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Industrial Labour And Covid-19 Pandemic: A Review Of Recent Studies

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Abstract : The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the world economy. The world came to a stand still and the economic slowdown, which started a in the previous years, picked-up its speed during this period in India. The migrant workforce was identified as the most vulnerable section to be affected by this unexpected disruption. Number of researchers attempted to document the effects of the pandemic on different groups of industrial workers. The effort and the effectiveness of the governments to deal with this unprecedented situation is also documented in the studies by various researchers in journals, reports and press reports. In the present article we attempt to review and understand the nature and content of the research studies published on this theme. Based on the review observations are made regarding the new learning about the effects of the pandemic especially on the migrant labour and the new policies to support this vulnerable class of workers.

Keywords: Pandemic, Migrant workers, Industrial Labour, Recession

1.0 INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has overpowered the ability to earn a living for many people, rendering the world economy to a standstill, and bringing a myriad of social and economic changes. The situation in India is no different. And as we know, soon after the incidence of COVID-19 cases started picking up, a most stringent lockdown was imposed on the country on 24th March 2020, at 8 p.m, at a notice of 4 hours. The most significant fallout of this measure was the disappearance of millions of jobs, and the particularly heart-wrenching aspect of it was the distress of migrant workers; by end of March 2020, the country and the world at large was witnessing the brutal and grotesque spectacle of precarity on India's roads,

railway tracks, et cetera as hundreds of thousands of workers were forced to trudge along to get back to their distant homes.

During the lockdown, unemployment increased from 8% to 24.3% between March and May. According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, India's Industrial Production fell by 16.7% year-on-year in March 2020. It is the steepest decline since 1994. A plausible reason could be that the lockdown has closed many businesses either temporarily or permanently eventually exposing many workers to job loss.

Companies categorically need to revamp their leave structures and employee benefit structures to incorporate disruptions

caused by pandemics; however, governments must ensure that informal labourers that are not protected by these measures are not adversely affected by the pandemic's damage to the economy. Possibly, these were the most dramatic spectacles of the vulnerability and precarity of workers (and their families), anywhere in the world, who had lost not only their jobs but also their hearth and temporary homes in their destination areas, with no hope of support and succour from their employers, the government or any other quarter; many died on the way, of hunger, exhaustion and accidents. These were ultimate images of livelihood and employment precarity in India since Independence, reminiscent, in many ways, of the trauma of forced mobility during the partition in 1947; 'citizens' had been turned into 'outsiders'. It seemed as if, at least for a few weeks, the government at the centre was in denial mode, or in a state of paralysis, with respect to this massive mass of humanity. With this overwhelming proportion of the workforce already facing issues of lack of job security and employment benefits, governments need to include pandemic-

pursue 'with unrelenting vigor its [ILO] constitutional mandate for social justice by further developing its human centred approach to the future of work'. It called for putting workers' rights and the needs, aspirations and rights of all people at the heart of economic, social and environmental policies. The international community and ILO's constituents have engaged in a collective endeavour to tackle the devastating human impact of the pandemic, but more is needed.

iii) Aditi Rao (2020) observed that, Companies categorically need to revamp their leave structures and employee benefit structures to incorporate disruptions caused by pandemics; however, governments must ensure that informal labourers that are not protected by these

related clauses into social protection schemes.

2.0 Review of literature

i) Rosa Abraham and Amit Basole (2021) in their report noted that the first wave and its associated containment measures caused large-scale job losses, a sharp rise in inequality and poverty, and an increase in indebtedness and hunger. For particularly vulnerable groups such as migrant workers and the homeless, it was nothing short of a humanitarian disaster. Their report, State of Working India 2021 – One year of Covid-19, documents the experience of households and workers in the last year, beginning with the aftermath of the national lockdown of 2020. The lockdown increased inequality dramatically because incomes were wiped out almost completely at the bottom of the distribution.

ii) Dagmar Walter(2020) stated that, the COVID-19 pandemic has pushed the world into an unprecedented crisis and uncertainty, calling to expedite the implementation of the Centenary Declaration. It called upon constituents to measures are not adversely affected by the pandemic's damage to the economy. With this overwhelming proportion of the workforce already facing issues of lack of job security and employment benefits, governments need to include pandemic-related clauses into social protection schemes. These trying times have catapulted us into a here-to-fore distant digital age, where companies and governments must adopt pandemic related social security measures as part of contracts, leave structures, and human resource management.

