

**REVERSE MIGRATION OF LABOUR: AN ANALYSIS OF INDIA'S INFORMAL SECTOR DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC (2019-22)****Nibha Sinha**

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**ABSTRACT**

*This paper is an analysis of impact of Covid-19 pandemic on India's unorganized sector. It opens with a short discussion of Indian economy and discussion of growth of labour history and its compartmentalization into formal/organised and informal/unorganized sectors. This is followed by an examination of the informal sector of the economy. Although, my area of focus have been study of organized sector, particularly textile mill workers of Delhi Cloth Mills, this is my humble attempt to work on informal sector of the economy. Further, it discusses the impact of last pandemic of 1919/1920 which created global health crisis. Even prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19, the Indian economy was reeling under slow economic growth, increase in unemployment and poverty. India's capacity was hence weak to deal with corona crisis when the pandemic hit in March 2020. The economic crisis after March 2020 affected all the sectors of the Indian economy. The hardest hit, however, was the unorganized sector. It is in this regard that an effort has been made to analyze the harsh realities of unorganized sector, particularly of northern India. Newspapers were full of articles on hardships faced by people working in unorganised sectors. The plight of migrant workers is still afresh in our memory. The paper is based on primary sources in the form of newspapers and some of the recent secondary sources on the issue.*

India was predominantly an agricultural economy till 1947. Even after independence, the emphasis was on agriculture in the First Five Year Plan (1951-56). It was from the Second Five Year Plan (1956-61) that focus shifted towards heavy industrialization. With its 'mixed economy' model and Five Year Plans, India took off on the path of industrialization. In the first phase of the development effort spanning the first three Five Year Plans (1951-66), with its emphasis on development of heavy and capital goods industries in India, the overall economy made considerable progress on several fronts. Indian economy, however, faced massive crisis in many respects by mid-1960s. Monsoon failures of 1965-66, fall in agricultural output and food grain output, rise in inflation, deterioration of balance of payments situation and rising dependence on foreign aid- forced economy planners to abandon long term planning and three annual Plans (1966-69) were adopted. (Chandra, Mukherjee: 2008) The radical economic reforms of post-1967 period further restricted economic growth. In fact, industrialization strategies and policies pursued in India since independence till mid-1980s focused more on regulation than development.

The tighter 'protectionist' policy, import-substitution-industrialization were pursued with a belief that it would protect infant domestic industry. But in reality, what happened was building up of structural weakness in economy. It has been pointed out that despite head start in heavy industrialization within Asia-Pacific region, India's rank in the major industrial countries dropped from the 13th in 1965 to the 19th in 1990. One can get an idea of how isolated Indian economy was from the fact that during 1960-1990 India's share in world exports stagnated around 0.6%, less than half the figure in 1950. Over-regulation and over-protection became major bottlenecks for Indian economy. It has been pointed out by C. S. Venkata Ratnam that Indian industrial scenario was such that "industrial sickness became pervasive but the industrialists who contributed to such sickness, wilfully or otherwise, were not usually sick and were permitted to set up new units with substantial support from public financial institutions with impunity." (Venkata Ratnam: 1996)

The failure to bring about any structural changes in economy was due to the fact that until the beginning of 1960s, it was still believed that industrialization would be instrumental in transition towards a socialist society. This belief further guided government's policies towards labour. During the 1970s and 1980s drastic changes took place in labour relations because of restructuring of industrial economy. Rationalisation of production resulted in downsizing of labour. Technological changes were equally significant factors in bringing these changes. Exit

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policies like voluntary retirement schemes reduced the size of permanent workforce in general. It has been argued by many that such efficiency drive and flexibilization of industrial work meant “a contraction of production in the formal sector and further expansion of the informal sector of economy.”(Parry, Breman, Kapadia: 1999)

Labour history in India emerged in the post-colonial period when questions of economic growth were of central concern for most historians. Generally speaking, labour historiography may be broadly divided into four phases. (Upadhyaya, 2011, p.87)<sup>1</sup> In the first phase, the late colonial period, some of the foundational premises on labour were formulated and this established the beginning of labour history in India. Various commissions of enquiry were constituted to understand constraints to industrialization in India during colonial period. It was these commissions of enquiry which first formulated and developed the discourse on Indian labour. Colonial discourse focussed on the inhibiting social and cultural factors as responsible for stunted industrialization and restricting mobility of labour.

