Regional disparities of growth and internal migrant workers in informal sectors in the age of COVID-19

Diganta Das

Centre for Studies in Society and Development, Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar, India

Correspondence
Diganta Das, PhD Scholar at centre for studies in Society and Development, Central University of Gujarat, Diganta Das, C/O- Gajendra Nath Das, Vill-Bennibari, District-Baksa, State- Assam, Pin-781316 India.
Email: diganta253@gmail.com

Why does the migrated worker face with the crisis of livelihoods in general and informal sectors in India, particularly during the age of corona? Migrant workers in informal sectors constitute a major percentage of total workforces in India, who have contributed for the economic development. Due to the overlapping nature of migration, it would not be possible to estimate the exact numbers of migrated people in India. This article is an attempt to discuss about how workers are deprived in informal sectors. Again, the study also discusses how, in the age of coronavirus pandemic, millions of workers, faced with higher form of informalisation, faced with the threat of survival. Secondary data are used as methodology. This article argues that, in India, maximum numbers of workers, who migrated from poor Human Development Index (HDI)-scored states to high HDI-scored states, faced with higher informalisation of their jobs, due to deprivation from basic rights in the age of Corona.

1 | INTRODUCTION

On the midst of the lockdown, migrated workers of informal sectors faced with desperation across India to go back to their home. Hence causing them to come into the street, by foot, only because of livelihood loss, which pushed them to stay dependent on civil society for their survival. They faced with moderation of humanities from the hands of police personnel and from others. They walked along with their children without having enough money in their pockets to buy foods on their ways, neither they had any ideas about the future source of livelihood at their native village nor did they know when to come back again to urban areas once the situation becomes normal. Such distress of the workers towards their native place, called “reverse migration,” in the age of COVID-19 virus, shows the failure of the government’s development model under the banners of “Sabka Vikas (Growth for All), ‘Shining India’ and ‘Achche Din (Good Days)” and so forth. This article is about the plight of informal sector’s migrated workers in the age of novel coronavirus, and also displays how regional disparities in the line of Human Development Index (HDI) are caused due to workers’ migration to a developed state with higher HDI. This study argues that workers from poor state joined informal sectors’ jobs after reaching a developed state, and are faced with worst forms of informalisation of job tenures. Only informal sectors are examined in this article because India’s maximum numbers of migrated workers work in the informal sectors. Again, there is substantial evidence that, in the age of corona, workers faced with extreme informalisation of job tenures, cause due to loss of jobs overnight, after the announcement of nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of corona. Workers did not get any compensation for their job loss. This article is based on the data collected from research papers, census data, planning commission, Government official reports, National Sample Survey Office (NSSO), reports from media, commentaries from civil society and the author’s individual comments.

2 | THEORETICAL UNDERSTANDING OF MIGRATION

Migration happens within frameworks where some parts of economic, socio-cultural and institutional structure changes create both source and destination points of migrants, which could be rationalized with the best argument of disproportionateness development between both the places (de Haas, 2009).

3 | MACRO THEORY OF MIGRATION

Neoclassical macro theory of migration argued migration as a part of county’s economic development and stated that internal migration occurs due to different geographical differences on supply as well as
demand of labour, which is prominent amid the primitive mode of agricultural and modern manufacturing sectors in urban areas. Again, the basic model (Lewis, 1954; Ranis & Fei, 1961, 1986), which grew out of trade theory, argued that the growing modern sector has helped to accumulate capital by attracting labour from traditional agriculture sector with the lure of positive wage structure. But this theory relegated when wage equalisation happened in both traditional agricultural and modern industries. As per dual labour market theory, Piore (1979) stated that migration occurred due to some temporary pull factor, where more demand occurs for structural works. As per world systems theory, Wallerstein (1974) stated about a historical structural approach, which argued about the role of disruptions along with dislocations due to upraise of colonialism in peripheral parts of the world, later it has extended through neoclassical governments towards multinationals. Mabogunje (1970) stated that the occurrence of migration is a dynamic spatial process. Zelinsky (1971) argued through the theory of hypothesis of mobility transition in migration, and stated that parts of wider economic process and social changes also occur inherently interlinking under the process of modernisation. This theory is part of functionalist theories stated about social change, and argues about functional interlink among different substances of development.

