

Pandemic Pressures: The Socio-Economic Impact of COVID-19 on Migrant Workers in Tirupur—A Study

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unprecedented socio-economic challenges to migrant workers across India, with Tirupur—a major industrial hub—being severely affected. This study investigates the socio-economic hardships experienced by migrant workers during the pandemic, focusing on income loss, unemployment, housing instability, and restricted access to healthcare and basic services. It evaluates the shifts in employment patterns and working conditions in Tirupur's industrial sector, emphasizing the effects on wages and job security, and the study analyzes the role of government policies and interventions designed to mitigate the impact on migrant workers. By examining the effectiveness of schemes such as food distribution, financial relief, and healthcare support, this research highlights both successes and gaps in addressing the crisis.

Key words: Migration workers, Covid- 19 Pandemic, unemployment, Tirupur industrial sector, Economic Impact.

Introduction:

Since its onset in early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on India. The first confirmed cases emerged on January 30, 2020, involving Indian medical students who had returned from Wuhan, China. The virus rapidly spread across the country, prompting the Indian government to implement nationwide lockdowns beginning on March 25, 2020, in an effort to contain the outbreak. totally India faces the three phases of lockdowns that are The first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, which began in early 2020, prompted the government to impose strict nationwide lockdowns. Daily cases surged to a peak of over 90,000 by September 2020, after which they gradually declined. However, a more severe second wave emerged in March 2021, reaching a peak of over 400,000 new cases in a single day by April 30, 2021. This wave severely strained the healthcare system, leading to widespread shortages of medical supplies and overwhelming hospitals. In response to the escalating crisis, India launched a nationwide vaccination campaign on January 16, 2021, deploying domestically produced vaccines such as Covaxin and Covishield (AstraZeneca). By early 2022, over 720 million individuals had been fully vaccinated, marking a significant milestone in the country's fight against the pandemic. By this effects.

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the entire world, including India, and Tamil Nadu has not been spared. Within Tamil Nadu, Tiruppur plays a vital role in the state's economic growth. Tiruppur is well-known for its textile industries, and it also houses several related industries, such as poultry, steel, plastic, and agriculture-related enterprises like oil mills and rice mills, all of which operate successfully. For employment, many people from across India come to Tiruppur as migrant workers. A vast number of informal workers are employed across various industries in Tiruppur. However, the COVID-19 pandemic has severely impacted these industries throughout India, including those in Tiruppur. This period was particularly difficult for migrant workers, especially those from North India. As a result of the pandemic, Tiruppur's apparel industry is currently facing a potential labor shortage, as a significant number of migrant workers, primarily from Uttar Pradesh, are returning

to their home states due to improved job opportunities. Approximately 60,000 migrant workers have already left, prompting the Tiruppur Exporters Association (TEA) to take action by improving living conditions for these workers in an effort to curb further departures. Migrant workers make up nearly half of the estimated 600,000 laborers employed in Tiruppur's apparel manufacturing units. According to K. M. Subramanian, president of the TEA, "There has been a 20% exodus of migrant workers from Tiruppur garment manufacturing units, which is a cause for concern." In response, the TEA has established a forum to explore various measures to improve the well-being of migrant workers, including the development of housing societies, improved healthcare services, wage increases, and the timely payment of wages. The majority of the migrant workforce employed in Tiruppur's garment units, which generated Rs. 34,350 crore in exports during FY 2023, comes from states such as Odisha, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Uttar Pradesh. (News-Desk, 2024). Like –wise. This article examines the economic challenges and hardships faced by migrant workers, highlighting their experiences of economic oppression during the pandemic. It also explores the various government initiatives implemented to address these issues and the specific obstacles that migrant workers encountered throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

Social- Economic Challenges of migrant workers in Tiruppur:

Tiruppur, a prominent textile hub in Tamil Nadu, India, has experienced a substantial influx of migrant workers over recent years, primarily from rural regions in search of improved economic prospects. Despite these opportunities, migrant workers in Tiruppur often face numerous socio-economic challenges that hinder their overall experience and integration into the local economy. The structural vulnerability of migrant workers in Tiruppur is exacerbated by their geographic and social isolation. Worker settlements, often situated at least a kilometer away from the nearest bus stop and lacking proper access roads, create physical remoteness that, combined with their 'outsider' status and limited proficiency in the Tamil language, inhibits the formation of local social connections. This alienation benefits private contractors, as it prevents migrant workers from organizing with local civil society, political organizations, or labor unions to address the numerous injustices they face, including inadequate housing, environmental issues, and exploitative work conditions, thereby deepening their structural vulnerability. In the few instances where migrants bring their children to Tiruppur, these children are often deprived of state-provided education, nutrition, and primary healthcare, further hindering the social reproduction of migrant families through the process of migration. (Subramanyam & Bouma, n.d.)

