



Atmanirbhar Bharat Meets Digital India: An Evaluation of COVID-19 Relief for Migrants

AUTHOR

Ankan Barman¹

EDITOR

Aayush Rathi

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¹ Ankan Barman is pursuing his Master's in Development Studies from Ambedkar University. He is an activist and researcher affiliated with Migrant Workers Solidarity Network.

Migrant Workers Solidarity Network
& The Centre for Internet and Society

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Introduction

In response to the outbreak of COVID-19 in India, a nation-wide lockdown was announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi on 24 March 2020. The national lockdown kicked in with a mere 4 hours of notice. At the time of announcement of the lockdown Indian workers were unsure about their survival, given that they stood to lose work immediately and a majority of them were either employed in casual/daily wage work, unprotected by any social security. Migrant workers, despite being large in numbers, have long remained invisible in public discourse around workers' rights and were an afterthought in the decision to impose the national lockdown.

The large exodus of the agrarian and rural workforce to urban centers in search of work has been happening for decades (Gupta 2005). Most of these migrants are employed in the informal sector or contract/casual jobs of the formal sector. No significant measures for enumerating or registering the growing number of migrant workers have happened in the past decades towards ensuring portability of social security. Thus the matter of access to welfare and social security for a large section of Indian working population has remained unaddressed for long. This is also the reason, while images of stranded migrants were appearing on mainstream media and social media as the national lockdowns began, no State Government or the Union Government could publish any definite figures of how many migrant workers are stranded, where, which sectors, etc, apart from submissions made in the court (Mint 2020) and media that all migrants were being supported by the governments.

This report assesses the health condition and access to welfare of migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown in India. Three host states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, and Haryana were chosen and 20 in-depth interviews were undertaken of workers from various sectors including garment work, housekeeping, delivery services, embroidery and jewellery making, construction, auto parts manufacturing and steel product manufacturing and different home states, who have been in touch with Migrant Workers Solidarity Network. Migrant Workers Solidarity Network is a network of trade-union activists, social activists, students, workers and concerned citizens active in different parts of India for the citizenship and workplace rights of India's migrant workers and were engaged in providing relief and related updates to workers stranded in COVID-19 lockdown.

Through remote interviews, we have sought to gain insight into the everyday realities of the much spoken about "migrant worker" as a subject of the COVID-19 induced lockdown. In doing so, we have a modest ambition. We seek to highlight the various pressures that large parts of the Indian population survive, existing at the intersections of precarious migrant and socio economic identities and the failures of the welfare state and its recent technological adventures. We want to centre the festering (lack of) access to political capital for migrants in India as a key pillar for this analysis.

That being said, our data is neither backed up by prolonged qualitative engagements with these workers nor do we attempt to provide quantitative data on the actual numbers of migration, or of welfare access. Several works have done so very exhaustively and showcase the loss of livelihoods, food insecurity and economic situations that migrant workers found themselves in (Centre for Sustainable Employment, 2020; Jan Sahas, 2020; Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020).

Enumeration through Law & Policy

The provisions of the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Condition of Services) Act 1979 and the consequent rules made by the central government (Government of India 1980), though limited in its framework (Majumdar 2020) have never been seriously implemented. The 1979 Act and accompanying rules stipulate the registration of migrant workers by “principal employers” and the mandatory licensing of contractors. Even though the number of migrant workers in India has only grown enormously ever since, creating a far greater crisis of welfare and protection of Indian workers, the will to implement the 1979 Act has been lacking.

In 1966, with a growing number of construction workers in the country, many of whom were migrants, the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Cess Act was framed (Ministry of Law and Justice 1996). The 1966 Act provides for a Cess Fund, to be used for providing welfare programmes for workers registered by State Welfare Boards. But records on affidavits submitted to the Supreme Court of India by the central government show that a large part of the funds, to be used for welfare programmes, are left unspent (Supreme Court of India, 2018). The registration of workers by the Welfare Boards remains low. According to the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment figures, 3.24 crore workers were registered by 2018, which even according to the estimates of the Periodic Labour Force Survey (2017-18) is only around 60% of all the construction labour in India (Financial Express 2020).

