with respect to the migrants are mentioned in the status report.<sup>15</sup> The main steps ordered was to immobilise the migrants, keep them in shelters and quarantine in the state of origin or along their

---

15. <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Status%20Report%20COVID19.pdf> viewed on April 10, 2020

routes if they had already moved. Besides, the government, with little understanding of ground realities of implementation, also ordered employers in all establishments to pay workers during closure in the lockdown, and landlords not to realise rent from workers.<sup>16</sup> Subsequent protests of the migrant workers in different parts of the country, such as Gujarat and Maharashtra were not considered as the response to serious livelihood crisis but treated as an extension of the government's arguments on fake news as the cause and maintenance of law and order and lockdown measures as the response.<sup>17</sup>

The extension of the lockdown on April 15 inevitably again led to a resurgence of migrant desperation and attempt to move back to their native homes by any means. On April 19, the Central government issued a fresh notification allowing migrants in shelters to be deployed for work *within the states* in which they were kept in the shelters. On April 19, the Central government issued a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for movement of stranded labour within states/UT allowing migrants in shelters to be deployed for work *within the states* in which they were kept in the shelters, after screening and disallowing the movement of labour outside the states in which they were currently sheltered.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the pressure that built up, the Centre issued a notification on April 29 that stranded migrant labourers could travel home, subject to a strict protocol, but only by buses.<sup>19</sup> These orders were clearly directed at restricting the long-distance movement of migrants, from the Western and Southern states to the Eastern states, while at the same time utilizing their labour, as and when required in the states where they were stranded. The arrangements for travel were left to the respective origin and destination states, with the Centre sidestepping any coordinating or financing responsibility.

---

16. It may be noted that the Supreme Court was satisfied by the steps taken by the Central government to contain the virus. It was also sufficiently persuaded by the government's argument that there "is no person walking on the roads in an attempt to reach her/his home town / villages" and that "the migration of a large number of labourers working in the cities was created by panic caused by fake news that the lockdown would continue for more than three months." ([https://main.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2020/10789/10789\\_2020\\_0\\_1\\_21581\\_Order\\_31-Mar-2020.pdf](https://main.sci.gov.in/supremecourt/2020/10789/10789_2020_0_1_21581_Order_31-Mar-2020.pdf) viewed on April 7, 2020).

17. <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/coronavirus/news/mumbai-11-arrested-in-connection-with-crowd-of-migrants-in-bandra/articleshow/75172910.cms> viewed on April 17, 2020

18. <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHA%20Order%20Dt.%2019.4.2020%20with%20SOP%20for%20movement%20of%20stranded%20labour%20within%20the%20State%20and%20UT.pdf> viewed on April 20, 2020

19. [https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAordernew\\_29042020.PDF](https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAordernew_29042020.PDF) viewed on April 30, 2020

Finally, on May 1, the MHA finally issued another SOP permitting the inter-state movement of migrant labourers and other stranded persons by special trains on the basis of which the Ministry of Railways issued detailed guidelines for the operation of special “Shramik” trains for migrant labourers. These mentioned, among other issues, the need for inter-state coordination, screening and provision of medical certificates, issue of tickets, food packets and water, at the originating station, and screening and transport at the receiving station. It further stated that the local government authority in the originating states shall hand over the tickets to the passengers after collecting the ticket amount and hand over the same to the Indian Railways.<sup>20</sup>

On May 3, the Government of India issued a clarificatory order stating that its earlier order was *“meant to facilitate the movement of such stranded persons who had moved from their native places/work places, just before the lockdown period, but could not return to their native places/work places on account of restrictions placed on the movement of persons/vehicles as part of lockdown measures. The facilitation envisaged in the aforesaid orders is meant for such distressed persons, but does not extend to those categories of persons, who are otherwise residing normally at places, other than the native places for purposes of work etc. and who wish to visit their native places in the normal course”*.<sup>21</sup> This clarificatory order twisted and narrowed the definition of “stranded” migrant as one who had reached the destination area immediately before lockdown, thus effectively excluding all migrant labourers, including circular migrants from the definition of “stranded migrants”. The order led to contradictory claims, with some contesting whether labour migrants, who were obviously employed in states where they had been stranded, could at all be permitted to travel back. On May 6, the Karnataka government used this notification, apparently under pressure from builders, to cancel train arrangements, hoping to “persuade” migrants to stay back and work for the construction industry, but later, as protests mounted, did a U turn.<sup>22</sup>

