

Understanding Migration and Psychological Health of Migrant Workers

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Abstract

Migration has been a dynamic phenomenon from the evolution of the human species. It affects various aspects of life and gets affected by different determinants around us. Various studies have been done in this field to comprehend the phenomenon and still, there are distinct aspects of it that need more attention. One such aspect is the psychological health of migrants. Migration is an inevitable process of human life that's why understanding the phenomenon becomes very imperative. Especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, it has become crucial to study this aspect of migration. Various changes took place very rapidly as the covid-19 hit the world. People were left in uncertainty in comprehending the situation. Among those people, one of the most vulnerable groups was the migrant workers. This paper attempts to understand migration by discussing why people migrate and what are the major factors behind the movement. Further, the types of migration are also discussed to gain a more holistic perspective on the topic. After that, a case study of the plight of Indian migrant workers has been taken to understand the psychological effects of Covid-19 among migrant workers. A very strong social protection policy is required. Some measures of immediate response could be providing community shelters and community kitchens. Apart from these initiatives is also very significant to recognise that it is individuals who need to be more aware and responsible for their health securities.



Keywords: *Migration, Psychological Health, Migrant workers, COVID 19 pandemic, Uncertainty*

Introduction

The movement of people from one place to another has been a constant process from the beginning of human civilization. As per United Nations, just 2 per cent of the total population is migrants. However, the complications and significance of this process are much more than what the percentage shows. It is a process which is having a political colour, which is getting diversified and is growing (Castles & Miller, 2003), which makes this phenomenon more significant to explore in the present context. It is a natural human behaviour to improve their lives. The process of migration affects the life and surrounding environment of humans. Apart from mortality and fertility, migration is another important phenomenon that plays a vital role in population growth or population alteration of any specific geographical region. When people migrate from one place to another, they become more adaptable to the new environment.

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They make various new decisions, go through the whole process, shift physically from one place to another, adjust to new local culture, and become part of that local culture and system.

One important question which comes here is why people migrate. Migration is defined in simple terms could be understood as the movement from one place or region to another and this process is a series of actions to achieve something so the process of migration is a series of movements of people from one region to another to achieve a goal, for example, good life, employment opportunities, better education, etc. When people move in very distinct contexts and circumstances like an invasion, conquest, forced displacement, fleeing because of natural disaster, mercantile outreach, colonial settlement, slavery, etc. it could be termed as migration.

In the post-war globalization era, the movement of individuals or families generally for socio-economic purposes is the modern understanding of migration. Many historians of migration believe that migratory flows have been, and will continue to be, a significant catalyst of social, economic, and cultural change in any society. However, determining the number of people who were migrants in history is not possible. The Second World War is often considered an important turning point in the history of migration.

It is imperative to comprehend and analyze the factors responsible for migration to decode the cause-effect relationship as well as the consequences of migration on society as a whole. A factor can be understood as a force that influences or affects something and lead to the consequence, that force can be favourable, unfavourable or neutral. As far as migration is concerned the factors are related to the Origin (place of the last resident) and Destination (the place of new residence). There have always been a various push and pull factors behind why people move from one place to another. Few such factors include economic factors, social factors, and cultural factors. There are some theories about factors of migration. One such example is the law of migration Ravenstein (1885), where he states certain norms about migration such as when people move from one place to another it causes counter-migration, people generally migrates to a short distance, as compared to urban people rural people migrates more, migrating people tend to choose big cities as a destination, majority of migrants are adults, migration causes the growth of the large town, adults move more frequently as compared to families, etc.

The “Push-Pull Theory” was provided by Lee (1996), in which he explains that there are different push and pull factors that make people leave their country of origin and often they get attracted to various opportunities at the destination country. A few examples of push factors are lack of employment and opportunities, underdevelopment, natural calamities, fear of being persecuted, death threats, negligible medical facilities, discrimination, war or war-like situations etc. Examples of pull factors are better living conditions and quality, more opportunities, education, employment, safe environment, no fear of death and persecution, sound medical facilities, industrialization, favouring climatic conditions etc.

Another is “Situational theory” given by Wolport (1965), in this theory he talks about the importance of “place utility”. He argues that people migrate to locations where they find the value of “place utility” higher than the

location where they are already residing. People migrate because they believe that in locations with higher place utility they could get better socio-economic opportunities and benefits. These are a few theories that explain the reasons for migration and why people migrate from one place to another.

The objective of this paper is to understand the concept of migration comprehensively, specifically at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic because both have affected each other immensely. In this context, another major aspect will also be discussed which is the mental health problems of migrant workers. What are the factors for this problem, who are responsible for ensuring health security, how the current pandemic affected the migrant workers are a few questions which will be addressed in the paper?