4 | MICRO-THEORIES OF MIGRATION

As per Lee (1966), who for the first time formulated migration within a push–pull framework of an individual level and has given emphasis on both supply and demand side of migrants. Again, Wolpert's stress-threshold model (1965), stated about behavioural model of internal migration, is similar with cost-benefit analysis and assumed individuals as rational ex-ante rather than not necessarily so ex-post. As per behavioural model, where the value-expectancy model (Crawford, 1973) stated about a cognitive model and pointed out about migrant’s conscious decision to migrate based on their values and expectations, which is totally personal and demands on household characteristics like education, societal norms and so forth. In a similar note, place-utility approach of Wolpert stated that migration totally depends on migrants’ subjectivity. Again, other similar micro-based individual behavioural decision-making models (De Jong & Fawcett, 1981) and adjustment-to-stress approach (Ritchey, 1976) stated about the non-economic factors and societal influences for migration.

Hoffmann-Novotny’s approach of social systems (Hoffmann-Novotny, 1981) stated that migration happens due to resolving structural tensions (power questions) and anominal tensions (prestige questions). Migrants hope to gain their status in the destination places but it is seen as the transformation of tension instead of reducing the problem. Again, in regards of family migrations, Morokvasic (1984) stated that women migration is influenced by several factors like economic motives, married, social constraints, low rights and lack of protection against domestic violence and so forth. Again, Sandell (1977) and Mincer (1978) argued migration as a holistic family decision for positive net gain. Bigsten (1988) also argued that migration as a household decision and calculative measure to accumulate wage gains of family members.

5 | TREND OF MIGRATION IN INFORMAL SECTORS OF INDIA

In India, inter-state migration happened in the colonial period also, people used to do migration from native places to avoid exploitation from Zamindars system. Especially, farmers were seen to do so after the termination of land rights, and lost the land to the hands of landlords due to incapability to pay rent. But, even today, people do migrate for jobs/works, as they lost the source for livelihood at village due to lower level of agricultural production, distribution of land among members, landlessness and due to other socio-economic barriers in village. Social capital/caste/kinship bonds have inspired people to migrate to urban areas, and helped them to find out jobs (see Banerjee, 1986; Banerjee, 1991; Banerjee & Bucci, 1994; Mitra, 1994 and Sovani, 1964).

Some of the workers in the informal sector come to urban areas for a long-term while some others are seasonal, which has contributed to the economic development. As per census date of 2011, the estimated numbers of migrated workers were about 454 million in India, which are far higher than the earlier decade (2001), estimated as 31.8% of decade growth. The highest percentage of migrated workers come from states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Uttarakhand, West Bengal and so forth, and prefer to work in states like Delhi, Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh and so forth. The rate of increasing numbers of migration into urban areas occurred in the last decade (2001–2011) because of rapid urbanisation in India. It is being estimated that increasing numbers of migration would cross around 550 million in 2021 for higher demand of workers in mega projects like National Smart Cities Mission and so forth. On the other side, inter-state migrations also saw similar increasing trends with 55% of growth in 1991–2001 and it was 33% increased between 2001 and 2011. Again, inter-district migration increased to 30% during 1991–2001, while 58% increased between 2001 and 2011. Intra-district migration increased from 33% in 1991–2001 to 45% in 2001–2011.

Below (Figure 1) has shown the increasing trend of internal migration within India. Which states attract workers most? Here, it is reliable to mention about the reports of Economic Survey of India in 2017, which stated that developed states had more recipient of migrant workers from less developed states like Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and so forth. The overlapping nature of migrations is the cause of failure to estimate the exact numbers for census agencies like National Sample Survey Office (NSSO). What are the works that attract migrated workers into urban areas of developed states? Studies show that migrated workers work for informal sectors that constitute about 93% of the total workforce in India. In informal sectors, migrant workers join in different type of works like construction, agriculture labour, brick kilns, services sector, industries, service
providers in small road side businesses and so forth. It is estimated by PLFS that out of 465 million workers in India, a total of 419 million workers is in informal sectors. Again, 298 million workers work for rural informal sectors as against 121 million workers in urban areas. In rural areas, around 62% of workers work in agricultural or other allied activities against 8% of works in urban areas.