---

20. [https://www.indianrailways.gov.in/railwayboard/uploads/directorate/coaching/Circulars/2020/Movement\\_020520.pdf](https://www.indianrailways.gov.in/railwayboard/uploads/directorate/coaching/Circulars/2020/Movement_020520.pdf) viewed on May 2, 2020

21. <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/5MHA%20DO%20Lr.%20Dt.%203.5.2020%20to%20Chief%20Secretaries%20and%20Administrators%20clarifying%20movement%20of%20distressed%20stranded%20persons.pdf> viewed on May 4, 2020

22. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/k-taka-allows-migrant-trains-daily-services-likely-from-today/story-u0UW1ekB7Q5hUplTfcGzBI.html>, viewed on May 8, 2020

It may be mentioned that the Central government and state governments had started taking steps to repatriate large numbers of stranded pilgrims and students from late March itself.<sup>23</sup> The Vande Bharat mission was organised seamlessly to bring back Indians stranded abroad. It may also be mentioned the interstate migration and interstate quarantine are Central subjects (Number 81 on the Central list) but the Central government only laid down the protocols for states to follow and implement.

In the first twenty-three days since the transportation of the migrant workers was allowed by train, the Railways claimed that about 3.5 million workers had been able to avail of travel on 2600 special trains, and that they could transport another 3.6 million to their home states over the next ten days.<sup>24</sup> The most vulnerable migrants, in peripheral locations and on worksites, were the most unlikely to either have the resources or the ability to be able to fulfil the procedures laid down. The mobility of many such workers continued to be controlled by the middlemen and contractors. The Central government in its submission to the Supreme Court on May 27, averred that 9.1 million migrants had been transported, out of whom 4.1 had been transported by buses. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were destination states for eighty percent of these migrants.<sup>25</sup>

Nevertheless, several million labour migrants, in desperation, trudged back to their villages from the beginning of the lockdown and continue to do so for several weeks in far increased numbers after the second phase of the lockdown.<sup>26</sup> There was a steady stream of circular migrants on all major highways walking back to their source states and villages, several thousands of miles away. Migrants sold whatever they had, including mobiles, to buy bicycles, used pushcarts, huddled dangerously inside containers, and concrete mixers, in the absence of transport. On May 7,

---

23. <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/1-800-people-stranded-in-uttarakhand-to-return-to-gujarat-in-28-buses-1660760-2020-03-28> viewed on March 26, 2020

<https://www.freepressjournal.in/india/special-buses-sent-to-get-900-south-indian-pilgrims-from-varanasi-a-tale-of-two-lockdowns> viewed on April 16, 2020

<https://scroll.in/article/959648/why-was-a-special-exception-made-for-kota-students-to-return-to-uttar-pradesh-during-the-lockdown> viewed on April 21, 2020

24. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/in-next-10-days-36-lakh-migrants-will-travel-on-shramik-special-trains-railways-11590231463881.html> Viewed on May 26, 2020

25. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/91-lakh-migrants-moved-till-date-centre-tells-supreme-court/story-BUpylAQf3oZy1HvWxK2wYO.html> viewed on May 28, 2020

26. Reports also suggest that perhaps 70 to 80 percent intra-state short term circular migrants may also have walked back to their villages since the lockdown, most in the first week itself.

one such worker and his wife met with a fatal accident while attempting to cycle back from Uttar Pradesh to Chhatisgarh, leaving behind two orphan children.<sup>27</sup> Sixteen others died on train tracks in Maharashtra, while resting.<sup>28</sup> Several hundred migrants have died in accidents or suicides or due to lack of food and water during transportation, since lockdown.<sup>29</sup> This scale of the plight of migrant workers has never been seen in independent India. Braving all odds, however, several lakh migrant workers have been reaching their source villages, even after facing hostility from the local dominant elite, swelling the ranks of workers there. This is the urban exodus that India has never seen before.

## 8. Analysing the Response of the Central Government

Reading back into the actions of the Central and State governments from the start, several facts become clear.

