

A Review on Impact of Covid-19 on Labor Migration: Ethical Lessons for Human Resource Management (HRM)

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Covid-19 on Labor
Migration

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Abstract

Purpose: The COVID-19 has caused severe issues concerning Human Resource Management (HRM, hereafter) and organizations worldwide. Organized sectors using the work from home culture equipped with various technological supports managed their organizations and protected their jobs. However, many people lost jobs in other professional units that could not cope with technical support, such as industrial and manufacturing units, which run through on-site human resources. Indeed, this has been an issue much relevant for the HRM strategists and policy-makers. However, this paper draws attention to a significant matter relating to HRM: the mass labour migration that occurred due to COVID-19 across the globe. India's two most populated states, Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, have faced severe social and economic problems because of large-scale migration. States across the country have been ordered to evacuate the people who are migrants from the other states for the proper health management to combat the pandemic. Central and state governments supported different packages. International organizations like UNDP also worked with states to help such people. However, there are tough ethical lessons to learn from this pandemic experience. This paper reviews the HRM policies and programs of the Government and Private sectors by addressing these issues. It offers some essential ethical guidelines for HRM in the view of health emergencies like COVID-19.

Keywords: COVID-19, pandemic, HRM, UNDP, ILO, Migrant workers.

1. Introduction

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 has brought the world to a standstill, and its impact is very much visible on all the sectors of the economy, such as tourism, aviation, MSMEs, oil, and retail (Ranjan, 2020). With the increasing cases of corona-affected patients, the government has restricted all transportation services and closed all public and private sectors offices, manufacturings, and factories for an uncertain period; this led to workers and employees working in organized and unorganized sectors losing their jobs and struggle to earn their livelihood (ETGovernment, 2020).

The COVID-19 has major impacted the world economy after the great depression of the 1930s (Sahoo & Ashwani, 2020) and has affected our nation's organized and unorganized sectors. However, its harsh impacts can be seen heavily on the unorganized sector than the organized sector due to the difference in the sectors' nature. The organized sector consists of those sectors with the employment assurance that includes the jobs registered under the Government like Government institutions and schools, banks, politics, police jobs, and large enterprises registered under the government. On the other side, the unorganized sector consisting of the large part where the employment terms are neither fixed nor regular, such as medium, small, and micro-organizations, is not registered under the government, including the plantation labourers, hand looms workers, fisher, toddy tappers, weavers, etc. All the workers belonging to the organized or unorganized sectors count as important assets for the working class. Therefore, our review focuses on finding solutions to the workers' livelihood and sustainability and tries to touch those points through which some solution can be generated for the most hard-working class of society, labourers.



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2. Impact of COVID-19 on Organized and Unorganized Sector: A Critical Review

Migration is one of the most striking manifestations of globalization (Elie, 2015). According to an international labor organization, the pandemic has reduced the working hours by about 7% in quarter 2 of 2020, equivalent to losing 195 million full-time jobs. At the end of March, both the private and government sectors companies have asked their employees to leave the organization for an indefinite period without any pay or have reduced their salaries to about 85%. The organized sector saw major layoffs and jobs cut during pandemic and post-pandemic, affecting economic activities worldwide. As per a study conducted by recruitmentalerts.com, "68% of the employers have started their layoff or were planning to" (HT correspondent, 2020).

The impact of COVID-19 was harsher on the unorganized sector than the organized sector. The wage loss of informal workers was \$81,122 crore as jobs under this sector critically involve the human presence; thus, completion of work with the help of the internet or digitally was not a solution for them, and formal workers wage loss was \$5,326 crore as work of these sectors has been shifted to remote working with the help of digital solutions (Jadhav, 2021). According to a survey conducted by All India Manufacturers' Organization (AIMO), one-third of freelancing SMEs are about to close due to recent crises (Fana et al., 2020).

