Rights of Inter-State Migrants during Pandemic and Post-Pandemic: Examining Migration Governance in India

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Abstract

Inter-state migration in India reflects the country's deep regional inequalities. Every year, millions of individuals move to distant cities, not out of choice but out of necessity. The lack of jobs, low wages, and agrarian distress in many rural areas push them to migrate, while cities, with their promise of higher earnings and better living conditions, pull them in. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, exposing gaps in migration governance and the inadequacy of welfare mechanisms. Using secondary data from government records and micro-level studies, this study tries to examine the existing migration governance in India with regards to inter-state migrants. This paper also examines the challenges faced by inter-state migrants during and after the pandemic, focusing on livelihood insecurities and lack of access to social protection. During Covid-19 it was evident that there's need for greater policy synergy and engagement of grassroots actors in the governance process as they provide immense emotional and social support in the time of crisis.

Key words: Inter-State Migrants, Migration Governance, Covid-19

1. Introduction

Migration is an essential adaptive strategy for livelihood improvement,

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especially in regions where economic disparities and environmental uncertainties undermine the sustainability of local livelihoods. Individuals and households, particularly in rural India, rely on migration to diversify income sources, reduce the risks linked to seasonal agricultural employment, and improve their overall living conditions. Research highlights that remittances originating urban employment have become crucial for rural households, often surpassing agricultural incomes in significance (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Migration provides an avenue for the poor to access better employment opportunities, even if temporarily, and supports investments in education, health, and infrastructure in the migrants' home communities. However, despite its potential to reduce poverty, migration is not leveraged as a structured livelihood strategy due to systemic governance failures

Interstate migration in India is a powerful reflection of the country's deep regional inequalities and the persistent human drive for better opportunities. Every year, millions of people move from their home-states to distant cities, not out of choice but out of necessity. The lack of jobs, low wages, and agrarian distress in many rural areas push them to migrate, while cities, with their promise of higher earnings and better living conditions, pull them in. Yet, for most of these migrants, the journey is uncertain and loaded with hardship. During Covid 19 pandemic and post Pandemic, the situation of inter-state migration became a huge crisis for various reasons which made migrant not just a victim and target but also directly affected the livelihood of millions of people. Looking at the situation retrospectively provides a great lesson which can help us reexamine some of the policies and provide

more fresh insights for better migration governance.

This research draws upon secondary data obtained from various sources, such as government records and a range of micro-level studies carried out both during and following the pandemic. Although some of the data are not up to date, they have been included here due to the absence of more recent information. This paper aims to achieve the following objectives (1) examine the challenges of Inter-state migrants and governance challenges; and (2) to relook at the state and international legal safeguard to address these challenges during and after the pandemic period in particular and inter-state migration in general.

2. Inter-State Migration: The size, source and destination

The economic benefits of migration are undeniable- it fuels urban growth and sends crucial remittances back to rural homes. As Rajan et al. (2021) observed, data from the 2011 Census indicate that internal migration in India constituted 37.4 percent of the total population, reflecting an increase from 31 percent recorded in 2001. They further argue that the total number of internal migrants in India reached 453.6 million in 2011, marking a 45 percent increase from 2001. States such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha have historically served as major sources of labour for more economically developed regions like Maharashtra, Gujarat, and Karnataka.

Rank (based on Census 2011 figures)	State	Total inter-state migration (Census 2011 Table)	Net in Migration (based on: Economic Survey 2016-17 Net in Migration based on Cohort based Migration Metric 2001-2011) Into brackets the position in the rank based on the net in migration – if in the top 10
1	Maharashtra	9 million	0.50 million (#3)
2	Delhi	6.3 million	0.46 million (#4)
3	Uttar Pradesh	4.06 million	- 5.8 million
4	Gujrat	3.9 million	0.34 million (#6)
5	Haryana	3.6 million	- 0/08 million (#9)
6	Karnataka	3.2 million	0.3 million (#5)
7	Madhya Pradesh	2.7 million	- 0.7 million
8	Rajasthan	2.6 million	- 0/8 million
9	Punjab	2.4 million	- 0.08 million (#8)
10	West Bengal	2.3 million	- 0.2 million
12	Tamil Nadu	1.6 million	1.01 million (#1)
18	Kerla	0.6 million	0.9 million (#2)