Hence, lack of documentation, legislation drafted with no implementation or endeavours like Aadhaar enrollment itself, which never translated into delivery of portability of welfare benefits, as promised, suggests that there has been no sincere intent or will to extend social security to a large percentage of Indian working population. No infrastructure for the same has evolved over the years. These faultlines were most vividly highlighted with the repeated and harsh lockdowns being imposed for months at a stretch. The only means for survival for migrant workers was to depend upon state welfare schemes, or rely on networks of kinship for monetary support. While inaccessibility to welfare schemes for migrant workers is not new, even welfare measures announced during the lockdown months could not be accessed. The government announced free food grains to 8 crore migrant labourers and their families under Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan (Ministry of Consumer Affairs 2020b), but implementation was poor and only 20.26 lakhs received food grains during May-June 2020, according to data released by the Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution on 7th June (Ministry of Consumer Affairs 2020a).

Role of Central Government

Soon after the lockdown was imposed, the Central government announced a financial relief package of 1.7 lakh crore rupees under the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY)¹. On 26th March 2020, when 1.7 lakh crores was announced under the scheme, there were no specific provisions for migrant workers or guidelines on how relief will reach millions of workers stranded without food and income (Press Information Bureau 2020). Till then the demographic of the 'migrant worker' had not even surfaced in the pronouncements of the government as a constituency in need of a targeted welfare scheme and relief given its precarious situation.

On 31st March, an appeal was submitted to the Supreme Court for wage compensation for workers (LiveLaw 2020). But on 21st April, the Supreme Court dismissed the appeal, (Supreme Court of India 2020) upholding the Government of India's submission that adequate relief is reaching the workers, and hence there is no need for wage compensation (Kadam 2020). The government and the court systematically abrogated their responsibility of enforcing the legally bound obligations of employers (Bhatia 2020).

In our interviews in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Haryana, workers across sectors had failed to receive both wages and relief in any sustained manner for the entirety of the national lockdowns, from March to May. All of our respondents indicated that they had not received dry rations in a manner which could qualify as providing sustenance. In addition, whenever they did receive dry ration, most of our respondents did not have a clear idea of its source. However, it was clear that in most cases it was not coming from the government—centre or state. A substantial amount of ration was distributed by various support groups, NGOs, civil society organizations, or individuals.

There was no attempt to systematically record migrants to streamline welfare delivery to migrant workers in any sustained manner. Despite this, there was no lack of announcement of social and economic protection schemes. On 12th May, another welfare package was announced by the Government of India called 'Atmanirbhar Bharat'. The Finance Minister declared a package of Rs. 3800 crore as part of it. The Atmanirbhar scheme was also announced under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY). Under 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' there was supposed to be Direct Cash Transfers of Rs. 500 to Jan Dhan accounts, especially of women beneficiaries, and distribution of food grains. A comprehensive survey was supposed to be conducted for the distribution of this package. The scheme also aimed to provide free LPG cylinders to beneficiaries. Other welfare schemes announced included Kisan Kalyan Yojana and Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana which were supposed to help migrant workers in particular. There was also the announcement of mid-day meals.

¹ The PMGKY is a welfare scheme that was first announced by the Prime Minister in 2016. Back then, it was primarily a scheme initiated to disclose unaccounted or black money confidentially without persecution as a part of India's demonetisation programme.

Bibi Kumari, 28 years, working in a garment manufacturing company in Tirupur, Tamil Nadu, from Palamu, Jharkhand, lost her tailoring job in the aftermath of the lockdown. The question of getting wages for April onwards, according to her, did not arise, when she hasn't even received all her dues for the working days in March. As it is, she said, early March had a lot of non-working days before the lockdown like Holi and other holidays, and as a contract worker she does not get paid for these. Once lockdown started, there was no work and no pay. Bibi received very little dry ration while staying in Tirupur. She received it once in her residential area, but does not know the source. She came back to Palamu in May. She also received some support in the form of cash from a helpline in Chennai.

It was clear that most Central government schemes under PMGKY did not reach the migrant workers in our sample in any targeted manner. Most of the respondents said that they received little to no ration, and those who did receive it only received it once in the initial days of the lockdown after which they were left to their own savings (if any) and money they received from their families or otherwise.