The vendors trading in "essential commodities" like fruits and vegetables were required to have vendor license and health permit; vendors trading in "semi-essential" must deal with the concerns related to hygiene, social distancing, and permits under FSSA Act and decline in demand. Vendors trading in "non-essential commodities" like plastics and clothes were mostly affected groups due to the lack of demand, supply, and closure of firms producing these commodities (Unni, 2020).

During COVID-19 pandemic, India's unorganised sector-which comprises contract labourers, small dealers, street vendors, and daily wage workers-faced hitherto unheard-of difficulties. Over 90% of India's workforce was employed in this sector, which experienced job losses, unstable income, and a lack of social security benefits (Jadhav, 2021).

It was a multifaceted crisis. Millions of migrant workers were forced to return to their home towns without sufficient assistance as a result of the lockdowns' first effect, which was mass unemployment. Second, because of dilack of financial support and healthcare. Second, weakened consumer demand and broken supply networks hurt unorganised enterprises. Third, poverty and vulnerability were made worse by the lack of access to healthcare and financial support (Fana et al., 2020).

Even though government programs like Atmanirbhar Bharat and PM Garib Kalyan Yojana offered short-term respite, they also revealed the unorganised sector's structural flaws. In order to preserve this industry from future economic shocks, the pandemic brought to light the pressing need for labour reforms, financial inclusion, and improved social protection (Unni, 2020).

3. Impact of COVID-19 on the Unorganised Sector and Labour Migration in India

India's unorganised economy was severely damaged by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially migrant labourers, who make up a sizable share of the informal workforce. Millions of people experienced severe distress as a result of the abrupt lockdowns, job losses, and absence of social security.

3.1. Significant wage reductions and job losses

Lockdowns caused factories, building sites, and small companies to close, which resulted in the unemployment of daily wage workers.

Many migrants experienced financial difficulties as a result of unpaid or delayed wages (Ranjan, 2020).

3.2. The Humanitarian Crisis and Reverse Migration

Due to a lack of transportation, millions of migrant workers walked hundreds of km back to their villages.

Basic food and medical care were difficult to come by in overcrowded aid camps and shelters (Sahoo & Ashwani, 2020).

3.3. Insufficient Social Security and Medical Care

Because they lacked formal contracts, insurance, and savings, unorganised workers were at risk.

Increased mortality and disease transmission were caused by limited access to healthcare (Thomas 2020).

3.4. Government Assistance Initiatives

Limited help was offered by programs like the One Nation One Ration Card and the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana.

Free ration distribution and MGNREGA assisted migrants in temporarily sustaining themselves (Walter, 2020).

4. National Labour Migration- National Agencies Role

According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economic (CMIE), about 122 million people lost their jobs in 2020. Three-quarters of these were wage labourers and minor dealers from unorganized sectors (Thomas 2020). Pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of urban casual workers, most of whom were migrants. They were among the first who faced the crucial implications of COVID-19 and lock down measures as economic activities have been called off, threatening the survival of many small units and these workers' employment. In most urban units, the workers have jobs linked with accommodation at the workplace, and the unemployment held due to crisis has forced the workers to leave shelters. The pandemic has forced them to return to their home town (Walter, 2020).

During the pandemic, labour migration in India came to global attention when suddenly ten thousand workers gathered in Delhi after the lock down announcement due to COVID-19 who wanted to cross into Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states. They assembled, being anxious to reach their villages due to which, despite being shut down of transportation facilities, they were trying to walk thousands of kilometres back to their towns. Many migrants were forced to return to their homes as they ran out of money/savings (Patnaik 2020). A mass departure of workers has raised the government's concern about the spread of the virus, due to which government must launch a scheme called "Migrant Workers Return Registration." This scheme counts the numbers of migrant workers stuck in other states and provides them 14 days of quarantine facilities with proper arrangements after reaching their villages or home town. The state government has launched its portals to accumulate workers' data and easily shift to their home towns. Indian railways also introduced Shramik special trains to help migrant workers, tourists, and students reach their homes (Khanna, 2020).