Source: Aggarwal, V., Solano, G., Singh, P., & Singh, S. (2020). The integration of interstate migrants in India: A 7-state policy evaluation. *International Migration (pg-4)*

The given above table clearly indicates India's stark regional disparities, with states like Maharashtra and Delhi attracting millions of migrants due to better economic opportunities, with states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar experience significant out-migration driven by poverty and lack of jobs. Maharashtra leads with 9 million migrants, though Tamil Nadu and Kerala show the highest net in-migration, indicating strong labour absorption and economic stability. Conversely, states with high out-migration, such as Uttar Pradesh (-5.8 million), reflect deep-rooted challenges in their local economies. These migration patterns highlight the insistent need for equitable development and policies that ensure both the well-being of

migrants and the sustainable growth of different regions.

State-wise distribution of individuals who migrated for work and employment, as recorded in the 2011 Census (Migrant Workers).				
SlNo	State	Persons	Males	Females
1	Andaman & Nicobar Islands	52,129	47,229	4,900
2	Andhra Pradesh	37,37,316	30,51,811	6,85,505
3	Arunachal Pradesh	1,19,244	93,441	25,803
4	Assam	5,72,064	4,93,877	78,187
5	Bihar	7,06,557	5,39,176	1,67,381
6	Chandigarh	2,06,642	1,91,668	14,974
7	Chhattisgarh	10,21,077	8,65,897	1,55,180
8	Dadra & Nagar Haveli	63,779	60,588	3,191
9	Daman & Diu	73,782	70,592	3,190
10	Goa	1,15,870	99,913	15,957
11	Gujarat	30,41,779	26,85,190	3,56,589
12	Haryana	13,33,644	11,47,374	1,86,270
13	Himachal Pradesh	2,96,268	2,36,454	59,814
14	Jammu & Kashmir	1,22,587	1,00,680	21,907
15	Jharkhand	8,24,259	7,24,065	1,00,194
16	Karnataka	28,87,216	23,67,901	5,19,315
17	Kerala	7,13,934	5,59,263	1,54,671
18	Lakshadweep	6,135	5,375	760
19	Madhya Pradesh	24,15,635	20,27,884	3,87,751
20	Maharashtra	79,01,819	68,19,915	10,81,904
21	Manipur	22,750	16,441	6,309
22	Meghalaya	52,797	38,769	14,028
23	Mizoram	62,828	45,688	17,140
24	Nagaland	1,10,779	88,923	21,856
25	Nct Of Delhi	20,29,489	18,98,884	1,30,605
26	Odisha	8,51,363	7,14,603	1,36,760

27	Puducherry	70,721	60,366	10,355
28	Punjab	12,44,056	10,60,487	1,83,569
29	Rajasthan	17,09,602	14,45,847	2,63,755
30	Sikkim	46,554	38,703	7,851
31	Tamil Nadu	34,87,974	27,74,086	7,13,888
32	Tripura	92,097	74,594	17,503
33	Uttar Pradesh	31,56,125	25,91,421	5,64,704
34	Uttarakhand	6,17,094	5,50,465	66,629
35	West Bengal	16,56,952	14,29,130	2,27,822
	India	4,14,22,917	3,50,16,700	64,06,217

Source: Ministry of Labour& Employment. (2022, March 25). **Azadi Ka Amrit Mahotsav: Data on Seasonal Migrants**. Press Information Bureau. https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1814543

The table underlines the significant role of interstate migration in shaping India's labour dynamics, reflecting regional disparities and employment-driven mobility. Maharashtra, with over 7.9 million workers, leads as a migration destination, other states, including Delhi, Tamil Nadu, and Gujarat, which attract significant labour inflows due to strong urban economies and industrialization. Conversely, states such as Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Odisha exhibit high out-migration, driven by agrarian distress and limited local opportunities. Notably, male workers dominate migration patterns, signalling the economic compulsion of the primary breadwinners. The data reveals a gender disparity, highlighting women's limited participation in employment migration. This trend points to deep-rooted structural inequities and stresses the need for inclusive policies ensuring fair wages, social security, and better integration mechanisms to uplift migrant workers' conditions while addressing regional imbalances.