Even the mid-day meal scheme for the migrant workers under the Atma Nirbhar relief package was not delivered, as many of the migrant workers in the host states in our sample (Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Haryana) were not residing at government shelters and neither was any attempt made to reach out to migrant workers in need of help. The severity of the situation was further compounded by the imposition of a strict lockdown which was imposed through heavy-handed police force, constant surveillance, and brutality. Due to the fear of the police, workers in host states were unable to travel to cooked food centres. In addition, the cooked food centres were far from adequate in their provision. On March 31st, on the floor of the court, Solicitor General of India, representing Union of India, stated that "there is no person walking on the roads in an attempt to reach his/her home towns/villages" and that the State has ensured that anyone outside has been taken to available shelter, thereby suggesting that there was no problem at hand. But later when reports of migrants dying on roads due to walking came in, The Solicitor General, on behalf of Central Government, submitted that nothing can be done if migrants start walking in anger and don't wait for their turn; the Court, on May 15, remarked "How can we stop migrants from walking" while dismissing an application filed to seek intervention in looking into the distress of migrant workers, and providing them proper transportation, food and shelter. (Hindustan Times 2020b).

Role of State Governments

MAHARASHTRA

With the pandemic hitting Mumbai and other cities hard in its very early days, the Maharashtra government slashed the price of the 'Shiv Bhojan thali' from Rs. 10 to Rs. 5 on March 29th (India 2020), which was originally announced by Maharashtra CM on 26th January 2020 (The Economic Times 2020b). The government further announced (Pune Mirror 2020) 262 relief camps to provide shelter to more than seventy thousand migrant workers/homeless to 'ensure they have food and a roof during the crisis' and announced (The New Indian Express 2020a) 45 crore for these schemes. The government later reported (Mumbai Mirror 2020) that "from January 26 till June 30, a total of 1,00,00,870 Shiv Bhojan thalis have been distributed through 848 centres". There are also instances of dissents of workers and cases where police administration is handling migrant workers brutally².

From the five interviews taken from respondents who have been working in Maharashtra, from Pune and Mumbai, none suggested that they received dry ration from the state government. One of our respondents from Bombay, Moidul Islam, who received cooked food in Bombay for 5 days, didn't know where it came from.

For Moidul Islam said 'the food we got, was inedible. But had to eat to live. But that too came for 5 days alone. And I received no dry rations.'

Rakesh Mondal, 20 years working in Maharashtra, received khichdi once. But he too does not know where it came from. He received dry rations once, but again, from where, what was the source, didn't know.

Buddhadev Senapati, 23 years from West Bengal, working in Maharashtra, said he never heard of cooked food initiatives.

² For links to cases of dissents in Maharashtra, see MWSN (2020a)

5.2. TAMIL NADU

Tamil Nadu is a state with high concentration of low-paid migrant workers in different sectors such as manufacturing, textiles and construction³. As the migrant workers started walking through the roads for returning home, several protests⁴ led to the CM directing district collectors (The New Indian Express 2020b) to provide relief and the government announcing a detailed order barring the migrant workers movement (Health and Family Welfare Department 2020).

Among the three states we surveyed, respondents seemed to suggest that they received some ration from the Tamil Nadu Government, although inadequate. The state government was distributing ration (The Economic Times 2020a) and has promised to arrange the return of the migrant workers (Sivapriyan 2020). The government tracked (Vijay Kumar 2020) the migrant workers to restrict their movement and also reportedly provided reliefs (The Hindu 2020b).

The Tamil Nadu Government also spoke of distributing cooked food to the workers through the facility of Amma Canteens. But this seems to have failed to help the majority of the workers. While many didn't know about them, while some said they found it difficult to access the same during the Lockdown, due to the imposition of police surveillance.

For instance Himanshu, from Balasore, Orissa, did ironing work in a garment factory, in Tamil Nadu. He said he knows of Amma canteens, but going to Amma Canteens during the Lockdown was made very difficult by the Police.

³ The TN announcement in an official release have mentioned that the state have around 4 lakh migrant workers. The actual number however is probably higher. See The Hindu (2020a), 22 May.