Agencies	Role
International migrants supported by IOM	Launched schemes for returning workers to their home towns include providing loans for training related to commercial activities.
Ministry of Health and Family Welfare	Guidelines related to migrant workers' quarantine emphasized providing special care to vulnerable groups like children, pregnant women, and older people.
National Commission for Women	Issued an advisory to act appropriately for the needs of women migrants during COVID -19.
Ministry of Home Affairs	Helped to fulfil the workers' emotional, medical, food, and shelter-related requirements.
Bihar State Health Society	Started a psychological well-being program called 'Ummeed,' for laborers in isolation centres.

Table 1.
Role of different national agencies in dealing with the migration of workers during covid-19

Source: Irudaya Rajan et al., 2020

Table 1 discusses the role of different national agencies that helped the migrant laborers by launching schemes and programs during COVID-19. These are the agencies responsible for forming and implementing guidelines and recommendations for workers within the nation.

5. The Case of Bihar and UP.

The pandemic has resulted in the loss of jobs and incomes of workers in places far away from their home towns, resulting in the migrations of men, women, and children walking hundreds of kilometres back to their home towns (Datta, 2020). According to the National Sample Survey Office, about half of the migrants are from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (Srivastava 2020). Imposition of lock down to maintain social distancing directly impacted the migrant workers. Approximately 10.5 million migrant workers having 22,567 shelters are living in different regions of India (Rawal et al., 2020). Most of these migrant workers belong to the poorer states of eastern India-Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal (Rao et al., 2020). According to a study conducted by International Institute for Population Sciences (IIPS) shows that the number of cases of COVID-19 has increased in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Rajasthan as migrant workers have returned their homes or villages as the government was unable to trace them or contact them due to the unavailability data about them (Rai, 2020). During COVID-19, states and union territories have identified and helped the migrant workers of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar by providing them food, shelter, and basic amenities. For example, the Delhi government, along with some organizations, arranged cooked food for about 800,000 migrant workers; Maharashtra government has supported 650,000 workers with food, medical facilities, and shelter; Karnataka government helped 440,000 migrant workers, Haryana government helped in setting up relief camps for 70,000 migrants, and Uttar Pradesh and Bihar government has allowed about 1 million migrant workers to return to their hometowns in different states (Maji et al., 2020). The paper review shows that the number of active cases of COVID-19 increased due to the daily arrival of migrant labor, and in states like UP, Bihar, and MP, the risk was even high.

6. Government policies and packages

The outbreak of COVID-19 resulting in the lock down to break the virus's spread caused panic among millions of migrant workers. It became difficult for them to survive and earn a livelihood without social protection, work, and income, forcing them to move to their native homes by walking as the transportation facilities were stopped due to lock down. This condition resulted in an increased risk of virus spread, and such a situation prompted the government to develop policies and packages to reduce transmission and help migrant workers (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). After the Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman of COVID-19 relief packages, the government has taken various steps for farmers and migrants during the lock down. Similarly, the government has also announced to provide Rs. Four thousand crores from a total of Rs. Twenty thousand crores to a Credit Guarantee Fund Trust for MSMEs. The enterprises whose loan has been classified as Non-Performing Asset (NPA) were made eligible for banks' extra credit; this will motivate them to provide loans to the small enterprises already indebted to them (Sikarwar 2020).

Table 2.
Some government policies
to benefit migrant laborers

Scheme names	Packages
Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme	- Helped provide laborers returning to their native homes - Promised to provide 1 kg channel and 5 kg of foodgrain per family for two months - Benefited around eight crore migrants and has spent 3,500 crores under this scheme
One Nation One Ration Card scheme	Centres have announced to enhance this scheme by promising to increase its validity by 83 percent till August 2020 and 100 percent till March 2021
Launch a scheme under the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana	Under this scheme, the government subsidized houses were converted into affordable rent houses for workers and their families.
Scheme to facilitate easy credit	The government announced a credit facility with liquidity of up to Rs. Five thousand crores for the street vendors.
Indian finance minister	Announced to provide US\$22.6 billion for free food grains, liquefied petroleum gas (LPG) for cooking, cash transfers for three months, and insurance for frontline healthcare workers.