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3. Pandemic Impact

India's approach to managing the COVID-19 pandemic revealed significant challenges in maintaining public health measures with socio-economic realities (Choudhari, 2020). The lockdowns, implemented in phases starting from March 2020, were among the strictest globally, reducing mobility in key sectors by over 60% (Ghosh et al., 2020 and Ram et al.,2020). Nevertheless, these measures disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations, particularly inter-state migrant workers, who faced loss of livelihoods, inadequate safety nets, and difficulties in accessing welfare due to systemic governance gaps (Gopalan & Misra, 2020). The situation emphasised the critical need for inclusive policies and flexible social protection measures to mitigate the impact of health crises on marginalized communities.

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic exposed significant vulnerabilities within India's migration governance framework, increasing the systemic shortfalls that had long marginalized migrant workers. As Thomas et al. (2022) observe, the measures implemented during the pandemic, such as lockdowns and social distancing, were necessary to lessen the spread of the virus but came at a tremendous human cost. The abrupt enforcement of these measures disproportionately impacted migrant labours, who were compelled to manage a public health crisis lacking sufficient social safety nets or infrastructural support. For millions of migrants employed in the informal sector, the absence of job security and portable benefits exacerbated their already precarious living conditions, leaving them stranded, unemployed, and often without basic sustenance.

The departure of migrant workers, as detailed by Rajan et al. (2021), underscores the failure to incorporate migration into the framework of national development strategies. The sight of thousands walking miles back to their villages, often without food or water, highlighted the intersection of governance gaps and socio-economic inequality. Migrants, particularly from socially disadvantaged groups, including SCs, STs, and OBCs, were doubly disadvantaged by systemic discrimination and exclusionary policies. While the government's emergency measures, such as the Migrant Workers Return Registration and Shramik special trains, were commendable, they served more as reactive responses than solutions addressing the underlying structural issues. The lack of preparedness and coordination between state and central governments further intensified the humanitarian crisis (Dastidar, 2020).

Moreover, the pandemic underscored the necessity for comprehensive and inclusive policy frameworks that extend beyond immediate relief. The vulnerabilities of migrant workers—ranging from communal housing risks to limited access to healthcare—illustrate the urgent need for comprehensive reforms. As Khanna (2020) notes, the economic shock caused by the pandemic and subsequent recession disproportionately affected migrants in the unorganized sector. This not only destabilized their livelihoods but also posed broader challenges for food security, malnutrition, and India's advancement towards attaining Sustainable Development Goals. The pandemic, thus, brought to the forefront the need of resilient systems that protect migrants in times of crisis and beyond.

4. Issues Faced by Inter-State Migrants

Two major challenges which are interconnected are: migrant rights and livelihood.

4.1. Migrants Rights

Inter-state migrants in India often face systemic exclusion from fundamental rights, primarily due to administrative barriers such as documentation and residency requirements (Banupriya, n.d.). These obstacles are embedded within the country's welfare framework, where access to crucial facilities like healthcare, education, and subsidized food remains tightly linked to an individual's state of origin. Despite national-level initiatives like the 'One Nation, One Ration Card' (ONORC) policy, which aims to enhance portability, many migrants encounter roadblocks due to inconsistent implementation at the state level (Agarwal,2022). For instance, ration shop owners and local officials often refuse to recognize ration cards issued in other states, effectively excluding migrants from the public distribution system (Bakhla et al., 2020; Jayaram & Varma, 2020).

