

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON AGRIBUSINESS, MIGRANT WORKERS INVOLVED IN AGRICULTURE

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ABSTRACT

Migration is a growing global phenomenon. There are many causes of migration among which the root causes are conflicts, violence, natural disasters. Many migrants are compelled to move because of poverty and lack of employment opportunities. More than 75% of the world's poor and food insecure live in rural areas. They mostly depend on agricultural produce for maintaining their livelihood. The rural poor face very much difficulty in accessing credit services and technologies. Migration becomes an important part of the strategies of rural households for improving their livelihoods. In this pandemic situation the migrant workers who were engaged in agricultural work in some other states have faced serious problems. During the lockdown phase when all activities were shut down, they were forced to stop their work. As these people mainly earn on daily wage basis and had little savings, it was very difficult for them to continue staying in faraway land and started returning to their home states. When they reached their home states the government had given permission to start the agricultural work but, these people were unable to engage themselves as they were working in faraway lands. We will focus on the condition of the migrant farmers in other state with comparison to their home states, when they are returning back to their home states due to the pandemic situation caused by COVID-19. We would also try to understand how the present condition of such a concern may be improved.

Keywords: *Migrant Farmers, Reasons of Returning Back to Home States, Improve Present Condition.*

Introduction

Migrant workers involve in agriculture engage a faithful role in India. In 2018, total GDP 17% to 18% contribute by agriculture income and total employment 50% generated by agriculture. The migrant workers work in different states in India. All the work were going smoothly but problem started due to lockdown on 24th March, 2020. So, in this pandemic situation the migrant workers cannot return home smoothly. They are facing difficulties as a result many of them cannot decide what they will do. They will stay there or they will come to home state. Many of the migrant worker stay alone there and as a result their family members are facing problems because they cannot send money to their families as they are not earning money. Some of them who are staying with their families and they are thinking that how they will accommodate all because they are not earning money. After the long lockdown of 98 days the migrant workers their saving has gone down so now how they will start again? What they will do? So as a result respective state and central government has taken initiative role regarding this matter. Migrant workers they are trying to overcome all the hurdles and they try to regenerate their savings, to smoothly run their families.

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Review of Literature

Ranjan Choudhari (2020) did a study to see the mental challenges of migrant workers during the pandemic time. The study revealed that social exclusion, inability to access doctors, absence of occupational safety, have highly affected the migrant workers and led to development of psychological illness. The study tried to draw attention of mental health professionals to these areas.

Kakoli Goswami, Yuma Nath (2021) on women in inter sectionalism perspective especially in women of North-East India. The results of the study shared that in addition to mental and emotional health, majority of the people are suffering due to significant increase in work pressure in household chores work area at different age level a positive correlation was found between stress and depression.

Ratha (2020) in a study tried to see the plight of migrant workers. The study showed that due to the economic activity becoming standstill, most countries faced challenges in health and agriculture which is majorly dependent on availability of migrant workers. Due to non-availability of regular steady income and health insurance coverage there is a deep and pervasive effect.

Rajan, Sivakumar Srinivasan (2020) did a study on impact of Covid 19 on migration. The study showed that desperate attempt to return back to homeland have led to lockdown become ineffective and clashes with authorities. The paper discussed about mobility, gender and mental health of India's internal migrants. The study suggested recommendations for improving the public policy regarding migrant workers.

Rajan (2020) did a study on migration and development. The paper tried to examine the impact of migration in future days. The paper focused on Kerala Migration Survey (KMS) which provided data on cost, remittance of migration. The study showed how the model was successfully used in Kerala and other major states of the country to manage the spread of pandemic as well as organize plans and programs to manage return of workers and its subsequent impact on society.

Chamic (2020) did a study on international migration and examined the trend and policies in covid pandemic era. The study examined pandemic related migration trends and policies. The study concluded with guidance for policymakers in local as well as international field. The study proposed that safety to be prioritized in terms of return and reintegration of migrants. There should be reconciliation of national border security and climate related migration should also be addressed.