Migrant workers in Tiruppur often endure overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions, residing in cramped spaces where multiple individuals share small rooms. These accommodations are typically characterized by a lack of basic amenities, including insufficient access to clean water, proper sanitation, and adequate healthcare services. The absence of such essential resources exacerbates the already challenging circumstances faced by these workers, leading to heightened health risks. Exploitative labor practices further compound the difficulties experienced by migrant workers. Many receive wages below the legal minimum, contributing to significant financial hardships. In addition to low pay, they are frequently subjected to excessively long working hours, often without receiving overtime compensation. Unsafe working conditions are also prevalent, exposing workers to hazardous environments that pose serious risks to their health and safety. Access to healthcare is severely limited for migrant workers due to several factors. Language barriers often impede their ability to communicate effectively with healthcare providers, hindering their access to necessary medical care. Furthermore, the financial constraints imposed by their meager wages make affording medical treatment a challenge, leaving many without the means to seek proper care when needed. Social isolation and discrimination are common experiences among migrant workers, largely driven by cultural and linguistic differences. These workers often face discrimination due to their distinct cultural backgrounds and customs, which can result in marginalization. Language barriers further exacerbate their isolation, limiting their ability to form social connections and contributing to feelings of loneliness and alienation. Moreover, the lack of legal protection leaves migrant workers vulnerable to exploitation. Many are unaware of their rights under labor laws, and their limited access to legal assistance makes it difficult for them to seek redress for labor violations. This vulnerability exposes them to further exploitation and reinforces their precarious position within the labor force. Already the migrant workers faced these kind of challenges in their migrant place. The covid-19 give big burden to their heads.

Impacts of covid-19 on migrant workers:

North Indian migrant workers, particularly those who lacked fluency in Tamil, faced significant hardships during the pandemic. Their inability to communicate effectively in the local language made accessing medical services extremely challenging. Additionally, many struggled to purchase basic necessities, such as

cooking supplies, due to both language barriers and economic constraints. With industries and garment factories shut down during the lockdown, these migrant workers, most of whom relied on daily wages, were left without income. The closure of transportation services further compounded their difficulties, as they were unable to return to their hometowns. Living conditions also worsened during the pandemic. Many migrant workers were staying in small, overcrowded accommodations, because they needed low rent residences. Where maintaining proper sanitation and hygiene was nearly impossible. These cramped living spaces increased their vulnerability to infection and illness. Coupled with their already precarious economic status, which made it difficult to meet even basic daily needs, the pandemic placed immense pressure on their livelihoods and overall well-being. (Communications, 2021). North Indian migrant workers, particularly those who lacked fluency in Tamil, faced significant hardships during the pandemic. Their inability to communicate effectively in the local language made accessing medical services extremely challenging. Additionally, many struggled to purchase basic necessities, such as cooking supplies, due to both language barriers and economic constraints. With industries and garment factories shut down during the lockdown, these migrant workers, most of whom relied on daily wages, were left without income. The closure of transportation services further compounded their difficulties, as they were unable to return to their hometowns. Living conditions also worsened during the pandemic. Many migrant workers were staying in small, overcrowded accommodations, because they needed low rent residences. Where maintaining proper sanitation and hygiene was nearly impossible. These cramped living spaces increased their vulnerability to infection and illness. Coupled with their already precarious economic status, which made it difficult to meet even basic daily needs, the pandemic placed immense pressure on their livelihoods and overall well-being. Especially in the textile sector. Despite the large number of migrant workers from various states in Tiruppur, efforts by the Tamil Nadu authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to provide assistance are hindered by the absence of accurate, official data on the exact number of migrant workers. According to the Tamil Nadu Revenue Department, there are over 1.3 lakh migrant workers in the city, while data from the Industry Safety and Health Department in Tiruppur estimates the number at around 64,300. This discrepancy in figures can be attributed to differing data collection methods. A revenue official explained that their estimate was based on data collected during the COVID-19 aid distribution in 2020, when many migrants were unable to return to their native villages after losing their jobs. Although special trains were operated between May and September 2020 to facilitate the return of migrant workers, many did not come back to Tiruppur, and some may have transitioned to other sectors as the garment industry lost its economic appeal. N. Ramasamy, coordinator of the Odisha Migration Support Centre, reported that there are approximately 12,000 registered workers from Odisha employed in large companies in Tiruppur, operating under the Deendayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDUGKY) scheme. However, tracking unregistered workers from Odisha and other states proves challenging. These workers typically arrive in Tiruppur through manpower agencies or references from existing workers and are often employed in small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Over the past six months, there has been a notable outflow of unregistered migrant workers from Odisha leaving Tiruppur. An official from the district social welfare department highlighted the difficulties in tracking migrant workers due to their widespread distribution across the district. Efforts to register migrants upon their arrival at Tiruppur railway station have been proposed, but the plan has yet to be approved by the railway authorities. The Tiruppur Exporters Association (TEA) president, K.M. Subramanian, emphasized the current crisis facing the garment sector. After a significant increase in yarn prices between December 2021 and May 2022, prices have since plummeted to below INR 350 per kilogram. This volatility has placed immense pressure on small and medium-sized exporters, who are now reluctant to hold inventory, leading to a sharp reduction in yarn procurement. Subramanian noted that yarn prices could decline further, heightening concerns for the future.