This exclusion reflects deeper governance challenges. Policies designed to support migrants are often reactive and fragmented, lacking the coordination required to address the dynamic realities of migration. The absence of a centralised framework for ensuring the portability of welfare benefits across state borders leaves migrants vulnerable to systemic neglect. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this gap was clear as migrants struggled to access even basic relief measures, highlighting the urgent need for inclusive policymaking. By aligning with the Supreme Court's 2021 judgment, which

called for centralised registration and reduced dependency on identity proof for accessing benefits, the state can take important steps toward equitable governance (Deshingkar, 2021).

Moreover, the framing of migrants within policy discourse often perpetuates their marginalization. Labeling them as 'outsiders' reinforces societal and institutional biases, limiting their integration into host states. Civil society supporters argue that shifting this narrative is serious for ensuring migrants are viewed as rights-holders rather than mere beneficiaries of state largesse. Ensuring their inclusion in policymaking processes not only fosters equity but also enhances policy efficacy by addressing the ground realities of migration. For example, Kerala's initiative to rename migrants as "Guest Workers" offers a model of inclusive governance that promotes dignity while addressing migrants' vulnerabilities (Chathukulam, & Tharamangalam, 2021).

4.2. Livelihood Challenges

The challenges faced by inter-state migrants are closely tied to the structural realities of India's labour market, which reflect deep rural-urban economic disparities. The Harris-Todaro Model (Harris& Todaro, 1970) provides a theoretical framework to understand these migration patterns (Rapanos, 2005). According to the model, rural-to-urban migration is influenced not just by the existing wage gap between rural and urban areas but by the expected income differential (Garg, & Agarwal, 2). Migrants are often drawn to urban centres by the prospect of higher wages, even when the probability of securing formal employment is uncertain (Iyengar, & Jain, 2021). This clarifies why urban areas with relatively better job opportunities witness a

disproportionate influx of migrants, despite the prevalence of high unemployment rates in these regions.

For instance, during the pandemic, many migrants in urban centres found themselves in informal or precarious jobs that offered limited security. This mirrors a critical aspect of the Harris-Todaro Model: the phenomenon where urban job creation, instead of alleviating unemployment, can paradoxically increase it due to heightened migration. The urban informal sector often serves as a temporary refuge for migrants who lack the ability to secure positions in the formal sector, aligning with Todaro's observation that many workers endure periods of underemployment or informal work before obtaining stable jobs.

Overcoming these challenges requires not just enhancing job opportunities in urban areas but also improving rural livelihoods to reduce distress migration. As the Harris-Todaro Model suggests, rural development strategies can play an essential role in mitigating the adverse effects of unregulated migration. Policies intended at reducing the rural-urban wage gap and creating sustainable economic opportunities in rural regions can alleviate migration pressures while fostering balanced regional development.

5. State Mechanisms to Address Migrant Issues

Governance mechanisms in India have consistently fallen short of addressing the vulnerabilities migrants face. Policies like the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, are outdated and lack strong enforcement mechanisms, leaving millions of migrants without job security, fair wages, or access to social services. Migrants are frequently denied access to

welfare schemes due to residency-based eligibility criteria, compounding their marginalization in urban areas. During the COVID-19 pandemic, these governance gaps became painfully evident, as the absence of social safety nets left millions stranded without food, shelter, or transportation. Migrants' significant contributions to urban economies and rural livelihoods remain undervalued in policy frameworks, which tend to treat migration as a problem rather than an opportunity for development. Addressing these governance deficiencies requires integrating migration into national and state-level development strategies, ensuring portable benefits, and enforcing labour protections to uphold migrants' rights.

Livelihood strategies for migrants are further undermined by the absence of welfare benefits and inadequate governance mechanisms. Migrants often denied from state-level welfare programs due to residency-based restrictions, limiting their access to healthcare facilities, education, and subsidized food (Price, & Chacko, 2012). This exclusion reflects deeper structural inequities, where migration is viewed as a coping mechanism for poverty rather than a development opportunity. While remittances contribute to rural economies, they do little to offset the challenges faced by migrants in hazardous urban jobs or the persistent marginalization of their families at home. The economic and social insecurity of migrant workers calls for inclusive policy reforms, emphasizing portable social security systems, inclusive labour laws, and improved enforcement to safeguard their rights and livelihoods.