The nationalist, on the other hand, argued that colonialism was responsible for inhibiting the development of capitalism and hence restricted the growth of normative industrial workforce. Both of these writings shared the fundamental assumptions about stereotypical image of Indian industrial worker. The stereotypical image of an industrial worker was that of ‘semi-rural semi-urban peasant-proletariat’. (Sen: 1999) Morris D Morris critiqued old colonial and sociological frames that saw caste and other social institutions as barrier to labour supply, etc. But he did not fundamentally challenge colonial assumptions. In the second phase which started since independence and dominated until the mid 1970s, Marxist-nationalist historiography and modernization theories became significant. This was the period of conventional labour history. Most of the writings on labour history during this period shared many assumptions that underlined colonial discourse on labour. Stereotypes about lack of commitment to work and irregular work rhythms continued to underline these discussions.

The third phase started from the early 1970s and became pronounced in the late 1970s and 1980s which heralded major rethinking on various aspects of labour history. New trends began to emerge in social history writing. First there was a shift away from arguments which framed the discussion of modernization theorists like Morris. Instead of considering caste and village ties as impediments to labour commitment and supply, now labour historians re-examined the significance of these ties in understanding working class formation. The other trend was an attempt to develop a critique of the economic assumptions dominant in writings on working class protests. There was a shift away from conventional trade union histories, in which workers as human subjects were absent, to histories that explored the social and cultural worlds of workers. The general attempt was to show that there is a possibility of simultaneous existence of different levels of consciousness among workers. There was thus serious questioning of class attributes of industrial workforce.

The fourth phase, which can be called the new labour history, began in the late 1980s and early 1990s and is still current. It is during this phase that entire foundation of conventional labour history has been challenged and several alternatives have been proposed. There is widening of perspective by exploring new themes and issues. “Not only have questions of culture, community, family and gender become more important, the boundaries of labour history have opened up to incorporate ‘unorganized’ home-based workers, casual labourers, self-employed artisans and others who existed on the fringes of the academic writing.”<sup>2</sup>

A major break in the writing of labour history in India came with Dipesh Chakrabarty’s work *Rethinking Working Class History*, based on a study of jute workers in Bengal. It has been pointed out that Chakrabarty tried to create

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<sup>2</sup> Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003), 6.

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an epistemological break by bringing culture in the centre of working class history.<sup>3</sup> For this, he selected several often discussed topics of standard labour history such as the nature of industry and entrepreneurship; the working and living conditions of labourers; the nature of trade union organization and leadership, and the range and nature of protests. He showed centrality of culture in deciding the nature and outcome of the phenomenon. Thus, according to him, the industry was in continuous crisis because the entrepreneurs were guided by the pre-capitalist commercial culture of profit through buying and selling and were not interested in long-term investment. The trade union leaders, it was argued that, treated workers as their subjects and organizations as their zamindaries. Workers' protests were divisive along communal lines. According to Chakrabarty, all these things happened because there was no proper bourgeois democratic revolution in Indian and no proper working class could be developed here as it was immersed in its pre-bourgeois culture.<sup>4</sup>

Another major contribution to new labour history was R. Chandavarkar's work on Bombay textile mills. He has argued against the categorical dualism found in much of labour history. He has pointed out that in conventional labour history, rural-urban, informal-formal, workplace-neighbourhood are some of the oppositions in which one category is privileged at the expense of other. In his study of Bombay textile mills workers, he has shown that workers maintained and nurtured rural links as a strategy to tide over fluctuations in employment. He has questioned the conventional notions of one-way migration of workers and has shown that two-way mobility was resorted to rather than one-way migration from the rural to the urban areas. So it was part of survival strategies of workers to maintain their links with the villages which enabled them to sustain and prolong collective actions against employers. He has also questioned the dualism of workplace-neighbourhood, former as site of unity and latter as arena of conflict and has shown that neighborhood was a source of strength for workers away from authoritarian control of mill authorities at the shop floor.<sup>5</sup>