⁴ This map compiles some protests of migrant workers during the lockdown in Tamil Nadu. See, MWSN (2020b)

5.3. HARYANA

On March 31 Haryana CM announced 467 relief camps with a capacity of 70,000 people had been set up for providing food and shelter to the homeless and the migrant labourers (The Hindu 31 March, 2020c). The government started a “Jan Sahayak – HelpMe” app (Government of Haryana 2020) for the stranded persons and suggested that they can take assistance from district administration by dialling 1950 or call centre number 1100 (Hindustan Times 2020c). The Haryana government also started running a web portal for registration of migrant workers, but later (on June 26, 2020) put that on hold.

But workers said they received no relief from the Haryana state government, even though some of them had submitted their ID proofs and necessary documents to avail such benefits.

Anmol Dang, 22 years working as housekeeping staff in Gurgaon, Haryana from Jharkhand, said he along with his friends had submitted their photo IDs to the local administration to get some relief, but never heard from them. During the first phase of the Lockdown he called the Jharkhand government COVID-19 Helpline and received some dry ration kit. Thereafter he got ration from Delhi based support group. He had applied to the Jharkhand government scheme for monetary help, but failed to receive anything.

On 6th April 2020, the Haryana Government had announced a financial package for construction workers, working in Haryana, registered by the Haryana Building and Other Construction Workers’ Welfare Board (Department of Labour 2020). Such workers were supposed to be given a relief of Rs.1000/- per family per week. The package was implemented from 30th March but migrant workers were left behind.

Migrant workers engaged in construction have historically remained outside the ambit of this scheme (Financial Express, 2020). This is not just the case in Haryana but across many states. The primary fact remains that most migrant workers are not registered by the Building and Construction welfare board.

Argha, 30 years, a construction worker in Sonipat, Haryana from West Bengal informed us of not receiving any relief from the Haryana state government. He received a relief of Rs. 1000 from his home state.

Effectiveness of Direct Cash Transfer

On 26th March 2020 through a press release finance minister announced a 1.70 crore package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana with the stated objective of helping the poor to fight against Coronavirus (Ministry of Finance 2020). The relief package contained Rs. 500 direct cash transfer to 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holder for three months; along with other ration, ex gratia Rs. 1000/- for 3 crore senior citizen, poor widows and poor disabled; increase in NREGA wages from Rs. 182 to Rs. 202 among others. On May 17, the Finance Minister announced that 20 crore women Jan Dhan account holders have received 10,025 crore along with the announcement of progress of other schemes that were announced (Hindustan Times 2020a). The government has also reported that even within lockdown a significant number of new Jan Dhan accounts were opened (Naga Sridhar 2020).

Studies have pointed to several issues (Sanghera 2020) that are standing as impediments to substantive financial inclusion even after a tremendous increase in number of bank account opened in PMJDY including the access to banking in rural areas, that average balance is low and around 38% of accounts are inoperative and the fact that access to formal credit have not increased through this and the credit-deposit ratio and the share of small loans has continued to decline (Sinha, Dipa and Rohit Azad 2020).

Some studies (Patel, Aaran, Pragya Divakar and Rajatha Prabhakar 2020) during the lockdown period have shown that only Rs 3,000 to Rs 4,000 crore was withdrawn from banks each month from the 10,025 crore that has been transferred. Though the Finance Minister has shown this data positively, the data of low withdrawal is because of account dormancy, infrequent usage and limited access to banks in rural areas as reported by the beneficiaries in a survey.

Direct cash transfer under the Central scheme did not reach the accounts of the migrant workers, nor any from destination states, it was mostly only from host states that migrant-workers seemed to receive cash, wherever they did so from government schemes. In most other cases, cash transfers or monetary help were received from support groups or individuals. They reported various cases to us where technical issues, bureaucratic hurdles, etc, led to migrant workers not receiving the cash transfers while they were aware of the schemes and had seen friends and co-workers receiving. Hence various technical and implementation issues made the access to whatever was available, also intermittent.