There are five major sectors that attract most of the migrated workers, where contribution to manufacturing is constituted with 28 million workers; restaurant and hotel and trade with 32 million workers; construction with15 million workers; transport, communications and storage with 11 million workers; and finance, business and real estate with 7 million workers, which constitute the total 93% of work force. There are about 40 million workers considered as most vulnerable in 10 informal sectors like salespersons in small shops (13 million), construction, including domestic workers and helpers in household (3 million), transport and manufacturing (12 million), building structure cleaners and painters (3 million), street vendor workers (2 million), workers in housing keeping and service workers in restaurant (3 million), and workers in garbage collectors (1 million), market and stall salespersons (2 million), (Kumar and Mehta, The Times of India April 13, 2020). The entire work force is most vulnerable during the spread of COVID-19.

What causes the workers to join such vulnerable works? Workers come to join for informal sectors’ works due to distress for livelihood in village, to get relief from bondage labour systems and debts from moneylenders. But the same harsh realities are faced in urban areas as well due to exploitation with regard to delay of payment, sudden wage cut and inhuman work environment, and for scarcity of house even in slum areas, living without proper nutritious foods. A study by Llewellyn (2005) states that people used to migrate to brick kilns sectors to reduce their borrowing at village, which helps them to get over from the burden of bondage labour systems. But there is an opposite notion pointed out by Srivastava (2005) that migrated workers in brick kiln work in a notional wage rate. But few studies (de Haan, 2000; Deshingkar & Start, 2003; Rogaly & Coppard, 2003) stated that workers in informal sectors earn enough for basic livelihoods and send some savings to their family members in the village, which helps them to overcome from poverty. Dayal and Karan (2003) stated that migration money has helped to improve and maintain the standard of consumption patterns of foods; it even helped to take care of children’s education, health and other productive properties, where about 98% of migrated workers from Jharkhand reported on improvement in living standards.

### FIGURE 1

Internal migrants (Millions) in 1971-2011 (Based on their place of last residence, India). Source: Census of India.

What are the causes of regional disparities of developments among states in India? It is because of poor economic opportunities, caused by increasing gaps of regional disparities of development among states for what workers do migrate to a developed state. States like Bihar, Odisha, Rajasthan, MP, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and so forth are continuously experiencing poor economic development, and see a larger gap in regional disparities with regard to achievement in Human Development Index as compared to states like Kerala, Maharashtra, Haryana and so forth. The prime cause of regional disparities is because of the problems that are associated with undeveloped states like chronic drought, deforested landscapes, devastated agro-ecologies along with the failure of the government to implement welfare schemes, higher level of corruptions, lack of village industries, poor water conservation and so forth are prominent.

What are the efforts of the government to bridge the gap between disparities among states? Although, from 1990 onwards, government planning has been shifting toward the enhancement of human well-being through means of economic growth, the focus has shifted towards improvement of individual quality of life through sustainable development. It is essential to improve individual’s own capacities so that they can improve their own quality of life (see, for example, Dasgupta, 1993; Sen, 1985; Sen, 1987; UNDP, 1990). Here, the government has taken Human Development Index (HDI), which is considered as a tool to measure the overall development of individuals and the idea was brought with the launch of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) from 2000 onward. The focus is to eradicate poverty and hunger with the achievement of universal primary education, gender equality, reducing infant and child mortality and so forth.

