# CHALLENGES FACED BY INDIAN MIGRANT WORKERS during the COVID-19 pandemic

The pandemic of COVID19 is a global health crisis that has put a stop to the entireworld economy. How the migrant economy is affected by this pandemic should not be overlooked or sidelined. The effect of COVID19 in India has also gone beyond public health to social and economic problems, especially for migrant workers.

A migrant worker is a person who migrates either within or outside their home county to pursue work. The purpose of migrant workers is generally not to live permanently in the country or area in which they work. International employees are also called migrant workers who work outside of their home country. They may also be referred to as expatriates or guest workers, especially when before leaving the home country, they were sent for or invited to work in the host country.



The spread of the virus from Wuhan, China, began in January and most countries have taken strict steps to contain it from that time onwards. It is understandable that the Indian government has agreed to introduce lockdown measures, social distancing, and border closures to combat a virus that is of new origin and that can mutate. Nevertheless, did the leader-centered strategy take into account the effect of the lockout on the lives of the country's migrant, underprivileged, or oppressed groups?

Effect abroad on migrant workers

Millions of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf countries are facing a crisis due to COVID-19 and the fall in oil prices, as reported by the World Bank's lead economist. The pandemic of COVID-19 would have unprecedented implications for the migrant economy. Many workers live in unhygienic conditions, and because of travel restrictions imposed by the Gulf countries, they are unable to return home. Together with some other organizations, Amnesty International has raised concern about migrant workers' public health risk by citing very common issues such as overcrowded accommodation that compromises norms of social distancing. Not only this, given that most factories are shut down due to social distancing and national lockdowns, most migrant workers are unemployed or searching for a job or stuck in areas. In order to encourage food and basic services, they lack profits. Some businesses have also stopped paying foreign workers' wages, raising questions about their simple existence in a foreign country. Most companies operating in the oil and gas sector have questioned the strict government guidelines of remaining at home and observing the quarantine protocols by running production at the usual pace that has placed the lives of many migrant workers at risk in the midst of this pandemic. Although these countries have announced a financial plan to protect their economies, critics have highlighted the fact that migrant workers have done the least in terms of financial assistance. This could be because of the corrupt culture driven by discrimination against foreign employees. Taking the aforementioned details into account, it is very clear that the future of migrant workers abroad is very unclear. Also the Indian government has little capacity to provide assistance to these employees due to the financial constraints created by the situation.

Effect inside India on migrant workers

In India, industries such as manufacturing, hotels, textiles, and domestic workers account for much of the lowest paid jobs. The informal or 'unorganized' segment of the economy occupies 90 percent of the population, and migrant workers are a large part of it. In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockout, India's 40 million migrant workers are bearing the brunt of the crisis, according to the World Bank. This pandemic has created big problems such as starvation, being trapped away from the home, and work deprivation, which in turn would raise a thousand times the possibility of modern slavery. Second, because of the increased availability of employees who are at risk of slavery, there would be an increased risk of enslavement. Second, most children would be pushed out of school to earn a living to support their families, not to mention the interruption to schooling due to COVID-19. A large amount of children may be trafficked across borders, where a meager wage will be charged, where physical, mental, and sexual harassment may also occur. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees are not only at high risk from the aforementioned problems, but also victims of racial inequality.

These populations are for a reason, considered vulnerable. They live in slums where social distance is compromised, and access to masks and sanitisers is a luxury that puts COVID-19 at greater risk. The unfortunate reality is that their situation does not only put this group at COVID-19 risk but also at the next big 'hunger pandemic'. As a result of the loss of employment, the International Labour Organization has predicted that around 400 million workers will fall into poverty.

One month into the lockdown and the migrant workers' miseries were endless. Reports have shown that, to avoid the misery of being trapped in cities without food and water, thousands of workers had to walk long distances on foot. Food, housing, health care, work loss, family survival, anxiety and paranoia, etc., are urgent matters of concern to this community. Many of the workers faced police brutality and on the way back home, at least 22 died. The Indian government's announcement of the lockdown did not take into account any transport, financial or safety measures for this vulnerable population group.

To tackle the problem of stranded workers in various states, the government took an initiative to send them home by operating over 4000 'Shramik Special Trains'. Over 40 migrant workers were transported to their hometowns by Lakh (4500,000). During the process, however the principles of 'internal distancing' became undermined, and poor government administration contributed to disruptions in special trains, food and water shortages. The first special train began on 9 May 2020 to move migrant workers to their homes. On 23rd March 2020, the 'complete lockout' was enforced across the world. With a delay of a month and a half, the government took the plight of migrant workers into account. It clearly demonstrates that at the very beginning of the lockdown, the government neglected to implement measures to mitigate the effect of the COVID-19 lockdown on the migrant community. Not only has the late response caused chaos among refugees, but only after the program was introduced, an increase in COVID-19 cases was also seen.