iv) Vinay Vaish , Sulekha Kaul and Tushar Shah (2020) in their report state that the migrant workers are required to be paid wages without any deduction. In light of the nationwide lockdown implemented

for the containment of spread of COVID-19 and to mitigate the economic hardship of the migrant workers, the Ministry of Home Affairs vide its Order dated 29th March 2020 (*supra*) directed all employers in the industry or in the shops and commercial establishments to pay wages to their workers, on the due date, without any deduction, for the period their establishments are under closure during lock down. Further the report says, the employees working in establishments where the nature of work is such that it cannot be performed from home, are required to be paid salary for the duration of lockdown. The Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India through a formal communication dated 20th March 2020 (*supra*) clearly specified that if a place of employment is made non-operational due to COVID-19, the employees of such unit will be deemed to be on duty.

v) **Praveen Jha, Manish Kumar(2021)** in this research article state that labour in India, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, has been trapped in an unprecedented crisis, in living memory, is widely acknowledged. The employment and livelihoods of the overwhelming majority of workers have taken huge hits, and a massive uncertainly continues to loom over their immediate foreseeable future. This article focuses on how the world of work in India has been impacted by the pandemic, and it seeks to investigate the ongoing challenges.

vi) **Debdulal Saha & Anamitra Roy Choudhary(2021)** in this article have observed that in the absence of a holistic approach, both demand and supply sides of the labour market were swept away, exposing hidden vulnerabilities of a large section of urban workers who did not have the resources to withstand even three weeks of lockdown, thereby leading to catastrophic consequences. Despite the fact that deep fragility of Indian society

was exposed due to unplanned lockdown, it is imperative to focus sharply on the consequences of ‘prioritizing lives over livelihoods’ approach. Now, it should be immediately clear that the impact on livelihoods and ability to cope with it vastly differ across various participants given the hierarchical nature and structural inequalities that characterize the Indian labour market. On the other hand, they have given data from quarterly Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) shows acute crisis in urban job market. Within a period of just three months, between January–March 2020 and April–June 2020, Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of persons aged 15 years and above declined from 48.1% to 45.9%.

vii) **Radhicka Kapoor(2020)** in this paper attempts to understand the effect of the COVID-19 shock on the labour market in India by examining the vulnerabilities of the workforce using data from the Periodic Labor Force Survey (2018-19). With simply 24 % of the workforce engaged in regular wage salaried jobs offering a steady flow of income and a mere 2.2% in regular salaried jobs with a written job contract for a period of more than three years and access to all social security benefits, a disproportionately large share of the workforce is likely to face job and income losses as a consequence of the dual shock of the pandemic and lockdown. Further, they expect to see the widening disparity in the labour market between the relatively less educated workers who predominantly work in informal work arrangements in sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, construction, trade& hotels which have been most vulnerable to the first wave effects of the pandemic and lockdown, on the one hand, and the small proportion of better educated who have regular formal jobs in sectors that are more amenable to remote work. While direct income support is the principal means of providing immediate support to the vulnerable and displaced,

there is also a need to provide wage support to enterprises to prevent further job losses. Given that the COVID-19 crisis comes on the back of pre-existing high unemployment and underemployment, there is a need to put in place a clear and comprehensive plan of productive employment generation. Creating well paying good jobs is not just an end in itself but is also a means of boosting aggregate demand and enabling economic recovery. The strengthening and expansion of employment guarantee programmes and adoption of an industrial policy which focuses on construction and labour intensive manufacturing are important elements of such a strategy. They explained that there is a need to extend social security to informal workers to make labour markets more secure.

viii) International Labour Organization (2020) in this report observed that, India even before the Covid-19 crisis, India had been experiencing slower economic growth and rising unemployment – problems that were dramatically worsened by the pandemic and the ensuing lockdown. The number of workers vulnerable to the lockdown could reach 364 million or more, including those in casual work, self-employment and unprotected regular jobs (lacking social protection coverage). These workers could face cuts in working hours, layoffs, furloughs and reductions in incomes, and for some, this could continue beyond the lockdown. Building on the stimulus packages and other policy responses, economic recovery will require a strategy that restores jobs and supports incomes of both enterprises and workers – re-establishing supply lines and building back demand, while protecting the health, rights and incomes of workers and their families, especially for migrant workers and those in the informal economy. The report shows that, prior to the COVID-19 crisis, the Indian economy had entered a period of slower growth.