Since the inception of independence of India, the government has stepped up its efforts to bridge the gap of regional disparities between developed and undeveloped region within the country. Such effort accelerated after 1991 with the help of structural reform of India’s economy. Although eradicating regional disparities were the foremost objective through improvement of people’s standard of living, but evidence has shown overall increasing gaps of regional disparities among states in India. It is because of poor economic opportunities, caused by increasing gaps of regional disparities of development among states for what workers do migrate to a developed state. Such an effort got more momentum with the introduction of Eleventh Five-Year Plan (2007–12); the objective was to achieve “faster and more inclusive growth,” but has failed to achieve its goal to include every section of people in the process of growth. Regional disparity of Human Development Index is continuously seen for having gaps among regions (for example, Dholakia, 2003, 2009; Ghosh, 2006, 2008; Kurian, 2000; Singh, Bhandari, Chen, & Khare, 2003).
caused of more marginalisation of poor due to continuous depriva-
tion from basic essential; they have become subjects of subjugations
and rank on the bottom of the pyramid in socio-economic hierarchy
in undeveloped states like Bihar, UP, MP, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh
and so forth. Such increasing gaps of regional disparities of develop-
ment are understood with the help of Human Development Index
score secured by different states with the help of the following
diagram.

It is proved from the below (Figure 2), which has portrayed about
higher gaps of regional disparities among different states of India with
regards to the achievement of human development Index. The fact is
that states with lower HDI score like Bihar, Jharkhand, UP, MP and so
forth send more workers into states like Kerala with higher HDI score.
Aggregate HDI score is above 3, over the few decades, for states like
Kerala, Punjab, Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra and Haryana, as against the
states like Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh and MP with
HDI rate less than 1 over the decades. Few studies (Ahluwalia, 1978;
Ghosh, 2008, 2009) state that higher per capita incomes always help
to eradicate poverty of a state. But all poor states on HDI scores could
not afford to spend more expenditure on the well-being of human
development programmes like education, health, sanitisation, drinking
water and so forth. Studies (see, for example, Dholakia, 2003, 2009;
Ghosh, 2006, 2008; Kurian, 2000; Tilak, 1987) have proved about the
positive relation among human development index, increasing level of
per capita income and higher expenditure.

### 7 | INFORMALISTION OF INFORMAL SECTOR MEANS FOR EXPLOITATION OF WORKERS

How does a worker get over exploit in the informal sectors? It is a
well-known fact that higher economic growth rate cannot generate
more employment, especially in the formal sectors of a developing
country like India. But in India, the informal sector is doing well as
compared to formal sectors in regards to generating employments
(ILO-WTO 2009). But the current global financial crisis has become
the cause for raising the numbers of unemployment including both
formal and informal sectors, irrespective of developed and developing
countries. As India’s large numbers of migrated workers work for
informal sectors, which are faced with higher informalisation of
labour force, it is essential to understand how informal sector
exploited the labour force under the era of globalisation and
liberalisation in the age of a pandemic-like situation. Marjit and
Beladi (2008) stated that

> “Globalization would increase the size of the informal sector. This probably happens through the presence of
liberal trade policy, especially in the form of declining tariff rates that would reduce open unemployment and
an increase in informal wage and informal employment if capital is more mobile between the formal and infor-
mal sectors.”

India’s market competition happens among only a few capitalist,
which caused higher levels of informalisation of labours. Capitalist has
always a goal to maximize their profits with extreme use of their
labour powers, and use strategy to wage cut along with increase in
durations of labour works. They use such coercive technique to maxi-
mize their production level and sell at higher prices. The enterprise
frequently faced with fluctuations of risk for higher and lower demand
of their products is caused of unprediction about market demand, for
what they needed to keep their production procedures in variation as
per markets demand. That is why they always keep control over their
labourers’ rhythm and pace of work as per requirement of time. Dur-
ing such uncertain circumstance, they extend the work duration
during peak sessions, do delay of wage for payment and many times cut
their labour force within prior notice to employees.

Such extreme process of informalisation stress into unequal rela-
tions of production becomes the cause of higher level of gaps in social

---

**FIGURE 2**  State wise Human Development Index (HDI) scores in India from 1983 to 2011-2012 (Rural-Urban Combined). Source- Author
used the data of planning commission to prepared an average HDI (1983, 1987-88,1993,1999-2000,2004-2005,2009-2010,2011-2012) of each
state.
hierarchies. But labours do not have strong political or union representation for their struggle against such higher informalisation. Workers cannot seek legal help due to the informal nature of their contracts. In the word of Mundle (1993) about informal sector,

“Increased competition in the world would force firm to cut their work force and shift towards more capital intensive advanced technology, there by restricting employment and lead to casualization or in formalization of work force.”