First, the Central government may not have initially understood the scale, magnitude, and nature of the problem of populations stranded by the lock-down in general, and the issue of stranded migrant labour, in particular. However, this lack of understanding stemmed from the absence of consultations on the lockdown and its implications. Once, the scale and implications of the problems became somewhat clearer, the government's response was to direct state governments to immobilise these workers and keep them in shelters and quarantines. The successive notifications issued, discussed above, were unduly restrictive, and at each stage put increasing barriers to their repatriation. No other needs of the workers and their families were recognized by the Central government. The requirement of payment of wages during the lockdown period was initially passed on to employers through a series of orders – an impossibility for informal and contract workers, and these orders were later withdrawn.<sup>30</sup> The need to give them a compensatory wage and/or emergency income support through income transfers, was not accepted by the Central government in its submissions in the Supreme Court (which endorsed

---

27. <https://scroll.in/latest/961395/covid-19-migrant-worker-wife-die-in-road-crash-in-lucknow-while-trying-to-cycle-to-chhattisgarh>, viewed on May 8, 2020

28. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/16-migrant-workers-run-over-by-goods-train-near-aurangabad-in-maharashtra/article31531352.ece>, viewed on May 8, 2020

29. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/courting-death-and-injury-scores-of-migrants-killed-in-accidents-on-way-home/story-HgPUI1yi7SUACcIyw3ru5N.html> viewed on May 16, 2020.

30. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/mha-drops-order-on-wages-for-lockdown-period/article31616858.ece>, viewed on May 18, 2020.

the government's stand). Protests and attempts at securing mobility by migrant workers were treated as violations of the law, which were provoked by deliberate misinformation, thus attracting penal provisions.<sup>31</sup>

Second, the Central government has not taken additional responsibility for providing assistance to migrants or to enlarge the meagre scope of assistance initially provided under the Prime Ministers' Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) announced on March 26, The PMGKY was meant to alleviate the suffering of the poor during the lockdown.<sup>32</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, the package was poorly targeted at the urban informal workers and especially the labour migrants, leading many experts to recommend a universal food and income transfer to stem the hunger and extreme economic hardship.<sup>33</sup>

The Prime Minister's announcements of a Rs. 20 lakh crore package, which was later elaborated by the Finance Minister in the third week of May, did not cover address the urgent needs of the migrant workers.<sup>34</sup> The government did not accede to a large number of requests to expand the scope of the MGNREGA.<sup>35</sup> It has also stayed away from taking any responsibility for coordinating the inter-state movement of migrant workers, while at the same time issuing detailed guidelines,

- 
31. <https://mumbaimirror.indiatimes.com/coronavirus/news/mumbai-11-arrested-in-connection-with-crowd-of-migrants-in-bandra/articleshow/75172910.cms>, viewed on May 15, 2020.
  32. The main elements of the assistance package was to provide (a) the PDS beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act with 5 kg of wheat / rice and 1 kg of pulses free for three months; (b) Rs 500 per month of assistance of 20 crore women Jan Dhan Yojana account holders for the next three months; (c) an ex gratia of Rs. 1000 to each beneficiary of the governments National Old Age Pension Programme covering the old, the challenged, and widows. In addition, the government also announced front-loading of the first instalment of the Kisan Samman Yojana (Rs. 2000 to farmer households), and issued a directive to states to provide ex gratia payments to construction workers under the Building and Construction Workers Welfare Funds. It also increased the wages under MGNREGA from Rs 182 to Rs. 202 per month. (<https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1608345>, viewed on March 28, 2020)
  33. In a letter endorsed by several hundred public figures, the Indian Society of Labour Economics made a strong plea for distribution of free food rations and an emergency income transfer of Rs. 6000 per month to all households, except those who were tax payers (<https://www.ihdindia.org/pdf/Final-Letter-PM-CMs-immediate-proposals.pdf>). Similar recommendations were made by a large number of other economists, including Dr. Abhijit Banerjee, and Dr. Arvind Subramanyam.
  34. The announcements made by the Finance Minister on May 15 for migrant workers, contain of mix of ongoing measures and those which could see implementation in the medium term. A single announcement of immediate importance is the provision of 5kg. of cereals per person and one kg. of gram to each migrant family which does not have a PDS card. The implementation responsibilities rest with the states.
  35. The MGNREGA was mentioned but without relaxation of rules in the package, although an additional allocation of Rs. 40,000 crores was made for the scheme.



discussed earlier, which locked the workers in a difficult bureaucratic imbroglio to obtain permission for travel.