Access to Healthcare

On the question of access to health facilities, most migrant-workers were apprehensive of even suggesting that they might have any ailment or symptoms that might suggest that they may have contracted COVID-19. This cautiousness seems obvious given the stigma and panic that has spread where locals became apprehensive of letting migrants return and migrant-worker seemed to become a suspect of carrying the disease. The caution in responses to questions on health were clearly indicating the apprehension and the tension.

That apart, what was also clear was the overall dismal state of health infrastructure where non-COVID-19 health issues also got severely neglected and lack of adequate infrastructure and preparedness for treatment of non-COVID health ailment during the lockdown was alarming. Also, there was supposedly discrimination in the health infrastructure towards people from outer states, which added to the insecurity of the migrant workers.

None of the migrant-workers in our sample indicated experiences any symptoms associated with contracting COVID-19. However, there were instances of migrant workers relating to difficulties in accessing health facilities for some chronic or health issues unrelated to COVID-19. One migrant worker working in Maharashtra informed us of a worker dying because of delays in accessing proper medical treatment.

Faizal, in Maharashtra, said while he himself stayed back because going back to his home in Assam became difficult. They had managed to send their friend, also working in Pune, back home when he became ill. According to Faizal, though they managed to send him back on time, his friend, a diabetic patient, died in Guwahati, because of delay in receiving treatment. His friend had to wait for three days for the COVID-19 test to happen, without which no other treatment was to begin, and since for three days the test results didn't come, no other treatment was started and he succumbed to his ailment.

While battling with the COVID-19 situation, especially in the first 3 months, it seems the overall governmental planning, preparation and health infrastructure failed miserably to look into not just the COVID-19 spread but also non-COVID health hazards during the same time.

Concluding Remarks

The study shows that among the three host-states where the survey was conducted, migrant workers in Tamil Nadu still received better dry ration compared to Maharashtra and Haryana. Central government's direct cash transfer schemes didn't mostly reach the migrant workers. Whenever cash transfers were received that were reported to have come from home-states like West Bengal, Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand. While wages were lost by almost all workers, no one seems to have received any amount of sustainable welfare in the initial three months of the lockdown and were mostly dependent on helps from civil society initiatives. Most times where the migrant-workers received relief or dry ration kits, they did not have a clear perception of what was the source of the relief.

Almost all migrant workers we interviewed, who have returned to their home states with much insecurity in different registers, would want to migrate again owing to lack of work opportunities in their villages. Women migrant workers are facing several layers of burden because of the distressed condition of their family, lack of digital knowhow and other constraints during the pandemic. Most migrant-workers were apprehensive of even suggesting that they might have any ailment or symptoms that might suggest like COVID-19. This cautiousness seems obvious given the stigma and panic that has spread where locals became apprehensive of letting migrants return and migrant-worker seemed to become a suspect of carrying the disease. The lack of adequate infrastructure and preparedness for non-COVID ailment during the lockdown was alarming, coupled with supposedly discrimination in the health infrastructure towards people from outer states, which added to the insecurity of the migrant workers in host-states. The need for a robust universal public healthcare system as a pressing necessity came up more sharply than ever during this pandemic.

The lack of registration and enumeration of migrant workers mandated by several legislations has been a major issue, and this has also been used by the governments to shrug off their responsibility during the pandemic. The lack of portability of social security benefits, which has not been actualized even after near complete enrollment in Aadhar, an identity card which was launched in the name of minimal friction delivery of welfare schemes, raises a serious question on the intention. The lack of workplace rights and citizenship rights of migrant workers, that came to surface during the pandemic, must be responded in the framework of rights, taking into account the immense contribution of this workforce into economic growth and society. The effective de-franchisement of a substantial section of migrant workers has to do with their poor bargain terms, despite being a numerically large community. Unless the political rights (Ghosh, Shreya and Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay 2020) of the migrant workers are strengthened within a federal democracy and they become a 'factor' in the state and union election, legislators will continue to overlook their interest. Even well-intentioned welfare policies will fall short of desired result unless appropriate bottom-level infrastructures are created which can bring together all stakeholders like Municipal and State governments of host-states, home-states, union government, civil society and associations of migrant workers towards meaningful dialogue and implementation of schemes where the migrant workers themselves can exert pressure from below to the red-tapes of bureaucracy.

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