Objectives of the Study

- To find out the condition of the agricultural migrant workers in other states in comparison to their home states.
- We assess the immediate challenges that COVID19 has posed to the farm sector and suggest mitigation measures to ensure a sustainable food system in the post-crisis period.
- These crisis situation what steps Government has taken during pandemic that how the migrant workers will overcome and they will rejoin their work.

Scope of Study

The scope of the study are the workers who were engaged in agricultural work in other states and decided to return back to their home states and those who decided to stay back after that how they will survive their life as well as what steps the Government has taken during Lockdown and after Lockdown.

Research Methodology

This study is mainly based upon secondary data collected from various articles and views upon them.

Limitation

- As all the information which we have considered is based on secondary data, so we have done our work with limited constraints.
- We have only focus on agriculture migrant farmers who stayed in other state or who came back to home state.
- As we got limited information, so we don't have proper idea in rural village area. As we have collected all information from different types of newspaper and journal but in interior rural area, maximum information are not available, so we could not focus on it.

Findings

Among the various categories of migrant laborers in India, one category is of the seasonal workers employed in agriculture and related activities. Data shows that the agricultural laborers, who take upon rural to rural inter district and inter-state seasonal migration, predominantly belong to the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe categories, making them one of the most deprived strata of the rural hierarchy. With their mobility restricted, this very section faces one of the greatest brunt of the pandemic lockdown.

In order to fully gauge the harshness of the blow that has befallen on these agricultural labouring classes, the pandemic has to be situated within the context of the pre-COVID-19 economic conditions. The COVID-19 pandemic crisis comes at a time when the Indian economy was already reeling under an extended period of stagnation and fall in demand. The slump in consumption was most evident in rural India in the months leading up to the pandemic, all through last year with the same trend continuing well into this year, showing no signs of recovery. This demand crisis has been attributed prominently to the fall in days of employment available to manual workers along with a slowing down of the wage rates. Research shows that real wage growth for rural laborers plunged from 14.6 percent in 2014 to a mere 1.1 percent in 2019. Under such conditions, the present agricultural season was even more crucial for the rural workers to fight their daily battles of hunger and destitution.

Village studies have come to show that in the Indian countryside there no longer exists a pure class of agricultural laborers as a result of declining days of employment available in agriculture. However, there is a class which can be classified as manual workers, who shift from seasonal agricultural work to non-farm manual work in the lean season. It is this same class that the migrant agricultural workers belong.

Migrant workers who decided to stay back during the exodus faced assault from their neighbours, who accused them of being infected with coronavirus. They thus could not venture out to buy food. Many also faced police brutality if they ventured out of their homes. They were passing through mental pressure and harassment. They mainly depend on daily wages and they were not earning. As a result, many of them had to live on starvation. Those who decided to come back to their home states had to suffer a lot as well. Upon their return to their hometowns and villages, they were treated with either fear or a "class bias", being hosed down with disinfectants or soap solution in some cases. They were feared to be carrying coronavirus from the areas where they had been employed. They faced assault and harassment from the people of their hometowns. Since all of them belonged to the lower castes, they had to face caste slurs. Thousands got into property disputes as well.

Timing of Lockdown

The sudden lockdown was declared in a crucial time for the farmers. In view of continuing restrictions on movements of people and vehicular traffic, concerns have been raised regarding negative implications of COVID19 pandemic on the farm economy. This was the peak of *rabi* season in India and crops like wheat, gram, lentil, mustard, etc. (including paddy in irrigated tracts) are at harvestable stage or almost reaching maturity. This was also the time when the farm harvests reach the *mandis* (market yards) for assured procurement operations by designated government agencies. Moreover, any severe disruption to the supply of perishable fruits and vegetables, dairy products, fish, etc., having mobilized to meet the increasing demand from a bulging middle class as well as urban and rural consumers, may create irreparable damage to all actors in the supply chain. The migration of workers from few parts to their native places has also triggered panic buttons, as they are crucial for both harvesting operations and post-harvest handling of produce in storage and marketing centers.

The nationwide lockdown came at an unfortunate time for farmers, as it was the harvest season for the *rabi* (winter) crop. The lockdown created both a shortage of labor and equipment-migrant laborers in India usually move to rural areas during harvest, and small holder farmers often rent harvesting equipment as this is cheaper than purchasing it. Consequently, farmers have not been able to harvest their bumper crops of cereal and oilseed harvest this season. In some places the crops have been abandoned, while in others the harvest is coming more than a month late in hand with limited and more expense labor.