What is required of the administration?

Some of the migrant community have begun to return to the areas they work as India has begun to loosen the lockdown restrictions. More than 8,000 employees have returned to Pune in the past few days since the post-COVID shutdown was eased. Reasonable monitoring of migration status is required. In the future, when approaching refugees or marginalized groups in the face of such a pandemic, the government should bear a few points in mind. The first thing to remember is to use the compassionate approach, which is based on the belief that all human beings deserve respect and dignity and should be regarded as such, rather than the hierarchical approach. When the reports of disinfectant spraying on migrant workers made headlines through the media outlets, the government struggled miserably to enforce this. It was an inhumane act which in the social sphere undermined the notion of equality.

Secondly, state and central authorities should ensure that, regardless of their migrant status, returnees do not face stigma and bigotry and stop labelling them as 'carriers' of the disease. To stop the sensation of not belonging,' this can be seen as a significant measure.

This pandemic has unearthed errors that in the future can not be replicated. It is an imperative need of the hour to develop a decent and reliable labor governance structure for the workers. The government should also provide them with sufficient contact and guidance in their respective fields for their job quest and skill set after their return to home or workplace. Not to forget that the migrant workers and their families will enjoy continuous health care services with affordable rates and quality of care. It is also mandatory to take steps to resolve the problem of injustice and to ensure the integrity of migrant workers to get the economy back on track using the Atma Nirbhar Bharat Strategy of the Honourable Prime Minister Narendra Modi. A collection of improvements in policy reforms and regulatory systems that can be taken from world norms can do this. Due to lockdown steps, the twisting and churning of the Indian migrant economy by the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the key holes in the country's economy and growth. Therefore in the middle of this pandemic, I think strategic and expected legislative reforms in the healthcare system, labor law, and upholding social factors will help us fight this war of COVID-19 on all fronts.

## Government response

On 27 March, the Home Ministry ordered the states to ensure that migrants would not move during the lockdown, permitting the states to use the National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) for providing food and shelter to the migrants on 28 March.

On 29 March, the government issued sweeping orders directing that the landlords should not demand rent during the period of the lockdown and that employers should pay wages without deduction. It also announced that those who violated the lockdown were to be sent to government-run quarantine facilities for 14 days, and that it had asked state governments to set up immediate relief camps for the migrant workers returning to their native states.[[48]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-48)[[49]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-49) However, the order regarding payment of wages was withdrawn in the guidelines for the lockdown extension issued on 17 May.[[50]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-50)

On 16 May, the government announced the National Migrant Information System (NMIS), an online database created by the National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA). This was to help streamline the movement of the migrant workers. It will help states find the current number of stranded migrant workers and their location. The government planned to keep the workers updated by feeding their phone numbers in the system.[[51]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-51)

On 14 July, the [Ministry of Human Resource Development](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Human_Resource_Development) requested the state governments to create a database of children in rural areas who have migrated.[[52]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-52)

### Relief camps

Soon after the central government directive in late March, state governments set up thousands of camps to house lakhs of migrants and stop the exodus.[[5]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-21000camps-5) Delhi government provided free food to 4 lakh people every day, as of late March.[[53]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-53) Over 500 hunger relief centres were set up by the Delhi government.[[54]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-54) By 5 April 75 lakh people were being provided food across the country in food camps run by the government and NGOs.[]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-55) As of 12 April, 37,978 relief camps and 26,225 food camps had been set up.[[56]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-56)

To cater to the needs of the migrants and prevent them from leaving the camps, the government of [Kerala](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kerala) changed the food being provided by adding north Indian dishes to the menu, providing carrom boards and recharge facilities for phones, as well as provide other medical essentials such as masks, sanitizers, and medicines.[[57]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-57)

### Transport arrangements

As of 28 May 91 lakh migrants had travelled back home in government-arranged transport facilities.[[58]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-58) However, according to the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), migrants were confused about the exact procedures to register themselves for travel. Additionally, many state registration portals were either in English or the local language of \*the states they lived in, which very few migrants could understand. Further, general lack of information from the government to the migrants had resulted in them paying large sums of money to register themselves.[[59]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-59)

#### Buses

In late March, the [Uttar Pradesh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uttar_Pradesh) government decided to arrange buses at Delhi's [Anand Vihar bus station](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anand_Vihar_ISBT) to take the migrants back to their villages for free. Large crowds then gathered at the bus station.[[60]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-60) However, with the extension of the lockdown, many remained stranded till the last week of April, when the state governments were permitted by the central government to operate buses, but not trains.[[8]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-NDTVBuses30Apr-8) As of 23 May 40 lakh migrants had travelled to their homes by buses.[[47]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-Tribune75Lakh23May-47) Condition in the buses is generally poor, with social distancing being impossible due to overcrowding and higher fares being charged than promised.[[61]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-61)