The COVID-19 pandemic harshly uncovered these vulnerabilities, as millions of migrant workers lost their livelihoods overnight and struggled

for survival. The lack of resilience in urban settings, compounded by limited social protections, forced migrants into dire conditions, including long journeys back to their villages without adequate support (Deep, 2023). Addressing these systemic gaps requires a paradigm shift in policy, recognizing migrants as integral to India's economic fabric and ensuring equitable access to opportunities and protections.

India's legislative framework for addressing migrant labour primarily revolves around the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979, designed to protect the rights of inter-state migrants. However, its implementation has been weak, leaving millions without access to fair wages, secure working conditions, or social benefits (Manohar, 2022). This act mandates registration of migrant workers, minimum wage provisions, and measures to ensure safe working conditions. Yet, enforcement remains inconsistent, with gaps exacerbated by a lack of coordination between state and central governments.

In recent years, some initiatives have attempted to bridge these gaps. The introduction of the One Nation, One Ration Card (ONORC) scheme aimed to provide portability of food security benefits, enabling migrants to access subsidized food grains across states. While this was a positive step, the inconsistent implementation of ONORC across states has often restricted its reach (Bakhla et al., 2020). Moreover, residency-based eligibility criteria in various welfare schemes, such as healthcare and housing, further marginalize migrants, highlighting the need for comprehensive reforms.

Several state governments have also initiated programs to address migrant

vulnerabilities. For instance, Kerala's "Apna Ghar" project has provided housing and healthcare for migrants, setting an example of inclusive governance (Kumar, 2011). However, such measures remain limited in scale and have yet to be replicated widely across India.

6. Pandemic-Specific Responses

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed systemic shortcomings in the governance mechanisms for migrant workers. During the nationwide lockdown in March 2020, millions of migrants faced abrupt job losses, food insecurity, and homelessness. While the government announced emergency relief measures, such as the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), these were largely short-term fixes that failed to address the structural vulnerabilities of migrant workers (Rajan et al., 2021). For instance, while PMGKY provided free food grains and cash transfers, the lack of documentation among migrants meant that many were excluded from these benefits.

State governments responded with varied measures. Kerala stood out for its proactive approach, establishing quarantine centres, providing food and shelter, and even offering entertainment facilities in migrant camps (Sengupta & Jha, 2020). Other states, such as Maharashtra and Odisha, also created temporary shelters and provided food rations, but their efforts were often hampered by inadequate resources and planning.

Civil society organizations played a crucial role during this crisis, filling gaps in state responses. NGOs organized community kitchens, distributed hygiene kits, and arranged transportation for stranded migrants. Initiatives such as Kerala's "Bandhu" mobile testing units, which screened migrants

for COVID-19, exemplified innovative responses tailored to local needs (Goel, 2020).

However, the pandemic also revealed deeper structural issues, including the lack of a unified database of migrant workers, which complicated relief distribution. The Supreme Court's directive in 2021 to create a centralized registration system for migrants remains a critical step towards addressing this challenge (Deshingkar, 2021).

7. Principles for Migrant Protection

The protection of migrant workers in India underscores the need for adherence to international labour standards that prioritize dignity, fairness, and inclusivity. Migrant workers, particularly inter-state migrants, form the backbone of India's economy, yet they face systemic neglect and marginalization. Despite the existence of frameworks like the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979, its weak enforcement often leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitation, with limited access to fair wages, safe working conditions, or welfare benefits (Manohar, 2022). These challenges reveal the importance of adopting and implementing international labour standards that not only safeguard workers' rights but also ensure their integration into local economies. A holistic approach, emphasizing portable social protections and equal access to services regardless of residency, is crucial for reducing systemic inequities and improving migrants' livelihoods.

Migrant workers' exclusion from welfare schemes due to documentation and residency barriers further highlights governance failures in aligning with global principles of equity and justice (Bakhla et al., 2020). The "One Nation, One Ration Card" (ONORC) initiative, while a step forward, demonstrates the gaps in implementation, where many migrants remain outside its ambit due to bureaucratic inefficiencies (Jayaram& Varma, 2020). Harmonizing national policies with international labour standards, including ensuring the portability of benefits and stronger enforcement of labour laws, is essential to address these systemic shortcomings.