As discussed above, the Central government's detailed guidelines were perplexing and seemed to be more concerned with providing a committed workforce to industry, as and when it began to revive, leaving the responsibility to states to fend for the food and economic needs of these workers. The meeting of the Minister and the Secretary, Ministry of Labour and Employment, with central trade unions on May 6 confirmed that the Central government did not want migrant workers to return to their homes but to wait at destinations on beck and call, to be picked up by employers as and when industrial employment picks up.<sup>36</sup>

## 9. Response of the State Governments

Having announced an inadequate package of support measures under the rubric of the Prime Minister's Garib Kalyan Yojana, the Centre has left it to the states to bear the burden of implementation of the lockdown and to protect citizens against its adverse economic impacts. It has neither augmented the administrative capacity of states nor provided additional financial resources to them, other than limited amounts under the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) to meet the implementation challenges.

States, on their own part, have followed variations of the strategy permitted by the Central guidelines with respect to migrant workers. We must note that Kerala emerged as an outlier among states by announcing a comprehensive package of Rs. 20,000 crore for protection of livelihoods of workers, including migrant workers, even before the lockdown.<sup>37</sup>

States initially responded with tightening the controls on migrant movement and arranging shelter/quarantines and food for them. This was done either from a humanitarian perspective or from the perspective of implementing a coercive lockdown. Kerala, by standards of destination states, does not account for a significant percentage of circular migrants, set up the largest proportion of shelters.<sup>38</sup>

---

36. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/centre-urges-unions-to-convince-labour-to-stay-return-to-work/article31520051.ece> viewed on May 8, 2020

37. <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/kerala-govt-announces-20-000-cr-economic-package-11584645097047.html> viewed on March 20, 2020

38. In a submission to the Supreme Court on April 5, 2020, the Central government stated that the government of Kerala had set up 15,541 (68.9%) out of 22,567 government shelters nationwide, accounting for 302,016 (47.8%) of 631,109 migrants in government provided shelters.

State governments also announced *ex gratia* payments from the Building & Construction Welfare Funds for workers registered under these funds. These have ranged from Rs 1000-1500 (16 states), Rs 2000-3000 (8 states) and Rs 4500 and above (5 states). There are severe limitations on registration of construction workers under the Boards. In most states, inter-state migrant workers are not registered and among those workers, are a high proportion of those who are not employed in the construction industry (Srivastava, 2020).

Apart from these *ex gratia* payments, some states followed up with other *ex gratia* payments and have made additional efforts to provide rations to workers, including migrant workers, not registered in the PDS. Telangana announced an *ex gratia* payment for migrant workers early on in the second phase of the lockdown, as did Kerala.

As the migrant crisis escalated, sending states have announced measures to support stranded migrant workers. In the beginning, an initiative was taken by Jharkhand, followed by Bihar which announced an *ex gratia* payment of Rs 1000 per worker.

At the same time, there was been a significant reluctance on part of states to send or receive migrant workers. As pointed out earlier, the procedures which have been set up for their return are hugely complex, bearing in mind, that they have met them, living as they do, in red zones, where being seen on the streets can attract penalties. Since the Centre has asked sending and receiving states to coordinate with the railways, there is an increasing ambivalence on the part of states to send/receive migrants. As mentioned earlier, on May 6, Karnataka officially took the position that there would be no special trains to ply migrants on the plea that they were needed to service local industry. Although this order was withdrawn a day later, the same reticence can also be seen in the case of several other states. On May 7, four states, Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra and Gujarat, have requested the Uttar Pradesh government not to receive migrants.<sup>39</sup> These responses on behalf of destination states are principally due to concern shown by capital regarding the exodus of workers. On the other hand, the receiving states, too are worried about their capacity to meet the challenging situation posed by the return of migrants, On May 7, the Odisha high court threw a further spanner in the works by ordering that migrants have to be tested negative for the Coronavirus before being received by that State, but the order was stayed by the Supreme Court.