According to the IMF, over the period 2015-2019 growth fell from 8.0 to 4.0 percent.² By 2018, the unemployment rate exceeded 6 per cent, while from 2012 to 2018, the youth unemployment rate more than doubled from 10 to 23 per cent. ³ India faces longer-term labour market challenge, including slow and uncertain structural transformation. In 2017-18, 85 per cent of workers were in the informal sector and a further 5 per cent were employed in the formal sector but under informal conditions in that they lacked social protection or other employment-related benefits. Further they explained that there are also many gender disparities: women are less likely than men to participate in the labour force and young women have a higher unemployment rate than young men.

ix) Nilim Baruah, Jonathan Chaloff, Philippe Hervé Book, Shabari Nair (2021) in this joint publication of the ADBI, OECD, and ILO focuss on trends and the future of labour migration in light of the disruptions and developments related to the COVID-19 pandemic and provides useful policy guidance and statistical reference to practitioners, authorities, and policy makers. This edition, gives a report on labor migration in Asia, gives detailed report on a world where mobility has been sharply constrained. Trends in labor migration are usually defined mainly by the economic conditions and policy orientation in destination countries. This was the case in 2019, where labor migration in Asia continued to respond to labor demand in destination countries and policy developments. However, in 2020, the usual drivers of migration were disrupted by the global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus disease, COVID-19. The pandemic influenced most migration movements and corridors in the world, driving down movements. In Asia, migration corridors which are normally very busy, suddenly closed for several

months. Origin and destination countries applied strict entry and/or exit rules, to control the pandemic within their borders. The challenge for any portrait of labor migration trends in Asia in 2020 is to work with limited statistical information available. This chapter begins with an overview of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the latest data available on migration trends within and from Asia during 2020, as well as the impact on employment conditions and the health situation of migrant workers

x) World Health Organization (WHO,2021) mentions that, all workers should be protected from acquiring COVID-19 because of their work. The prevention of COVID-19 in work settings should be combined with measures for protecting physical and mental health, safety and wellbeing of workers from other occupational hazards in the operation, closures and reopening of workplaces. This joint WHO/ILO policy brief provides a summary of the evidence for transmission of COVID-19 in general workplaces and an overview of WHO and ILO recommendations for prevention and mitigation of COVID-19 and for protecting health and safety at work in the context of the pandemic.

The document is intended for public health and labour authorities, workers, businesses, employers & their representatives at the national, local and workplace levels to facilitate the implementation of public health and social measures for COVID-19 while maintaining full and productive employment and decent work during the pandemic.

xi) Mrityunjay Bose(2022) in this article mentions that last two years of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ensuing lockdowns, deeply affected the education and overall well-being of children in rural, as well as urban, areas of Maharashtra. Further they said the number of children who started

working as petty laborers or in the agriculture sector is said to have risen since 2020.

xii) Ministry of Labour & Employment (2021) reiterated India's commitment towards making all possible efforts to counter the impact of the pandemic, and emerge stronger. The virtual Non-Aligned Movement Labour Ministers Meeting under 109th Session of the ILC mentions that, the world has witnessed loss of lives and livelihood, slowdown of economies, adverse impact on the entire sections of the society and especially, the weaker ones more unsafe. There is need to ensure better support to the health-care systems, social protection and employment generation. The Governments are required to deal with the pandemic and provide an effective response at policy levels, to balance business continuity, income security and above everything, well-being of all, the report added.

xiii) PressTrust of India (2021) in the article added that, imposition of stricter lockdown in Maharashtra will help slow the transmission of corona virus but it will have a deep impact on the state's economy. The Maharashtra government initially announced a 15-day statewide curfew amid the spike in coronavirus cases in the state. The curfew exempted essential services. Industry body FICCI said it has interactions with the Maharashtra government and the chamber has shared inputs from its members both on policy and operational issues. It is said, that the closure of retail would impact the demand side, she said expressing hope that the lockdown should not be extended. Industry body Assocham also worked with the Maharashtra government to mitigate the economic impact of its 15-day curfew, and urged all states to reach out to the most vulnerable sections of the industry, particularly in the informal sectors, with the best possible relief.

xiv) Alok Deshpande(2022) observes that the economy of Maharashtra that suffered from pandemic-induced lockdowns has taken a big jump and is expected to grow at a rate of 12.1% in 2021-22. The Indian economy is also expected to grow by 8.9 % during the same period. During 2021-22, the agriculture & allied activities, industry and services sectors are expected to grow by 4.4%, 11.9% and 13.5% respectively. The manufacturing and the construction sectors which were hit the hardest in the previous fiscal are expected to grow at 9.5% and 17.5% respectively, due to which industry sector's growth is expected to be 11.9%. Subsequent lifting of curbs and beginning of businesses in trade, repairs, hotels & restaurants and transport sectors, has led to the highest growth in services sector with 13.5%, the report has said.

xv) JoshyJasline and John Romate (2020) in the article state that, the migrants were found to be one of the most vulnerable groups in this lockdown, as their very livelihood came to a complete standstill. This review-paper aims to investigate in detail the migrants went through in India during the lockdown and the socio-psychological impact of migration.