8. COVID-19 Focus Areas

The Lockdowns of COVID-19, in India disproportionately affected migrants employed in informal sectors, leaving them stranded, unemployed, and unable to access basic services because ofthe lack of portable social safety nets (Thomas et al., 2022). The pandemic also revealed the limitations of reactive governance strategies. While measures like Shramik trains provided temporary relief, the absence of a unified database of migrant workers hampered efficient policy implementation (Deshingkar, 2021). This crisis underscores the urgent need for proactive frameworks that integrate migration governance into national disaster response systems.

Beyond immediate relief, the pandemic highlighted broader structural issues, such as inadequate housing and healthcare for migrants. States like Kerala exemplified inclusive approaches, offering shelter, healthcare, and even cultural integration initiatives for migrants, setting a benchmark for others (Kumar, 2011). Such efforts reflect the possible of leveraging in-

ternational labour standards to build strong systems that protect migrants during crises and ensure their long-term well-being.

8.1. Pandemic Impact on Migrant Rights

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored and exacerbated the systemic vulnerabilities that inter-state migrant workers face in India. However, it also prompted a range of policy responses aimed at mitigating the crisis. These responses, rooted in existing schemes and frameworks, emerged at multiple levels of government and across various sectors, offering lessons for future migration governance. Some of the key policy areas are outlined below:

8.2. Registration and Tracking

The crisis highlighted the serious need for precise data on migrant workers. The absence of a centralized database complicated relief distribution and delayed the response. Recognizing this gap, the Supreme Court mandated the establishment of a nationwide registration system for migrant workers, ensuring that their demographic, occupational, and socio-economic details are accessible for policy implementation. This step aimed to streamline access to benefits and track mobility, particularly during emergencies.

8.3. Portability

The pandemic underscored the importance of portable welfare benefits. The "One Nation, One Ration Card" (ONORC) initiative aimed to address this by enabling migrants to access subsidized food grains irrespective of their location. Despite implementation challenges, the scheme marked a significant step toward safeguarding food security for migrants, who are fre-

quently excluded from local welfare systems due to residency restrictions. Enhancing the portability of other services like healthcare and education remains a crucial area for reform.

8.4. Facilitation

The introduction of "Shramik Special" trains by Indian Railways was a notable facilitation measure during the lockdown. These trains transported over three million migrant workers back to their home states. Although logistical issues such as shortages and overcrowding led to delays and hardships, the initiative demonstrated the potential of coordinated efforts between central and state governments. Such mechanisms should be institutionalized to ensure swift action during future crises.

8.5. Housing

The pandemic exposed the dire housing conditions of migrant workers, many of whom live in overcrowded and unsanitary settlements. State initiatives like Kerala's "Apna Ghar" project, which provided temporary shelters and quarantine facilities for migrants, served as models of inclusive governance. Expanding access to affordable and safe housing for migrants through public-private partnerships and urban planning reforms is essential for addressing this persistent challenge.

8.6. The Role of Existing Schemes in Addressing Migrant Vulnerabilities

Existing social benefit programs like the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) played a pivotal role during the pandemic by providing

immediate relief. PMGKY included free food grains, cash transfers, and insurance for healthcare workers, directly benefiting millions of migrant families (Agrawal, 2020). For instance, free distribution of food grains to 800 million beneficiaries under PMGKY mitigated hunger among migrant households, especially those excluded from state-specific welfare programs (ibid).

Similarly, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS) provided critical livelihood support to returning migrants in rural areas. By offering wage employment during the economic downturn, MGNREGS reduced rural distress and acted as a earning security for those who lost their urban jobs. States like Tamil Nadu even introduced bonus wages under the scheme, reflecting its flexibility to adapt to local needs.

These schemes not only addressed the immediate challenges posed by the pandemic but also underscored the importance of building inclusive and portable social safety nets. Strengthening these existing frameworks while addressing implementation gaps can significantly improve the resilience of migrant labours to future crises.