---

39. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/4-cms-dial-yogi-want-to-retain-labour-from-up/article31525047.ece> viewed on May 8, 2020

## 10. Implications of the Crisis and Responses to it for the Migrants and the Economy

The lockdown in India has had a huge negative impact on poor informal workers outside agriculture both in rural and urban areas. Although the rural agricultural economy has also been impacted, the impact has been somewhat less severe, except for some sectors. Among the informal workers, the migrant workers have been impacted most adversely and India has witnessed their unprecedented and heart-rending plight.

Although seasonal and short-term seasonal migrant workers have borne the brunt of the lockdown, hurtling into job losses, lack of access to food, and shelter, many long-term circular migrants, working in the urban informal economy have also been hugely impacted. The Prime Minister's relief package was poorly targeted at them, and subsequent measures announced by states also did not reach a large proportion and were not adequate to support them and their families.

Migrant workers should have been given time and the opportunity to reach their homes at the beginning of the crisis but this did not happen. Now they face a much greater risk of exposure to infection in the destination areas, and have had to overcome huge odds to reunite with their families. None of this has deterred them from trying to make their way back to their homes. Crores of intra-state migrants, along with many lakhs of inter-state migrants have returned to their home states or are in the process of doing so. This has swelled the ranks of the pauperized rural labour force in source areas and states. Although trains have transported back almost half a million, the stream of workers and their families returning to villages across the country in source districts and states is likely to continue unabated for some more time, although at a reduced rate. Real wage growth in rural areas has been very low for some years. These developments will impact on wages and intra-household allocation of work and labour in the source areas, further marginalizing women's employment. On the other hand, a little over one-fifth of circular migrants work in agriculture, about a quarter of them work as interstate labourers (NSS, 2007-08). However, this temporary disruption of labour supply may also have caused local wages to rise in some receiving areas.

Source states are now coming with plans for registration, skill mapping, and employment of migrant workers. In most cases, concrete plans with resources have still to be laid out. Odisha is the first major state to announce a Rs 17,000 crore

plan for rural developments and MSME revival and growth to provide employment to returnee migrants, among others.<sup>40</sup>

In the destination areas, the situation continues to be very complicated. As the economies begin to open up, there is restricted demand for workers from industry, but it is no way near enough to absorb the migrant labour force still in the destination states. These workers are vulnerable to infections, given the state of their living conditions in urban destinations. They have no means of coping with distress and starvation. The most vulnerable and dispersed migrants find it the most difficult to get on to the special trains. Many migrants are still stranded in worksites and are being held back with a combination of coercive measures and the promise of future employment. Eventually, some of them may be absorbed as activities revive but for many others, the desperate situation in facing the compounded challenges of risk of infection in crowded living conditions, and unemployment, could continue for quite some time.

The complete withdrawal of the Central government from offering any help to the distressed migrants is an astonishing, but not unexpected part of the story. The Central government, despite its constitutional and financial obligations, has held on to its purse strings, and has even maintained tight control over the relief funds, which should have been used to alleviate the distress of the migrants. The budgeted expenditure on MGNREGA has been increased to Rs 101,000 crores, which includes Rs 20,624 crores to meet wage arrears. But, as mentioned in the context of the stimulus related announcements, no relaxation has still been given to the rules to expand operations under the scheme. Although states, particularly source states, are constrained in terms of administrative and fiscal capacity, with some exceptions, they, too, are generally not doing enough. This is also mainly because migrants form the most invisible core of the workforce, at the bottom of the pyramid.

At the same time, there is a huge push back on labour law, with states, led by those States which have the same political dispensation as the Centre, announcing a complete bypassing of all labour regulations. In some states, there is an attempt to pull down the entire edifice of laws regulating conditions of work, industrial relations, and social security (Sood and Nath, 2020). This push back is part of an action plan, promoted by the Central government, which, these state governments