8 | INFORMAL SECTOR WORKERS IN THE AGE OF LOCKDOWN

In this pandemic of novel coronavirus, the world has been facing problems of health crises along with economic and humanitarian disaster, for what several millions of workers of informal sectors deal with the crises of job loss. International organisation like the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated about the threat of job losses to be more than 25 million jobs over the world due to lockdown. Work force with 81% is affected due to lockdowns. The ILO argued in their report that it is the “worst global crisis since World War II due to COVID 19.” Such effect is also not an exception for India; poor workers in informal sectors are the most vulnerable and caused to suffer due to loss of their jobs. It is estimated by ILO that about 400 million workers will fall into the poverty trap due to the lockdown in India.

Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) estimated that due to lockdown the rate of unemployment would increase from 8.4% to 23.8% towards the end of March 2020. Regarding the impact of lockdown in India, the assumption could be made that about one-third of household people of India might face with the problems of livelihood catastrophes. In a developing country like India, workers are faced with higher vulnerability in the pandemic-like situation due to poor implementation of welfare schemes.

The workers saw heart-wrenching plights, who decided to go back to their native state by foots, which was more than 1,000-2,000 Km, brought instant anxiety for them. Many of them were seen walking with berry foots, pregnant mothers gave birth on the road side without any medical help, while others walked with heavy weight on their head.

They did not even stop walking to get food and water for several days. They survived for several days with the help of eating small packs of biscuit provided by civil society. They did not get a place for little shelter during this hot summer. They were deeply depressed for losing their jobs and livelihood, insecurity of jobs in their native village after returning back to village and so forth. Social media along with electronic media were reporting about the suicide of workers under depression; several others were faced with social stigma as carriers of corona to village, they need to deal with such inhuman behaviours from their own village people, government officials and even from police personnel at many times. Sometimes police did lathe charge on them to control rashness to go back to village.

Later, the government officially approved for movement of people to native place, and workers were forced to pay for travel ticket who already had suffered for not having a single rupee in their pockets to buy food; cause of pain has compelled them to borrow money from others at higher rates. Once they reached their destination they were quarantined in such unhygienic environment within a narrow space, accommodating higher numbers of people. They were infected more from different illness. There was no scope for the people to maintain social distancing, which pushed more workers infected with corona. They spent quarantine period with all hardship with little foods, water and cleanliness. Such plights of workers have shown the failure of government policies, and the unplanned sudden announcement of lockdown has caused distress for migrated workers.

9 | CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Over the time, the government has enacted several laws to give protection for migration workers’ rights like Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 with the provision of minimum wages, welfare allowance like journey allowance, displacement allowance, residential accommodation, medical facilities, protective clothing, welfare allowance like journey allowance, displacement allowance, residential accommodation, medical facilities, protective clothing, and so forth. They could not achieve their goal to reach the real beneficiaries due to ineffective implementation and inaccuracy about the numbers of migrated workers, which was far higher than the estimated numbers by survey agencies. Current migrated workers’ deplorable scenario has proved again the failure of the government policies for the upliftment and protection of human rights of workers.

For the same cause, the government should need to revise their structure of welfare schemes along with other administrative and economic structure that could meet the aspiration of the workers in the age of coronavirus. Human rights for a worker should be needed to ensure them by providing basic fulfilment facilities like livelihoods. It is time to give more focus on the welfare approach, for that the government needs to provide them cash benefit along with job security. It is time to build for a strong centre–state relationship to ensure the rights of migrated workers. The government should use the recommendations of first taskforce “Working Group on Migration under the Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation” in 2015 to address the issue of migration. This report has emphasised to ensure the rights of workers.