While D. Chakrabarty's work give centrality to culture and reify culture, Raj Chandavarkar's approach place complete reliance on economic and political factors and totally dismiss culture from any consideration in labour history. Jan Breman has questioned the distinction between the formal and informal economy. He has argued that such duality does not exist in reality and there were no fixed lines between the two sectors. He has suggested that instead of separating the two sectors into watertight compartments, it would be more logical to emphasize on the fragmented nature of the entire labour market.<sup>6</sup>

A number of other works have also argued that "given the close interaction of agriculture and industry and between rural and urban economies, in structuring the milieu of organised industry, in shaping labour market, etc., any attempt to make distinctions between agriculture/industry and rural/urban can only be misleading."<sup>7</sup> What is required is questioning of such distinctions in order to fully appreciate labour history. During the 1960s, there was a surge in labour history writings in the west. This surge was a result of students' and workers' movements. It has been pointed out that "radical historians, apprehensive that workers were being co-opted within the structures of welfare capitalism in the post-war years, were keen to revive the lost radical traditions."(Linden, Mohapatra:

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<sup>3</sup> S B Upadhyaya, "Indian Labour History: A Historiographic Survey" in Sabyasachi Bhattacharya (ed.) *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography* (Delhi: ICHR in association with Primus Books, 2011), 100.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>7</sup> Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India, op. cit.* p. 3.

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2009) The writings of the English social historian like E P Thompson and history- from-below approach were representative of this trend.<sup>8</sup>

### **New Labour History and its discourse**

By 1970s, however, economic restructuring due to globalization changed all this. The emergence of global sub-contracting, diffusion of power in world economy and collapse of the Soviet system seriously challenged the foundations of labour history.<sup>9</sup> By early 1990s, labour history was in crisis. Since then, however, there has been a regeneration of interest in history of labour in the Southern countries. However, this new revival of labour history writing is different both in structure and style from traditional focus on working classes.<sup>10</sup> There is questioning of both Eurocentric view of labour history and conceptual binaries. These conceptual binaries of analysis of labour forms were usually located along three axes: spatial, temporal and relational. The spatial binaries were seen in terms of western developed countries- underdeveloped rest of world, workplace-home, factory workshop, and urban-rural. Temporal divide was along pre-modern, feudal times and modern industrial times. Formal, structured relationship between employer and employee and informal, unstructured relationship lying outside the sites of workplace were yet another conceptual binaries to understand labour histories.

The 1990s saw the emergence of more diverse, mainly gendered historical analysis of labour, particularly with regard to predominantly male labour force and wage gaps in the industry. Samita Sen's work has brought focus on the gendered nature of labour, devaluation of women's labour and the emergence of dowry practices. Leela Fernandes, through her field research in jute mill, emphasised the reproduction of gendered ideologies in national and trade union discourses as well as everyday mill practices. Madhavi Jha has focused on gender division of labour and women's vice in public works in colonial India. Nitin Sinha's work has brought a new area in focus. He has dealt with the social world of non-migrant women left behind in the villages of northern and eastern India. The gender research, focused on the industrial areas, has left a relative lacuna in terms of understanding the household strategies of circular migrants and impact on those 'left behind'.

The new labour history approach has questioned these binaries and has argued that these binaries are not watertight compartments; they are not mutually exclusive. Rather there is an overlapping and coexistence of multiple identities and forms of labour. In the current changing economic forces, these spatial, temporal and relational binaries seem to be blurring. With expansion of informalization and feminization of workforce, what is required is "new forms of comparison that take into account the multidimensionality of relationships, locations and temporalities."<sup>11</sup>

It has thus brought the non-class attributes in workers' lives and activities in the forefront of labour studies. It has made a case to look beyond linear conceptions of change prevalent in conventional Marxist writings. It has opened up new grounds to explore the dynamics of interrelationship between multiple identities of workers and it has led to major a rethinking and is increasingly exploring entirely new areas related to informality, gender, laws, etc. The binaries concerning formal-informal, industrial-agricultural, free-unfree labour are becoming obsolete. The new approach has provided space to study various labour forms which exist simultaneously and impinge on each other. Despite the changed paradigm, however, the main focus of the new labour history has been mostly, if not entirely, on large scale organized industry, mining and plantations.