---

40. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/odisha/2020/may/29/odisha-announces-rs-17000-crore-package-to-create-jobs-for-migrants-who-returned-home-2149627.html> viewed on May 30, 2020

would like to believe, will encourage industry and foreign investment in this deep crisis. The only coherent strategy that can thus be discerned across both the Centre and these States is that the state and the employers are somehow hoping to use the pauperised mass of labour to their own advantage by increasing the extraction of absolute surpluses through the lengthening of working time and lowering wages. However, this view is very myopic. The destination areas are growth centres which will require these workers and their acquired skills. In the medium term, despite their acute distress and psychological aversion to their recent destination areas, most migrant labourers may return to these areas, because they no longer have an attachment to rural work, and because of the underlying differential in employment and wages between rural and urban areas, and regions, would eventually assert itself. So the mismatch between labour demand and supply for workers in destination regions could be made short and temporary, reducing economic costs of recovery, but only if employers and the state are able to put into place strategies for decent work and living conditions of the workers. In the meanwhile, given that this still implies that the rural labour force may temporarily expand, source states will need a strategy of rural regeneration which can absorb these workers. If this strategy can also reduce the acute regional imbalances, it can also play an important part in reducing the asymmetric costs of migration and creating the basis for more equitable growth.

The pandemic has given several other clear lessons which are unaddressed in the policies taken by the Indian state so far.

First, one of the lessons of the pandemic is that public health is an externality and that state and employers need to invest more in workers' health. So far, no plans are afoot to increase investment in workers health which would also mean more investment in workers' housing and access to basic amenities.

Second, the devastating circumstances of the migrants remind us that the labour market needs to be re-unified with registration and formalization of the workforce and greater job security being provided for informal workers, including the circular migrants. This would also mean a thorough review of the Labour Code on Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions which is currently under discussion in parliament. The Code, in its present form, promotes informality, and its provisions for occupational safety and health are inadequate. However, as pointed out in this paper, the state has so far moved inexorably in a reverse direction of removing existing labour and employment protection and informalizing the entire workforce.

Third, the grim situation of the migrant workers reinforces the need to institute an adequate social protection floor for all workers. There has been an urgent immediate requirement for income transfer for a few months to compensate informal workers for their loss of income during the lockdown. In the short to medium term, there is a need to institute universal social security for all workers, including the migrants who are informal workers. The Code on Social Security which is currently being discussed in parliament fragments the social security framework into three parts. The first provides a framework for social security for establishments above the threshold size of ten or more workers, much on the line of the social security currently available. However, in its present form, these provisions exclude informal workers who are presently covered by the Social Security legislations. The second part incorporates the provisions of the Building and Construction Workers Welfare Act but does not address any of the lacunae in that Act, as has been pointed out by the Supreme Court in its judgment of March 2018. The third part incorporates the current provisions of the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act of 2008 but does not make any mandatory provision of social security for unorganized workers. In other words, the draft Code does not provide an adequate framework for universalising social security. But again nearly two months after lockdown, the state had still not taken a step in the direction of either instituting the emergency measures required, nor has it signaled a desire to provide a framework for social security for the unprotected workers.

At the macro level, most analysts agree that any attempt to revive the economy after lockdown will come up against a serious deficiency of global and domestic demand, which needs to be addressed urgently. This neglect of informal and migrant workers is bound to exacerbate the aggregate demand situation, which will significantly slow down eventual recovery.

The pandemic should have provided an opportunity to gear the economy for more equitable and inclusive development. Instead, within a short period, it appears that state and capital have decided to stand in opposition to the desperate, devastated, and hungry migrant and informal workers and build a strategy of primitive accumulation on their sweat and blood. This is indeed both myopic and unfortunate and a drastic course correction is required. As of now, Breman's verdict on India's low road to capitalist development appears to again stand vindicated.