Shortage of Supply

All the activities had been hit harvesting could not being done properly due to shortage of labour and post harvesting also suffered. Due to lock down and other restrictions it was seen that farm produce could not reach the markets as a result price of crops increased. Drivers abandoned trucks full of

produce in the middle of interstate highways. Markets eventually started running short of supplies, owing to food rotting in transit or never making it to point of sale. When the nationwide lockdown was announced in India, while the rain-fed regions of the country did not have standing crops, the regions endowed with irrigation facilities either had standing crops of wheat, vegetables, oilseeds or pulses ready to be harvested. The regional variation in the cropping pattern as a result of the disparity in development of agricultural systems and wage rates contributes towards the movement of migrant agricultural labourers in search of employment. In the northern states of Punjab and Haryana it is a busy season of wheat harvesting, which employs big numbers of migrant labourers from the eastern states of Bihar and Jharkhand who are employed in both the field operations as well as the loading and unloading activities at the government run procurement centers. It is estimated that Punjab involves one million migrant workers and Haryana about 0.6 million workers during this *rabi* season, of whom belong to the state of Bihar. In the wake of this pandemic on the one hand there has been a shortage of labour in these northern states to carry out harvest and post-harvest operations, while on the other hand in the states from where the workers could not migrate the agricultural wages have fallen due to oversupply of labour. The migrant workers in their home states have also been adversely affected by the absence of all non-farm work during this period of lockdown.

Future Problems

Another issue that is cause for concern is the availability and access to seeds, fertilizers and pesticides for the next crop season. Post the *rabi* harvest in April, farmers prepare for the next (*kharif*) season in May. However, the COVID-19 induced disruptions have reduced production capacity for farm inputs and have led to an increase in price, making these resources inaccessible to small holder and marginal farmers in the country. While large land holding farmers and businesses may be able to weather these shocks, they put enormous pressure on small holders who work with limited resources and income. Resuming business operations will be key to ensuring harvest security in the coming season.

In addition, social distancing and isolation are a huge challenge for farming communities who rely on daily labor and wages for their subsistence.

Loss of Jobs Due to Reliability on Mechanization

Reports from villages also inform that due to the restrictions on labour movement under lockdown, farmers were compelled to carry out mechanized harvesting operations to save their crop yields. At a time when rural farm workers are grappling with loss of livelihoods, a greater shift towards mechanized operations can act as a further deterrent to the possibilities of finding work in the near future. Although, only time will tell how well founded these concerns are.

Problem of Storage

Those farmers harvested their crops they did not have proper place to store their crop as a time being they faced lot of problem after lockdown.

Suggestions

- The poor sections of society are always the hardest hit in any disaster or pandemic situation. With about 85 percent of Indian farm households being small and marginal farmers and a significant part of the population being landless farm laborers, welfare measures to contain any damage from COVID are definitely going to help them with sincere implementation.
- The farmers must be provided with alternative cash transfer facilities to come out of the situations. The West Bengal government has announced an aid of Rs.1000 a month to daily wage earners in the state. But implementation of such activities need to be seen. Due to lack of information most of the farmers do not have any knowledge about such policies of the government. The uniformity is also lacking in terms of submission and benefits.
- To sustain the demand for agricultural commodities, investments in key logistics must be enhanced. Kishan Mandis have been set up in Haryana but it should be seen that all farmers can access those. Moreover, e-commerce and delivery companies and start-ups need to be encouraged with suitable policies and incentives. Storage spaces need to be increased.
- The small and medium enterprises, running with raw materials from the agriculture and allied sector also need special attention so that the rural economy doesn't collapse.
- To obviate the immediate concerns of scarcity of farm labor, policies must facilitate easy availability of machinery through state entities, Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) or custom hiring centers (CHCs) with suitable incentives.

It is also suggested to use leveraging NREGS funds to pay part of the farm labor to lessen the monetary burden on the farmer, while ensuring wage employment to the landless laborers and workers.

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