The transformations taking place in the discipline of labour history today can be stated in terms of, "the present juncture is one in which geographical boundaries of the discipline, which were narrowly configured around the

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xi.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., xii.

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nation-state, are being challenged; and the analytical category of labour, for long identified with the industrial, unionized and male worker, has been stretched to include hitherto marginalized informal workers.”<sup>12</sup> The rethinking, recent scholars have argued, has been to look beyond an exclusive focus on the industrial factory workers, to map the submerged histories of the ‘urban poor’, ‘irregularly employed’ and ‘sub-proletariat’. The emerging trend is thus to look beyond the site of workplace and factory walls and explore non-work sites like slums, chawls and bustees. Contemporary economic forces have reversed the ‘proper’ evolutionary sequence of change. The recent trend is towards informalisation and feminization of labour. “Instead of factory employment replacing cottage industry, formal sector workers are increasingly forced by retrenchment to eke out a far more precarious existence in informal sector home-based production units.”(Parry, Breman, Kapadia, 1999)

In a rapidly changing and globalizing world, the study of industrial relations has gained a new significance. Liberalization of Indian economy brought about a change in the role of government in industrial relations system. The relationship between major actors of industrial relations system- government, employer, employees and trade unions has shifted from conflict avoidance to collaboration in the wake of government’s adaptation to structural adjustment programme initiated by organizations like International Monetary Fund and World Bank. In the contemporary economic situation, the collectivist industrial relationship paradigm has given way to individualistic human resource management paradigm. This shift has not only affected the labour movement and its responses to expansion in informal economy but has also led to an increasing contractualisation of work.

This ‘organised labour in capitalist enterprises or government services remained a small part of total employment. South Asia’s labour market has remained overwhelmingly ‘informal’ or ‘unorganised’. This sector of economy has received less attention and is often marginalized. India’s work forces overwhelmingly rural and urban-rural labour markets remain closely connected. A very large part of the labour force remained closely connected to villages of origin. The pattern of circular migration, often manifested during economic or health crises such as the bubonic plague and COVID-19. The reasons for this continued patterns of circular migration have been disputed. It, however, remains important to understand the history of labour in terms of continued interaction between rural and urban societies and economies. (Haan: 2022)

The nature of the Indian industrial work force is closely linked to the migratory patterns. The earlier scholars called the pattern of circulatory migration as a transitory phenomenon. The circulatory migration, however, has become much more permanent than expected. It has also resulted in a relatively slow urbanization. As factories expanded, large numbers of migrants from rural areas moved out from villages to look for jobs. In the case of the Bengal jute mills, these were ‘up-country’ workers mostly from the poorest rural areas in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, and to some extent Orissa and Andhra Pradesh.(Haan:2022, p.16) Bombay and its cotton mills also attracted large number of migrant workers with a large concentration from Ratnagiri, and also from Uttar Pradesh. These movements tended to be circular as occupations were seasonal and temporary. These migrant workers were predominantly male and they did not sever their links with their villages. For migrant workers, industrial and other urban jobs provided an opportunity to supplement family income and village-based livelihoods. (Haan: 2022)They often returned to their villages for harvests or family-related reasons like to attend marriages, annual leave. They also returned when demand for work went down. One such health-crisis was covid-19 pandemic and the Indian government’s lockdown which forced millions of migrants to move back to their villages.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.