#### Shramik Special trains

Stranded migrant worker rushing to [New Delhi railway station](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Delhi_railway_station) to reach native village by "Shramik Special" train

On 1 May, the central government permitted the Indian Railways to launch "Shramik Special" trains for the migrant workers and others stranded.[[9]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-HinduShramikSpecial1May-9) On 3 May, the [Ministry of Home Affairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ministry_of_Home_Affairs_(India)) mildly reprimanded the state governments for hurriedly requesting for trains to transport migrants, stating that the trains were primarily mainly meant for those who were stranded due to the sudden lockdown, and not the migrants.[[62]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-62) Additionally, this service was not free, with additional charges over the normal fares.[[63]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-63) The central government then faced criticism from the opposition, with the [Indian National Congress](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_National_Congress) promising to sponsor the tickets of the migrants on 4 May.[[64]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-64)[[65]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-65) The government then announced that the Railways would offer an 85% subsidy on the train fares, with the state governments funding the remaining 15%.[[66]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-66) However, the migrants were still forced to pay an undisclosed amount in some cases. The central government initially declined to share the details regarding this with the Supreme Court,[[67]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-67) but later confirmed that it was not paying for anyone's fare.[[68]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-68) Additionally, the central governments directives regarding which states should pay for the migrants' travel resulted in disagreement between Maharashtra and other states.[[69]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-69)

A few days after the Shramik Special trains were introduced, the Karnataka government cancelled the trains (reportedly supporting the construction industry)[[70]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-70) and the Bihar government did the same to trains coming from Kerala (refusing to provide a No-Objection Certificate).[[71]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-71) The two states later reverted their decisions.[[72]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-72)[[73]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-73)

Further, migrants faced many hardships while travelling by these trains. Many reported to have no food and water arranged for them while they travelled.[[74]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-74)[[75]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-75) A train from Goa to Manipur reported a 58-hour delay, no proper food or sanitation facilities on the train, and stone pelting.[[76]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-76) Others who received food packets and water reported that the provisions were simply dumped at the entrances, leaving workers fighting with each other for their share.[[13]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-NatGeoDogs27May-13) Some migrants also died during the train journeys,[[77]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-77)[[78]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-78)[[79]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-79)[[80]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-80) but the Railways stated that most of them had existing illnesses.[[81]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-HTShramikDeaths28May-81) According to Railway Protection Force, there have been almost 80 deaths on board the Shramik Special trains between 9 and 27 May. [[82]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-HTShramikDeaths30May-82)

50% of the coaches converted into COVID-19 care centres were used for these trains. As per a report given by the Indian Railways on 23 May, migrant labourers from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh comprised 80% of the train travellers. Additionally, it was expected that 36 lakh migrants would be travelling in the ten days after the report.[[83]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-83) 4,277 Shramik Special trains had transported about 60 lakh people, as of 12 June.[[84]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-84)

## Supreme Court hearing

The [Supreme Court of India](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Supreme_Court_of_India) agreed to hear a petition on behalf of the migrant workers on 30 March.[[105]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-105) The Court asked the central government to file a status report with respect to the situation of migrant workers. In its report, the central government stated that the migrant workers, apprehensive about their survival, moved in the panic created by fake news that the lockdown would last for more than three months. The court added that it was satisfied by the government response thus far.

A plea requesting payment of minimum wage was rejected by the Court on 21 April, on the grounds of workers already being provided free meals.

On 16 May, the Supreme Court rejected a [PIL](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_interest_litigation_in_India) to direct the [District magistrates](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/District_magistrate) to identify and provide free relief and transport to the migrant workers, stating that it was the responsibility of the state governments. Speaking about the workers killed sleeping on the Aurangabad railway tracks, the Court stated that it could not have been prevented. Further, the central government stated that inter-state transport had already been provided to the migrants and requested them to wait their turn instead of choosing to walk.[[111]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-111)

On 26 May, the Supreme Court admitted that the problems of the migrants had still not been solved and that there had been "inadequacies and certain lapses" on the part of the governments. It thus ordered the Centre and States to provide free food, shelter and transport to stranded migrant workers.[[112]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-112) Hours before this ruling, senior lawyers from Mumbai and Delhi wrote a strongly-worded letter to the Court, regarding its "self-effacing deference" towards the government thus far.[[113]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic#cite_note-113)