

## **Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered unprecedented challenges across the globe, significantly impacting various aspects of human life, including social migration. In India, the pandemic led to a massive wave of internal migration as millions of migrant workers attempted to return to their home states in the face of job losses, economic uncertainties, and public health concerns. This research report explores the phenomenon of social migration during the COVID-19 pandemic from an Indian perspective. It investigates the underlying factors, consequences, and policy implications of this migration wave and provides insights into the lessons learned to enhance preparedness for future crises.

*Keywords: COVID-19, Pandemic, Social Migration*

The COVID-19 pandemic struck India in early 2020, prompting the government to implement nationwide lockdowns and containment measures. These measures led to a severe disruption of economic activities, causing many individuals to lose their livelihoods. In response to the crisis, there was a significant internal migration wave as migrant workers sought to return to their home states. These workers, facing job losses and uncertainties in their host states, decided to return to familiar surroundings and social support in their native places.

The purpose of this research report is to delve into the patterns of social migration observed during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. The report aims to analyze the factors driving the migration, the routes taken by the migrants, and the implications of this migration wave for both the migrants themselves and the nation as a whole. By understanding the underlying reasons and consequences of this migration, the report seeks to shed light on the broader impact on the labor market, local economies, public health, and social cohesion during the pandemic.

### **THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC, WHICH EMERGED IN EARLY 2020**

The COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in early 2020, unleashed an unprecedented global crisis, leaving an indelible mark on human history. Originating from the city of Wuhan in China, the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2) swiftly traversed borders, leading to widespread infections and fatalities worldwide. Governments and health organizations scrambled to comprehend the novel virus and implement containment measures.

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## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

As the virus began to spread, nations faced an alarming surge in cases, overwhelming healthcare systems. In response, numerous countries enforced strict lockdowns and social distancing measures to curb transmission. These drastic steps aimed to flatten the curve and prevent healthcare systems from being overrun. The pandemic's impacts transcended health concerns, triggering a massive socio-economic upheaval. Industries shuttered, supply chains faltered, and millions lost their livelihoods. Governments rolled out massive stimulus packages to mitigate the financial hardships faced by businesses and individuals.

The pandemic also exposed existing social inequalities, disproportionately affecting vulnerable communities. Marginalized groups faced increased risks due to crowded living conditions, limited access to healthcare, and economic disparities. Amid the challenges, scientific communities collaborated globally to develop vaccines at an unprecedented pace. These vaccines offered hope for controlling the pandemic and restoring normalcy.

As the pandemic raged on, societies adapted to new norms, embracing remote work, online education, and telemedicine. The resilience and ingenuity of humanity shone through in the face of adversity. The COVID-19 pandemic served as a stark reminder of the importance of international cooperation, robust healthcare systems, and the need for preparedness against future crises. As the world strives to recover, lessons learned from this historic event will undoubtedly shape the future of public health, economics, and global cooperation.

### **TRIGGERED NATIONWIDE LOCKDOWNS AND CONTAINMENT MEASURES IN INDIA**

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 propelled India to take drastic measures to contain its spread and protect public health. In response to the escalating crisis, the Indian government swiftly initiated nationwide lockdowns and stringent containment measures. This decision aimed to curb the rapid transmission of the virus, which posed a significant threat to the nation's vast population.

The imposition of nationwide lockdowns marked an unprecedented event in India's modern history. It involved restricting the movement of people, closing non-essential businesses, educational institutions, and public spaces. The government urged citizens to stay at home and practice social distancing to break the chain of infection.

These measures were deemed necessary to prevent overwhelming the country's healthcare infrastructure and to mitigate the potential loss of life. The health authorities emphasized the importance of "flattening the curve" to slow down the virus's spread and buy time to bolster medical capacities. While the lockdowns served as a crucial tool in containing the virus, they also posed immense challenges to society. The restrictions disrupted daily life and livelihoods, particularly for vulnerable populations and daily-wage laborers who faced financial hardships. Migrant workers found themselves stranded in cities far from their homes without means of transportation or income.

As the pandemic unfolded, the Indian government continuously adjusted its strategies to balance public health and socio-economic concerns. Gradual relaxations and targeted containment zones were introduced in response to fluctuations in case numbers. The nation grappled with the delicate balance between safeguarding lives and reviving the economy.

## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

The nationwide lockdowns and containment measures were both a testimony to the government's resolve in confronting the pandemic and a reflection of the hardships endured by the Indian population. As the nation united to combat the unprecedented health crisis, it also laid the groundwork for a future with strengthened healthcare systems and a better understanding of pandemic preparedness.

The footloose circular migrant labor, predominantly comprising historically marginalized social groups, holds a significant influence in shaping the growth poles of India since the implementation of new economic reforms. Urban and peri-urban agglomerations, primarily concentrated in the northern, western, and southern regions, have emerged as centers of neoliberal capitalist expansion, heavily reliant on cheap labor sourced from rural peripheries (Srivastava, 2020).