**Fig.1** Source: Times of India, 27 March, 2020.

### **COVID 19 and the responses towards informal labour sector**

During the early stages of the pandemic, India responded to the COVID-19 in a tough and abrupt manner. The pandemic had a devastating effect on already downtrodden workforce of informal sector. The socio-economic conditions of these informal workers were not matter of concern for the government's covid-19 response machinery. The Union Government imposed nation-wide lockdown through the Disaster Management Act 2005. The government imposed its erratic will on the whole country which affected the downtrodden sections of the society the most. India has a federal system, and health is a state subject. (Purushothaman, Moolakkattu: 2021). The manner in which lockdown was imposed which was very sudden and extended till 31 May led to a humanitarian crisis. This crisis involved a large number number of domestic migrant workers. These workers were left without resources to either survive in cities or go back to their native places.<sup>13</sup>

India's urban economy is inextricably linked with its domestic migrant workers. Apart from migrant workers, there are also beggars and homeless urban poor. Recently developing scholarly works on covid-19 have pointed out that policies of state were against the poor throughout the crisis. Apart from the various problems associated with the India's public health care system, the lack of social sensitivity towards patients during Covid times showed the cruel realities of India's health care system.<sup>14</sup> Migrant workers and urban poor were one who had limited or almost no access to health resources. Uma Purushothaman and John Moolakkattu have argued that "migrant workers and urban poor's ability to survive the pandemic is affected by their living and working circumstances, insensitivity of the authorities in providing services, workers' limited local knowledge and soical networks in the cities, and their non-inclusion as fully documented citizens."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.,p.3.



**Fig 2:** Source : Times of India , 27<sup>th</sup> March 2020

Covid-19 induced humanitarian crisis that unfolded resulted in tens of thousands of people rendered jobless. The lockdown created havoc in terms of rendering migrant workers jobless over very long period of time. These helpless folks streamed out of the major metro cities throughout the Covid times as they had little or no money or food to fend for themselves. They frantically walked hundreds of kilometres on highways to escape covid-induced crisis in cities.

“These tides of men, women and children, driven by the uncompromising arithmetic of survival and fear of contracting the coronavirus, posed a new challenge to the government’s all-out attempts to contain the spread of the disease.”(TOI, Delhi Edition, 27 March 2020) Some 26,000 people who reached Ratanpur, on the Gujarat-Rajasthan border were listed, screened, quarantined and transported back to their villages, the Collector of the district reported.

There were floods of people who were leaving the Delhi-NCR, slogging down the Yamuna Expressway and the expressway to Meerut. After the announcement of the 21-day lockdown, Raj Kumar’s manager in Gurgaon asked him to get back home and stay there. His home was 10,50 kms away in Bihar’s Chapra. Staying in Gurgaon was tough with meagre money and uncertainty over next pay. It made no sense to him to prolong his stay in Gurgaon, city which was sole source of income for him. Since the government had shut down all public transport, Raj Kumar and his family — his wife, their three month-old toddler and his 58year-old mother —started walking on foot along with thousands of workers streaming out of the city. They were all on foot walking on vast expressways with a hope that sooner they will be home. After walking several miles, many from Harayana made to their way to Delhi. In some of the places, some local residents offered packed food to these outbound migrant workers. Beating the scorching heat of summer months of north India, these streams of people kept walking in hope that someone, somewhere would offer a ride. (TOI, Delhi Edition)

Police check posts were made on the borders of different states. These check-posts were make-shift arrangements to control law and order situations in these border areas. Thousands of people carrying their bags were walking on the Jaipur-Agra highway. one such daily wage worker, Kishan Mahawar stated that his village was 110 km from Jaipur and he had no option but to go back. He along with some of fellow workers were stopped by the police at a few places. After lot of hustle, these workers managed to convince policemen and carried on. (TOI, Delhi Edition)

With productions shut down in almost in all sectors of economy, rations out of the shelves, migrant workers were the hardest hit. Many migrant vegetable vendors returned home from Assam and other neighboring states as it became unprofitable to set up shop with a severe shortage of produce. For example, one Prem Chandra Shah, a vendor in Guwahati, returned to Bihar as survival in cities was increasingly getting difficult over prolonged lockdown period.”(TOI, Delhi Times)