7. Non-profit and private organizational support

The wake of COVID-19 impacts the most vulnerable community, such as street vendors, migrant workers, waste pickers, and artisans. To ensure that essential things reach them, many organizations, especially the non-profit-organizations, take initiatives and connect their efforts to work towards the cause. Besides this, several non-governmental organizations came forward to support the migrant workers during COVID-19 who helped them with food and shelter. Organizations have also established shelter homes for laborers who could not reach their native towns on time. They had started delivering food packets with the help of administration to those workers for their survival. These organizations have also actively spread awareness among the workers regarding COVID-19 (ANI, 2020). Many private organizations came forward to provide on-site accommodation and daily food allowances to all their employed migrant workers. They also provided basic sanitation, wash areas, and isolation rooms if the need arose. The Directorate of Industrial Safety and Health instructed the Building and Other Construction Works (BOCW) employers to provide suitable medical facilities and prevent migrant laborers against the virus. Confederation of Real Estate Developers' Associations of India (CREDAI) has directed its members to provide food and essentials to workers. Similarly, according to the Chairman and CEO of Akshaya, they helped provide access to drinking waters, ambulances, and medical facilities to the laborers they employ (Adlakha, 2020).

Organizations	Support
Safa, Hyderabad -based not-for-profit organization	Through its volunteers' network, they distributed prerequisites for workers and women migrants in many cities of India.
Parikrma Humanity Foundation, working extensively in the field of education	During the pandemic, the foundation tried to fulfil the needs and requirements of their students and their families and raise funds for supplying food to them.
Zomato Feeding India	- Started the 'Feed the Daily Wager' to provide food support to families of daily wage earners across cities who lost their jobs during crisis. - They raised ₹50 crores.
Goonj	They launched the program "Rahat." They initiated to provide essentials like rations and personal care products and delivered it to crores of workers migrating.

Table 3.
Some non-profit organizations' initiatives to help vulnerable groups during covid-19

Source: Lounge

Table-3 discusses a few examples of well-established and known nonprofit organizations in India which have helped the migrant laborers during the pandemic.

8. Private sector HRM policies and measures: A critical Review

Estimated to be 3.5 million in 2018, migrant workers hail all over India. The attitude of HRM towards hiring and promotion of migrant workers can highly influence their career achievements. However, after migration, most of them are likely to face a decline in their career outcomes (Farashah & Blomquist, 2019). HRM during pandemic faced problems to recognize the difference amongst the workers as each worker were facing different sought of situation, and the "one-size-fit-all" method was not productive enough to meet out the problems.Many white-collar workers were privileged to get work from home. However, the labor class of employees who had to keep the business operating had more chance of risking lives and facing unemployment challenges (Nelson, 2020). Businesses to revive from losses have started cutting the salary of workers and terminating

them from the jobs to reduce the expenditure. However, this reaction of HRM led to disrupting behavior of laborers towards them(Butterick & Charlwood, 2021). At the time of uncertainty, the employers try to hide their financial position to their workers, which reduces the transparency and sense of togetherness among employer and worker. However, HRM should generate a sense of honesty and teamwork (Shell, 2021). "Demobilizing of labor is easy while remobilizing the labor is not easy." Therefore, bringing the labor back from their UP and Bihar is difficult; hence, HRM faced a major issue in operating activities which got shut due to pandemics. It also led to a delay in project completion as the labor was unable to resume. Therefore, many organizations take initiatives to bring laborers back to work by sending buses and other transport to them (Koundal & Joshi, 2020). Many employers provided essential care, support, service, and goods to migrant workers during the pandemic.