Small and medium-sized garment units, which operate on narrow profit margins, have been particularly affected by the unstable yarn prices. Unlike larger companies, these SMEs do not have in-house facilities for dyeing, knitting, compacting, stitching, and garment printing, forcing them to rely on outsourcing. According to official data, there are more than 6,200 such units in Tiruppur, many of which employ large numbers of migrant workers. As garment units cut back on procurement to safeguard their finances, these reductions ripple through the industry, with the impact falling hardest on migrant workers. In addressing the challenges faced by these workers, the social welfare department pointed to the E-shram scheme, which provides accident insurance coverage of INR 2 lakh under the Pradhan Mantri Suraksha Bima Yojana (PMSBY). However, many migrant workers, particularly those from northern and northeastern states, are unaware of the E-shram portal and its

benefits. A large-scale campaign is needed to educate these workers about the scheme and help them register. The lack of reliable data on the migrant population also complicates the work of law enforcement. Tiruppur Police Commissioner C. Prabhakaran acknowledged the difficulty of keeping track of migrant workers, especially since many are unskilled laborers who frequently change jobs in search of better wages. To address this issue, efforts are being made to encourage garment unit owners, human resources personnel, and manpower agents to maintain comprehensive records of the workers they employ, including identification documents such as Aadhaar, voter ID, and ration cards. This database could not only assist in tracing workers during emergencies but also help prevent exploitation and ensure better protection for migrant workers.(P, 2022).

Government incentives taken for migrant workers:

During the pandemic lockdown, the Government of Tamil Nadu took proactive measures to support migrant workers by distributing dry food packages directly to their residences. Recently, however, unrest arose among interstate migrant workers due to the circulation of misleading videos on social media, falsely depicting instances of assault. The Police Department has confirmed these videos to be fake. In response, the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu reiterated that the state government ensures the provision of basic amenities to all interstate migrant workers residing in Tamil Nadu, along with their protection under the Labour Protection Act. To counter the spread of these false rumors and restore confidence among the migrant workforce, officials from the Labour Department have urged the Employers' Association to advise workers not to believe unverified information circulating on social media. To further strengthen trust, briefings were organized with workers. To ensure the safety and well-being of interstate migrant workers across Tamil Nadu, District Collectors, Superintendents of Police, Labour Department officials, and the Department of Industrial Safety and Health have collaborated to conduct regular meetings. These efforts aim to reassure workers, mitigate fears, and foster a sense of security among the interstate migrant labor community in the state.(*Government of Tamil Nadu Takes Measures to Ensure Safety of Migrant Workers - Legality Simplified*, 2023). And for the basic necessity like food The Government of Tamil Nadu has implemented several initiatives to safeguard the welfare of migrant workers, including the creation of a dedicated website (<https://labour.tn.gov.in/ism/>) for their registration. Through this platform, more than 600,000 migrant workers have been registered by officials from the Labour Department, Directorate of Industrial Safety and Health, employers, and the workers themselves. This registration system has been crucial in ensuring the effective distribution of aid during the pandemic. As part of its relief efforts, the government distributed essential food packages to migrant workers during the lockdown period. These packages, containing 15 kg of rice, 1 kg of dhal, and 1 kg of edible oil, were delivered directly to the workers' residences. In the first wave of the pandemic, 416,047 migrant workers received aid in the first phase, followed by 466,025 workers in the second phase. During the second wave, the government extended support to an additional 129,444 workers. These initiatives were aimed at addressing the immediate nutritional needs of migrant workers during a time of heightened vulnerability.(*Measures Taken by the Government of Tamil Nadu to Ensure the Safety of Migrant Workers .P.R.No:480*, 2023). On the morning of March 6, 2023, a delegation from the state of Jharkhand visited interstate migrant workers in the Tirupur district, including areas such as Udumalaipet, Palladam, Vellakoil, and Avinasi, to assess their working conditions firsthand. Similarly, a team from Bihar conducted an inspection of interstate migrant workers in Coimbatore district, focusing on regions like Annoor, Thoppampatti, and Veerapandi. During these inspections, the migrant workers expressed to both teams that they were working in Tamil Nadu under safe and peaceful conditions.(*Measures Taken by the Government of Tamil Nadu to Ensure the Safety of Migrant Workers .P.R.No:480*, 2023)

Conclusion:

Migrant workers in Tiruppur continue to face a multitude of challenges, including economic difficulties, social and cultural barriers, legal obstacles, and health issues exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the Tamil Nadu Government has implemented various schemes to support these workers and facilitated their return to their hometowns after the lockdown, many migrants, particularly daily wage laborers, endured significant hardships during this period. Although initiatives have been introduced to assist migrant workers from other states, several schemes require specific qualifications, and there is a lack of comprehensive informal migration censuses. This deficiency contributes to persistent issues such as low wages and inadequate support during critical times like the pandemic. Furthermore, government incentives often fail to reach informal migrant workers, many of whom are illiterate and unaware of available resources. To address these challenges effectively, the government must enforce stricter regulations that require enterprises to maintain accurate employee records and regularly

update migrant worker data. By doing so, the government can better support this vulnerable population and ensure they receive the assistance they need during challenging circumstances.

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