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This reverse migration of an enormous workforces working in the gigantic commercial sector of Delhi-NCR started during the covid period. Manesar, one of India's largest automobile hubs, also witnessed such reverse migration of its employees. This endless flow of migrant workers on the car-free expressways of Delhi-NCR reflected the insensitive and abrupt manner in which lockdown was imposed. The people who were leaving were mostly factory workers, construction labourers and daily wagers. These workforce were those whose wages dried up as a consequence of the total blackout of the commercial sectors in such hubs. The reverse migration out of Delhi-NCR, became a matter of concern for governments. One such case is of Manoj Thakur aged twenty-six years who worked in a factory in Vaishali. He managed to Dadri after 10 hours of walking from the empty Anand Vihar bus terminal. He grieved that he had been walking for last ten hours with no food and water. He complained that none of the shops were open on the highway. He further anguished that he still had to travel 160km to reach home in Etah district. (TOI, New Delhi Edition)

Another such case in point is that of Manorama aged thirty who also hailed from Etah, had her 11-year-old daughter along with her. She expressed her dissatisfaction with the government's decision to shut down everything. She complained that people like her need daily wage to survive. Such migrant workers do not have enough savings to fend for months without wages. She was frustrated by government's decisions of shutting down public transport overnight.

It was the abruptness of the lockdown and the insecurity about wages which made workers helpless. Although some of the employers had given some cash to their employees, however, it was not enough to sustain them for prolonged uncertain period of lockdown. Some six workers from one prominent sweet shop of Noida were sent on long leave. One such worker named Omkar was given Rs. 1000 before sent on leave. He complained about insufficient funds to pay room rent and stay in cities with essential commodities being overpriced.



**Fig: 3** Times Of India 28<sup>th</sup> March, 2020.

For some of these migrant workers who had recently migrated to these cities, hopes and aspiration of making a living in a city had crushed too soon. Some like Mohan Singh, from Badau, Uttar Pradesh, who had come to Manesar ten days ago lamented that his dream to earn in big cities has been shattered. With lockdown orders in place, he was left with no money to run his family. He had a large family of ten members. It has been hard for him to survive with his family with all commercial sectors being shut. He along with his family members decided to walk to their village as no public transport were available. (TOI, Delhi Edition) It was adverse times for Om Prakash Kushwaha, who was carrying his seven month-old daughter in his arms. Since all transport were off roads, he had set himself a daunting task of walking to Ajmer which might take nearly a week

The Delhi-Jaipur highway witnessed swarms of such groups walking to their villages and small cities. Some of them with their luggage on their heads and some others with kids ticked between their arms. Most of them had a



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question for the government: “Why didn’t they inform us about the lockdown in advance? We wouldn’t have to walk like this! Amidst all this, some activist groups distributed packaged food, bananas and biscuits among workers on the Yamuna Expressway in Greater Noida. The police authorities from Noida region said that the only way they could help these homeless, helpless, sauntering people was by allowing them to pass borders so that they reach their villages.

**CONCLUSION**

The analysis of government’s policies with regard to migrant workers during lockdown clearly highlight the toll it had on the migrant workers. What is visible is that there was little or no no planning to check out the problems of the urban migrants, daily wage workers, employees in the unorganized sectors. Multiple factors were responsible for loss of migrant workers lives. They suffered due to lack of food, shelter, loss of wages, constant fear and anxiety of infection. Many migrants lost their lives during the exodus after the lockdown, possibly the biggest since the days of the partition in 1947.(Purushothaman, Moolakkattu: 2021). Even after walking miles and miles and reaching their villages, they were harassed by locals and police. They were seen as potential homes of infection. There were some cases of returning migrants being sprayed with chemicals to disinfect them. For example in Uttar Pradesh, cases of chemical spraying on migrant workers came to light. The returning migrants were offered jobs under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act, India’s leading workfare program in the rural areas.<sup>16</sup>

This, however, this led to further tension at village levels. The already registered job cardholders perceived migrant workers as depriving them of jobs. Certain benefits and rural security programmes like rations, free public education and health care facilities were not given to the migrants due to a lack of the necessary documentation. The lockdown with its unplanned and abrupt policies, hence, escalated the sufferings of the labourers in the unorganized sector.

Having said all these, from the government’s perspective also the pandemic proved to be a lesson and as it had never experienced such a catastrophic disaster. The mass exodus of the migrant workers was a learning experience and henceforth this pandemic would definitely been a case to reflect back upon.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.