Table 4.
HRM policies and packages adopted by private sector organizations to help their workers during the crisis

Organization's name	HRM policies and packages
Wipro, Infosys, TCS and HCL Technologies	● Implemented long -term remote working guidelines ● Implemented rotating shifts and flexible work schedules.
Reliance Industries, Mahindra Group and Tata Steel.	● paid full pay and guaranteed job security ● Salary advances and hardship allowances were provided .
Infosys, Accenture, Wipro and HDFC Bank.	● Increased medical insurance coverage to include COVID-19 treatment. ● Employees and their families received free COVID-19 immunisations
Uber	● Provided 14 days of compensation benefits to their workers affected by a coronavirus.

Source: Gurchiek & Gurchiek, 2020

Table-4 discusses HRM policies and packages given by the well-established giant companies having crores of turnover to help the migrant workers during the pandemic. These companies have differently sought help from their employees and workers to ensure that they feel supported and safe in crucial times.

9. Ethical Lessons and Guideline for HRM: Pandemic Challenges

The COVID-19 has intensified the situation and has made the workers worldwide adjust to the technological changes and adopt the essential skills required to use the technology. This situation made HRM help the employees navigate the changes and increase mental stress. The reduced boundaries creating dis-balance between work and private life were a major cause of employee stress, ultimately leading to burnout; for this, HRM was required to maintain clear and consistent communication with employees (Gigauri, 2020). The pandemic has also unfolded the requirement of heath management in organizations. HRM must develop critical solutions to employees' health, safety, and well-being. Many organizations also help their employees reduce stress through online classes to motivate them (Singh, 2020). Despite all public health and emergency preparedness experts' efforts, HRM failed to make necessary preparations for the pandemic. Adequate preparation is an ethical obligation because it helps prevent the harm before they occur rather than respond to them when they occur. To mitigate the harm, HRM should be prepared with adequate surveillance, equipment, testing kits, other non-pharmaceutical interventions in the absence of a widely available vaccine and the existence of limited treatments available. Therefore, HRM is an ethical obligation to learn from previous harm and take precautionary measures to prevent predictable harm in the future.

The policies and measures adopted to reduce pandemic harm should be properly aligned with the clear and justified goals. During the pandemic, there has been a lack of clarity that

the goal is to protect employees' health care, protect the disadvantaged workers, protect the vulnerable workers, or support economic loss. Thus, HRM should know which goal should be prioritized over others and justify adopting ethical and fair priorities for distributing all human and economic resources. It is essential that pandemics such as COVID-19 need a collaborative response. It will be ethical to serve people's interests rather than self-interest to be more effective.

Organizations without proper insights and news in the context of health emergencies will be unable to protect themselves from false and misleading information and panic among employees. Therefore, HRM needs to have evidence-based communication which can help employees from misinformation regarding pandemics, and preventive measures need to be adopted during pandemic and post-pandemic.

- Treat all migrant works equally, regardless of their gender and position.
- Give priority to the health and safety of the workers, respect their human rights, and accomplish their basic needs.
- Monitor that the workers follow the rules and regulations established by national authorities concerning health issues, and these should be properly communicated to them.
- Identify the employee's needs and access the existing health and safety measures.
- Focus on gender -sensitive issues and modify responses to vulnerable groups and migrants' needs and requirements.

Source: IOM, 2020

10. Conclusion

Pandemic has caused many challenges to people, the moral status of organizations, HRM, and employees. Companies must deal with the financial crisis due to the closure. On the other hand, the workers must handle the unwanted layoffs and reduce salaries. The pandemic has forced them to return to their hometown with no left choice. The impact of COVID-19 was harsher on the unorganized sector than the organized sector. Many migrants were forced to return to their homes as they ran out of money/savings. Their mass departure has raised the government's concern about the spread of the virus and workers' health and safety; due to this, they launched various schemes to mitigate the effects of coronavirus on migrant workers. Other than this, private and nonprofit organizations have also played a crucial role in helping migrant workers from the effects of COVID-19. Post pandemic companies welcome the workers and support them to come back and work on sites. COVID-19 has also created a challenging environment for the HRM as they must quickly adopt the changes occurring in the work and social environment; this led HRM to implement ethical measures and guidelines to support their employees and mitigate situations like COVID-19 in the future.

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