The government should provide social protection for the workers through self-registration of workers, so that digitisation of registration records could be used for delivering the benefit to workers throughout the county without having any inter-state barriers. There should be uniform portable health care facilities, strong food security through public distribution system (PDS), free education under SSA (Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan), skill development training, financial inclusion schemes and so forth. For a smooth negotiation of the entire issue of migrated informal sectors workers, the government needs to think for
a separate ministry. Universal basic income and employment guarantee scheme under MGNREGA should be the instant measure for the government to deal with the anxiety of reverse workers.

ORCID
Diganta Das https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1690-7737

REFERENCES
Ahluwalia, M. S. (1978). Rural poverty and agricultural performance in India. The Journal of Development Studies, 14(3), 298–323.
Banerjee, B (1986). Rural to urban migration and the urban labour market: A case study of Delhi, Bombay. Himalaya Pub. House.
Banerjee, B. (1991). The determinants of migrating with a pre-arranged job and of the initial duration of urban unemployment: An analysis based on Indian data on rural-to-urban migrants. Journal of Development Economics, 36(2), 337–351.
Banerjee, B., & Bucci, G. A. (1994). On-the-job search after entering urban employment: An analysis based on Indian migrants. Oxford Bulletin of Economics and Statistics, 56(1), 33–47.
Bigsten, A. (1988). A note on the modelling of circular smallholder migration. Economics Letters, 28(1), 87–91.
Crawford, T. J. (1973). Beliefs about birth control: A consistency theory analysis. Representative Research in Social Psychology, 4(1), 53–65.
Dasgupta, P. (1993). An inquiry into well-being and destitution. Clarendon, TX: Oxford University Press.
Dayal, H., & Karan, A. K. (2003). Labour migration from Jharkhand institute for human development. New Delhi.
de Haan, A. (2000). Migrants, Livelihoods, and Rights: The Relevance of Migration in Development Policies. Social Development Working Paper 4. London: DFID
De Haas, H. (2009). Remittances and social development. In Financing social policy (pp. 293–318). London, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
De Jong, G. F., & Fawcett, J. T. (1981). Motivations for migration: An assessment and a value-expectancy research model. In Migration decision making (pp. 13–58). Pergamon. Springer.
Deshingkar, P., & Start, D. (2003). Seasonal migration for livelihoods in India: Coping, accumulation and exclusion (Vol. 111). London, England: Overseas Development Institute.
Dholakia, R. H. (2003). Regional disparity in economic and human development in India. Economic and Political Weekly, 38, 4166–4172.
Dholakia, R. H. (2009). Trends in regional disparity in human and social development in India. Indian Journal of Human Development, 3(1), 5–26.
Ghosh, M. (2004). Economic growth and human development in Indian states. Economic and Political Weekly, 41, 3321–3329.
Ghosh, M. (2008). Economic reforms and Indian economic development. Bookwell.
Ghosh, M. (2009). Dynamics of agricultural development and rural poverty in Indian states. Margin: The Journal of Applied Economic Research, 3(3), 265–295.
Hoffmann-Nowotny, H. J. (1981). 4: A sociological approach toward a general theory of migration. International Migration Review, 15(1 suppl), 64–83.
Kurian, N. J. (2000). Widening regional disparities in India: Some indicators. Economic and Political Weekly, 35, 538–550.
Lee, E. S. (1966). A theory of migration. Demography, 3(1), 47–57.
Lewis, W. A. (1954). Economic development with unlimited supplies of labour. The Manchester School, 22(2), 139–191.
Llewelyn, S. (2005). Globalization and Labour Migration in Betul district, Madhya Pradesh: A Case Study. Indo-Canadian Shastri Applied Research Project (SHARP), New Delhi: Jawaharlal Nehru University.
Mabogunje, A. L. (1970). Systems approach to a theory of rural-urban migration. Geographical Analysis, 2(1), 1–18.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Diganta Das, PhD scholar, at Centre for studies at society and Development (School of social science), Central University of Gujarat, Gandhinagar. He has published several papers at peer-reviewed journals.

How to cite this article: Das D. Regional disparities of growth and internal migrant workers in informal sectors in the age of COVID-19. J Public Affairs. 2020;20:e2268. https://doi.org/10.1002/pa.2268