3.0 General Observations:

i) Due to Covid-19, pandemic, there are concerns on both supply and demand side. On the supply side, many companies operating were selling their products all over the country and extended disruption in their operation has created a negative impact on their customers.

ii) We can find a strong impact of the national lockdown on India's electricity consumption. It dropped on average 28.5 percent in the week after the implementation of the lockdown and was on average still 25.8 percent below normal throughout April. When some restrictions

were eased in May, electricity consumption recovered, but it remained 14 percent below normal levels.

iii) In the post-independence period, India's national income has declined only four times before 2020 – in 1958, 1966, 1973 and 1980 – with the largest drop being in 1980 (5.2%). This means that 2020-21 is the worst year in terms of economic contraction in the country's history, and much worse than the overall contraction in the world.

iv) During India's first stringent national lockdown between April and May 2020, individual income dropped by approximately 40%. The bottom decile of households lost three months' worth of income.

v) Per capita consumption spending dropped by more than GDP, and did not return to pre-lockdown levels during periods of reduced social distancing. Average per capita consumption spending continued to be over 20% lower after the first lockdown (in August 2020 compared with August 2019), and remained 15% lower year-on-year by the end of 2020.

vi) The rural poverty increased by 9.3 percentage points and urban poverty by over 11.7 percentage year-on-year from December 2019 to December 2020. Earlier months of the CPHS show that rural poverty increased by 14.2 percentage points and urban poverty by 18.1 percentage points. Yet the actual increase in poverty due to Covid-19 is likely to be higher than what the CPHS data suggest.

vii) The pandemic has brought severe economic hardship, especially to young individuals who are over-represented in informal work. India has a large share of young people in its workforce and the pandemic has put them at heightened risk of long-term unemployment. This has negative impacts on lifelong earnings and employment prospects.

viii) The urban workers aged 18-40, during the first lockdown quarter, finding that a majority of them who had work before the pandemic were left with no work or no pay. After the first lockdown in April to June 2020, 20% of those were out of work, another 9% were employed but had zero hours of work and 81% had no work or pay at all.

ix) The world of work has been profoundly affected by the global virus pandemic. In addition to the threat to public health, the economic and social disruption threatens the long-term livelihoods and wellbeing of millions.

x) The government exempted agriculture sector from the COVID-19 lockdown. Various measures regarding transport and distribution of agriculture inputs, transport and sale of produce, online renewal of licenses, coordination among the state departments, use of modern technology benefited in giving support to agriculture and allied activities sector during the lockdown.

xi) The manufacturing and construction sectors were hit the hardest with negative growth of 11.8 and 14.6 per cent respectively, due to which the industry sector's growth is expected to be a negative 11.3 per cent.

xii) Due to impact of the pandemic situation on trade, repair, hotels and restaurants, and transport sectors, the services sector showed a negative growth of nine per cent.

xiii) It is stated that 32 (10)% of non-farm workers in rural (urban) areas are vulnerable and face higher risk of job loss during a lockdown.

xiv) The first channel of impact is through direct job loss on account of reduced aggregate demand in the economy and reduction or closure of production

activities. The economic downturn leads to longer durations of unemployment. Falling revenues and rising costs of firms leads to job loss for workers

xv) Unlike regular times, when a business fails during recession, many firms simultaneously lose demand, making it difficult for former employees to be rehired.

xvi) Manufacturing and construction sectors are more cyclical and most affected during the recession, whereas services and government sector remain less exposed to cyclical fluctuations, the skills and jobs that would be affected by the slowdown and crisis. Recession or slowdown may lead to huge churning in the labour market in the favour of highly skilled workers and non-routine jobs.

4.0 Summary:

Covid-19 lead to the first increase in global poverty in the 21st century. A large share of this is from India. Low skilled workers, who typically lost their jobs during the lockdown, are particularly vulnerable to falling back into the poverty. Estimates suggest that close to ten million people returned from their workplace to their village during or just after the lockdown. Due to any crisis, labour markets across nations experience direct, indirect and long-term consequences . Following the global financial crisis in 2008, labour markets in advanced countries are yet to recover fully. However, financial crisis did not hit MICs as adversely as developed nations. COVID-19 crisis has hit labour markets of low- and middle-income countries harder than advanced countries. This created inequalities in the labour market with long-term effects. This is mainly because labour markets in MICs, including India, have a large number of workers in the informal sector falling outside the purview of law and having no access to safety nets.

Women and youth are worst affected. After the pandemic, countries across the Global South need to rethink development strategies to build economic resilience and automatic stabilizers, create strong institutions, provide regulatory and budgetary support, formulate comprehensive employment policies to safeguard workers and create more sustainable employment opportunities.

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