## References

- Breman, Jan (1985), *Of Peasants, Migrants and Paupers: Rural Labour and Capitalist Production in West India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Breman, Jan (1994), *Wage Hunters and Gatherers: Search for Work in the Urban and Rural Economy of Gujarat*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Breman, Jan (1996), *Footloose Labour: Working in India's Informal Economy*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Breman, Jan (2013), *At Work in the Informal Economy of India: A Perspective from the Bottom Up*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Connell, J, Dasgupta, B., Laishley, R. and Lipton, M. (1976), *Migration from Rural Areas: The evidence from Village Studies*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.
- Government of India (2017). *Report of the Working Group on Migration*. Ministry of Housing and Poverty Alleviation. January. New Delhi.
- Harris, John R., and Todaro, M.P. (1970), "Migration, Unemployment and Development: A Two Sector Analysis", *American Economic Review*, Vol 60 No 1, March, pp 126-138, 141-142.
- Jan Sahas (2020). *Voices of the Invisible Citizens: A Rapid Assessment on the Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Internal Migrant Workers Recommendations for the State, Industry & Philanthropies*. April.
- Kundu, A. (2009), "Exclusionary Urbanisation in Asia: A Macro Overview". *Economic and Political Weekly*, 44(48): 48-58.
- Kundu, A. and Saraswati, L. (2016), "Changing Pattern of Migration in India: A Perspective on Urban Exclusion", in *International Handbook of Migration and Population Distribution*, 311-332. Springer Netherlands.
- Lewis, W. A. (1954), "Economic development with unlimited supplies of labour", *The Manchester School*, 22, May: 139-92
- Mukhopadhyay, S. (1987), *Intra-rural Labour Circulation in India: An Analysis*, ILO-ARTEP, New Delhi.
- NCRL (National Commission on Rural Labour) (1991), Vol. II, Part II, *Report of the Study Group on Migrant Labour*, Government of India: Ministry of Labour, New Delhi.
- NSSO (National Sample Survey Office) (2010), *Migration in India, (July 2007-June 2008)*. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, New Delhi. June.
- NCEUS (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector) (2007), *Conditions of Work and Promotion of Livelihoods in the Unorganised Sector*, National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector, Government of India & Academic Foundation, August, New Delhi.
- Sood, A. & Nath, P. (2020), "Innocuous Mistakes or Sleight of Hand? Labour Law Changes" *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 55, Issue No. 22, 30 May. *Insight*
- Srivastava, R. (1998), "Migration and the Labour Market in India", Invited Keynote paper, Conference issue, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 41, No. 4, Oct.-Dec. pp. 583-617.
- Srivastava, R. (2009), "Conceptualising Continuity and Change in Emerging Forms of Labour Bondage in India", in Jan Breman, Isabelle Guerin & Aseem Prakash (eds.) *India's Unfree Workforce: Of Bondage Old and New*, pp. 129-146. Oxford University Press, New Delhi.
- Srivastava, R. (2011a), "Labour Migration in India: Recent Trends, Patterns and Policy Issues". *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 411-440.

- Srivastava, R. (2011b), “Labour Migration, Inequality, and Development Dynamics in India: An Introduction”, *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*, Vol. 54, No. 3, pp. 373-385.
- Srivastava, R. (2012a), “Internal Migration in India: An Overview of its Features, trends, and Policy Challenges”. National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development in India *Workshop Compendium Vol. II: Workshop Papers October 2012*. New Delhi: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation, and UNICEF India Country Office. ISBN 978-81-89218-45-4. pp 1-47.
- Srivastava, Ravi (2012b), “Internal Migration in India: An Overview of its Features, Trends, and Policy Challenges,” in *National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development in India: Workshop Compendium Vol. II: Workshop Papers October 2012*, UNESCO and UNICEF India, New Delhi, pp. 1–47.
- Srivastava, R. (2016a), “Myth and Reality of Labour Flexibility in India and What is to be Done? *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*. 59(1): 1–38.
- Srivastava, R. (2016b), *Structural Change and Non-standard Forms of Employment in India*. Geneva: International Labour Office, Inclusive Labour Markets, Labour Relations and Working Conditions Branch, ILO, Geneva.
- Srivastava, R. (2018), “Building India Brick by Brick: Labourers in the Construction Industry”. *Indian Exclusion Report 2017-18*. Yoda Press, New Delhi.
- Srivastava, R. (2019), “Emerging Dynamics of Labour Market Inequality in India: Migration, Informality, Segmentation and Social Discrimination”. *The Indian Journal of Labour Economics*. DOI: 10.1007/s41027-019-00178-5. (Springer).
- Srivastava, R. (2020), “Vulnerable Internal Migrants in India and Portability of Social Security and Entitlements” Centre for Employment Studies Working Paper Series. WP02/2020, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi.
- Srivastava, R. and Sasikumar S. K. (2005), “An Overview of migration in India, its impacts and key issues”, in Tasneem Siddiqui (ed.) *Migration and Development: Pro-poor Policy Choices*, The University Press, Dhaka, pp. 157-216.
- Srivastava, Ravi, Keshri, K., Gaur, K., Padhi, B. Jha, A. K. (2020), *Internal Migration in India and the Impact of Uneven Development and Demographic Transition across States: A study for evidence based policy*”, Institute for Human Development, New Delhi.
- Standing, G. (1985), “Circulation and the Labor Process”, in Standing, Guy (ed.), *Labor Circulation and the Labor Process*, Croom Helm, London.
- SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network) (2020a) *21 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India*. April.
- SWAN (Stranded Workers Action Network) (2020b) *32 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India*. May.
- Todaro, B.P. (1976), *Internal Migration in developing countries: A review of theory, evidence, methodology and research priorities*, International Labour Office, Geneva.