Capital-driven motives prioritize maintaining low production costs, leading to an increasing demand for footloose laborers from rural areas who are not entitled to social security benefits. These circular migrant workers, primarily hailing from historically marginalized social groups, find themselves oscillating between their permanent residences and worksites. The circular migrant workforce comprises a significant part of the informal economy, contributing approximately six percent to the nation's GDP, although estimates by researchers such as Srivastav (2020), Breman (2020), and de Haan (2020) vary from 45 million to as high as 100 to 500 million individuals.

Most of these migrant workers are sourced from lower-income states, such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Odisha, where an abundant pool of laborers is available. These states play a crucial role in facilitating and sustaining the phenomenon of circular migration (Srivastava, 2020).

The concentration of circular migrant labor in urban growth poles, coupled with their precarious working conditions and limited social protections, raises pertinent questions about the sustainability and equity of India's economic development. Understanding and addressing the challenges faced by these migrant workers are vital steps toward fostering a more inclusive and equitable growth trajectory for the nation.

### **INTERNAL MIGRATION IN INDIA**

Migration within India has been a long-standing and significant phenomenon, dating back through its history (Tumbe, 2018). According to the 2011 Census, a staggering 450 million Indians were identified as migrants based on their place of last residence, constituting about 37% of the total population. Over the decade from 2001 to 2011, approximately 140 million individuals were added to this migrant population, resulting in a total of 309 million migrants in 2001 (Rajan, 2013). While the exact figures for the 2021 Census are not yet available, an estimated migrant population of 600 million individuals is projected (Fig. 12.1)

Analyzing the 2011 Census data, it is observed that around one-third of all internal migrants are inter-state and inter-district migrants, accounting for nearly 200 million people. Of these, about two-thirds are engaged in various occupations as workers, giving an estimated migrant worker population of approximately 140 million today (Gupta, 2020). When considering intra-district migrant workers, the total number of migrant workers escalates to 200 million, excluding temporary and circular migrants (Bhagat et al., 2020).

## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

These migrant workers are engaged in a diverse range of occupations, spanning both urban and rural areas. However, a substantial portion of them is employed in temporary, informal, and casual work, making them highly susceptible to exploitation (Keshri & Bhagat, 2013).