9. International Labour Standards

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has been instrumental in advocating for the rights and well-being of workers globally, including migrant labourers, through its comprehensive set of international labour standards. These standards establish a foundation for ensuring fair working conditions, mitigating vulnerabilities, and upholding the dignity of all workers, regard-

less of their migration status. The relevance of these standards became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which exposed significant gaps in the governance and protection framework for migrant workers in India.

9.1. Historical Context and Core Conventions

Established in 1919, the ILO has sought to standardize labour rights through its conventions and recommendations, which emphasize fundamental principles such as freedom of association, elimination of forced labour, abolition of child labour, and non-discrimination in employment. Of the numerous conventions developed by the ILO, eight are considered core, underscoring the universal rights of workers. For instance, the Migration for Employment Convention (No. 97) and the Migrant Labours (Supplementary Provisions) Convention (No. 143) specifically address the rights of migrant workers, emphasizing fair recruitment, equal treatment, and protection against exploitation.

These conventions are particularly significant for India, where internal migrants form the backbone of urban economies yet remain excluded from many labour protections. The ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189) and the Violence and Harassment Convention (No. 190) also hold relevance, as many migrant workers in India's informal sector face precarious working conditions and are vulnerable to abuse. However, the implementation of these standards remains inconsistent, reflecting broader governance challenges.

9.2. COVID-19 and the Importance of International Standards

The pandemic highlighted the critical role of global labour norms in mitigating crises. As millions of migrant labours in India faced sudden job losses, homelessness, and food insecurity during the lockdown, the absence of adequate social protections underscored systemic vulnerabilities. The ILO's guidance—such as the General Principles and Operational Guidelines for Fair Recruitment—became a touchstone for addressing these issues. These guidelines stress transparency in recruitment practices, elimination of recruitment fees, and safeguarding workers from forced labour and trafficking (Jones et al., 2021).

Moreover, conventions like the Employment Service Convention (No. 88) and the Private Employment Agencies Convention (No. 181) highlight the importance of state-regulated employment services that confirm migrant workers are not exploited. Despite these frameworks, most Indian migrant labours were left without support, revealing gaps in the alignment of national policies with international standards.

9.3. Regional and Global Contexts

Globally, agreements such as the 1990 International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (CMW) emphasize the need for robust protections for migrant workers (Grange, 2006). Articles 7 and 11 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), to which India is a signatory, guarantee secure and healthy working environments as well as sufficient

living conditions (Eriksson, 2015). Though, India has not ratified the CMW, highlighting a gap in its commitment to fully integrating international labour norms into its domestic framework.

The European experience offers valuable lessons. For instance, the Netherlands' ratification of ILO Convention No. 97 demonstrates how adherence to international standards can ensure health care and protection for migrant workers. Similarly, the European Convention on the Legal Status of Migrant Workers underscores the role of regional cooperation in safeguarding labour rights. In contrast, the lack of similar frameworks in South Asia exacerbates the challenges faced by migrant workers, particularly during crises like COVID-19.

10. Conclusion

Covid 19 has brought huge crisis but also opened new insights on the inadequacy of prevalent migration governance practice. Migration governance with regards to Pandemic often requires dynamic and sustainable practice to minimize the crisis. In this regards, Scholten (2019) mention the following three measure steps keeping in view both short- and long-term measures. 1: develop policies that cut across traditional policy sectors and levels of governance; 2: approaches involving a broad set of actors within and outside government and involving diverse populations, especially non-migrants; and 3: flexible, contingent and emerging processes rather than specific models or policy outcomes.

One of the key players during Covid-19 is the civil society organisations. They have not only taken lead in managing community support, but also,

they have used the strength of social capital well before formal government support system came into place. Therefore, it is important to incorporate this grassroot organisation in various process of migration governance for better community participation and sustainable practices.

During Covid-19 it was evident that there's need for greater policy synergy and engagement of grassroots actors in the governance process as they provide immense emotional and social support in the time of crisis.

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