**APPENDIX:  
METHODOLOGICAL NOTE ON ESTIMATION  
OF CIRCULAR MIGRANTS**

The estimation of circular migrants uses data from the (a) NSS Employment and Unemployment Survey and Migration Survey, 2007-08 and (b) Employment and Unemployment Survey, 2011-12. (b) the NSO PLFS Survey for 2017-18; (c) Census of India Migration Tables. Those specifically used are Tables D-3, D-5 (2001, 2011), and D-8 (only available for 2001); (d) NSDP tables by industry (CSO). All estimates prepared from the NSS are based on unit records and adjusted for the Census population.

The NSS 2007-08 survey gives estimates of short-duration migrants who have migrated out for employment for one to six months. Except in agriculture, most seasonal/short-duration migrants migrate for longer cycles. Srivastava (2018) has carried out an exercise of estimating inter-state migrants in the construction industry. We use these estimates and the percentage composition of short-duration migrants across destinations and industry to re-estimate the numbers of circular migrants in 2011 and 2018. For agriculture, based on assessments from field studies, we have assumed the number of seasonal migrants to be about 5 million in 2011-12 and 7.5 million in 2017-18.

Estimates of long-term outmigrants who continue to have a rural base and can, therefore, be treated as long-term circular migrants are obtained from the NSSO survey of 2007-08 by destination (within state, other state). The urban-rural destination of these migrants is approximated using Census data of 2001. The same NSS survey can also be used to give the composition of the migrant population by consumption quintiles and occupational category for workers. This is used for estimating the vulnerable migrant worker population using two different methods. Using the percentage of occupationally migrant workers to total migrant workers, we estimate the numbers of vulnerable long-term circular migrant workers in 2011. Since Table D8 and D9 in the Census 2011 are still not available, it is not possible to directly estimate the number of inter-state migrant workers in 2011. We have taken the number of inter-state migrants in 2011 based on the D6 table and the Worker-Migrant Ratio from the 2001 Census (D8 table) to estimate the number of inter-state migrant workers in 2011. The growth of

the migrant population beyond 2011 for different segments is assumed to be the same as the 2001-2011 growth rate. The proportion of vulnerable migrant worker to total migrant worker population is assumed to be the same as in 2007-08. This gives us estimates of the vulnerable long-term circular migrants in 2018. The total number of vulnerable workers (workers in NCO groups 5 to 9) is estimated from the employment surveys.



## **Centre for Employment Studies Institute for Human Development**

The Centre for Employment Studies has been established by the Institute for Human Development (IHD) to undertake and promote focused research on employment and labour market issues relevant for both analysis and policy. As a part of its work, this Centre collects, collates, analyses and disseminates information and knowledge on employment and skills and also networks with other institutions, both within India and outside, working on employment and labour market issues.

IHD is a leading Institution in India for studies on labour markets, livelihoods and human development which aims to contribute to the building of a society that fosters and values an inclusive social, economic and political system, free from poverty and deprivation. Towards achieving its goals, it engages in analytical and policy research, teaching and training, academic and policy debates, networking with other institutions and stakeholders, and publication and dissemination of the result of its activities. The major themes of current work of IHD are: growth and employment; education and capabilities; health and nutrition; gender and development; security and vulnerability and governance and institutions.



Institute for Human Development  
84, Functional Industrial Area (FIE), Patparganj, Delhi-110092  
Phones: + 91 11 22159148-50  
Email: [mail@ihdindia.org](mailto:mail@ihdindia.org) Website: [www.ihdindia.org](http://www.ihdindia.org)