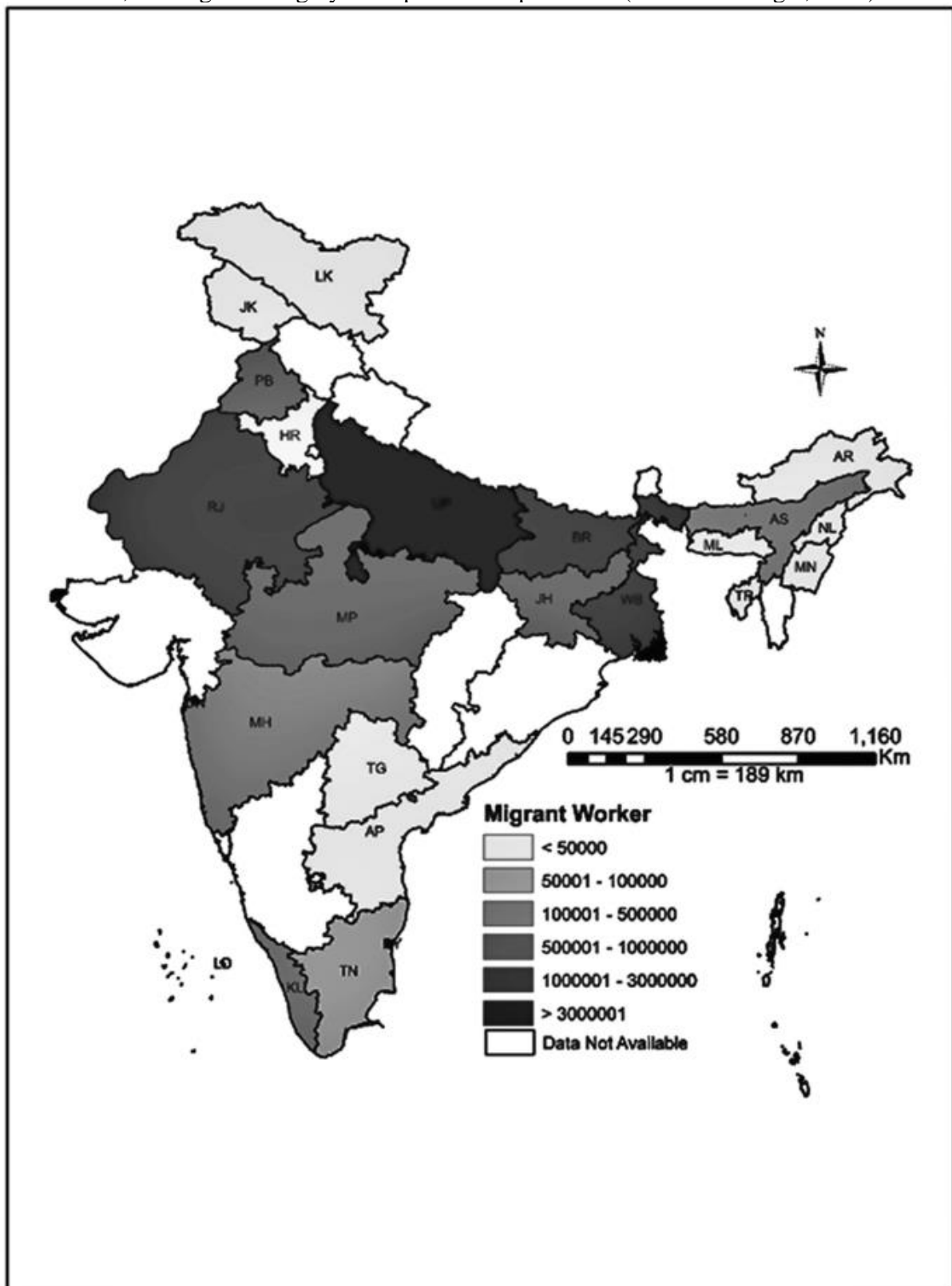


Figure 1 Migrants returned to their home states after lockdown. (Source of data: Unstarred Question No. 197, Lok Sabha, 14 September 2020)



## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

The scale and characteristics of internal migration in India underscore the importance of understanding and addressing the challenges faced by migrant workers. Their significant contribution to the labor force and economy necessitates the implementation of policies and measures that safeguard their rights, improve their working conditions, and promote their overall well-being. By addressing the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, India can create a more inclusive and equitable society, enabling these essential contributors to thrive and prosper.



Figure 2 A small family migrate to their own home | Photo by Satyabrata Tripathy/Hindustan Times via Getty Images

The sudden announcement of a national lockdown by the Prime Minister with only a four-hour notice caused panic among migrant workers in India. They feared being stranded in their destination cities without any means of earning a livelihood and no way to return to their hometowns. The distressing scenes of thousands of migrants gathered at New Delhi's Anand Vihar Inter-State Bus Terminal and similar scenes in other places like Mumbai reflected the desperation and uncertainty faced by these workers during the prolonged lockdown.

With no clear provisions for their welfare, many migrants felt compelled to start their journey back home using whatever mode of transport they could find. Tragically, some had no choice but to walk long distances, leading to at least 200 reported migrant deaths on the roads while attempting to return to their villages (Banerji, 2020). The lack of data on job losses and migrant deaths during the lockdown, as revealed by the government representative in response to Members of Parliament's inquiry, illustrated the marginalized position of migrants in policy debates.

## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

Millions of migrants decided to leave the big cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Ahmedabad, Pune, Bangalore, Hyderabad, and Chennai to return to their villages as the lockdown extended. However, the exact number of returnees traveling by various means, including their own vehicles, bicycles, or on foot, remains unknown from official government sources. The data cited by the Lok Sabha on 14 September 2020 mentioned around 10.5 million migrants using government-arranged transport like buses and Shramik trains to return home. Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, two of the most populous and economically disadvantaged states, witnessed a large influx of returning migrants during this period. The crisis exposed the vulnerability and lack of support for these migrant workers during times of crisis, highlighting the need for more inclusive policies and welfare measures to protect their rights and well-being.

### SUMMARY

India experienced a drastic surge in COVID-19 infections during the second wave, which began in early February 2021 and peaked in the first week of May 2021. During this period, daily cases surpassed 400,000, and deaths reached about 4,000, far exceeding the severity of the first wave. Despite a decline in cases after the first week of May, the second wave had a devastating impact on lives and livelihoods. The genesis of the second wave was attributed to factors such as the lack of adherence to COVID-appropriate behavior, social and political gatherings, religious activities, and elections.

Unlike the first wave, where a mass migration crisis of migrant workers was witnessed with their distressing exodus, the second wave saw a slower and less visible flight of migrant workers. This may be attributed to the cautious approach of the government, which refrained from imposing strict lockdowns and allowed transportation services to continue operating.

However, the second wave revealed shocking inadequacies in India's medical infrastructure, including shortages of oxygen, hospital beds, medicines, and vaccines. The policy measures announced during the first wave to support migrant workers have largely remained unimplemented, reflecting ad-hoc and short-sighted approaches instead of long-term, holistic solutions.

The challenges posed by the second wave exposed the need for more robust and integrated policy measures to address not only the immediate crisis but also to build resilience against future challenges. The impact on migrant workers during the second wave underscores the importance of comprehensive and sustainable policies that protect the rights and well-being of vulnerable populations in times of crisis. Addressing the systemic issues in India's healthcare and social support systems will be crucial in preparing the nation for potential future waves or other crises.

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## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author declared no conflict of interest.

## Social Migration During the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Indian Perspective

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