International Migration

International migration means there will be a change in the place of residence across national boundaries. An international migrant crosses the border of a country and move to another one. International migrants can be understood between different categories like legal and illegal migrants, refugees. As suggested by their names legal migrants are those people who move from one country to another with legal ways by following required rules and norms. However illegal migrants are those people who enter the destination country without following laws through illegal means. Refugees are those who move from source country to destination country for survival and due to fear of persecution. As explained by Jay Weinstein and Vijayan Pillai, there is another kind of international migration which is forced migration. Forced migration takes place when a person didn't have a choice to move. He/She is not willing to move but the circumstances have forced them to move such as calamities, wars etc. Making a clear distinction between internal and international migration is very imperative as the reason to move in both circumstances are different from each other. Motivating factors among international migrants are higher than internal migrants because international migrants face more barriers while moving as compared to internal migrants (weeks 1999).

MIGRATION AND COVID-19

Understanding migration and its types provide an insight to comprehend the issues and understand various aspects related to it. Now we can understand that various types of migrants sometimes move at their will and sometimes forcefully due to various situations. Consequently, they face various issues and

challenges. In this article, we will discuss one such challenge which is; Psychological aspect and due to the ongoing pandemic, this article will attempt to discuss the aspect in light of Covid-19.

At present world is experiencing the largest migration and people getting displaced since World War II ended. It has resulted in such situations where people and communities are leaving their home countries because of conflict, various forms of violations, due to negligible stability in the socio-political scenario, because of environmental threats etc. As per International Organisation for Migration, at present, there are 281 million international migrants around the world. Among these people around 26 million people falls in the category of refugees. In 2020 around 80 million people had to leave their home country because of conflict persecution various forms of violence. Various reports of the United Nations had predicted that this pattern of migration will keep increasing in the future because of factors such as increasing inequality, globalisation, sound connectivity, climatic changes etc. Such patterns make the international organisations act proactively towards the need of migrants and refugees and try to address their problems rather than just giving reactions to the crisis. The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic provides enough scope to analyze this phenomenon from various perspectives, especially psychological perspectives.

It has been estimated that around 272 million international migrants are way more vulnerable as compared to other migrants due to personal reasons or social or circumstantial reasons. Covid-19 has increased their vulnerability and has made them prone to various problems and challenges. They are at risk of health and financial challenges. The majority of migrants from the estimated numbers are in developing countries and pandemic has been affecting them adversely. Governments have taken various steps to contain and manage the pandemic which has curtailed the movement of migrants. Restrictions have been put on travel, any kind of movement from other states or countries was prohibited. Migration of labours got suspended as precautionary measures. The assistance which was being provided to asylum seekers got slowed down. Because of the restrictions, international organisations like IOM and UN High Commissioner for Refugees have to suspend the travel related to the resettlement of refugees.

Restrictions put on the borders of countries due to pandemics have affected and restricted the role of various international organisations. As per International Organisation for Migration (2021); after recognizing Covid-19 as a pandemic by World Health Organisation around 105,000 restrictions were put all around the world. However, different areas and territories of around 189 countries also introduced some 795 exceptions against the restrictions, which resulted in the movement of people (IOM, 2021). Even after introducing the exceptions, it was quite evident that migration flow has decreased. As per UN DESA (2020) in 2020 around 2 million international migrations decreased. In the initial months of 2020 migration flow in OECD countries decreased by 46 % which was considered a historical decrease in the flow of migration in OECD countries (OECD, 2020). This decrease in migration adversely affected the demography of those countries which were dependent on the migration for the growth of their population.

For example, as per the data from German Federal Statistics (2011), the population in Germany did not register any growth for the first time in a decade and the reason behind this was the decreased immigration. Since 1945, for the first time, net immigration in Australia was expected to decline at such speed. This would result in the lowest growth of population in 100 years (Australian Centre for Population).

Migrants and mental health

Over time flow of migrants and numbers of refugees have increased, especially in the European region. As discussed earlier different types of migrants and refugees move from one place to another. In many instances the

category of people moving from one place to another change also. For example, a person who has moved into some country irregularly can apply for and get asylum or sometimes when asylum seeking application of a person gets rejected they become irregular migrants. Sometimes irregular migrants manage to find some job and get status of migrant. However, one thing which is common in all these people is that they have to go through a very stressful and complicated process. Migrants leave their country of origin and move to a new country where they need to adopt a different environment, culture, lifestyle etc (Bhugra, 2004). As a consequence of this process migrants face various psychological problems which need to be addressed. They face fear and trauma during the process from the origin country to transit to the destination country. The extent of challenges and problems could be different from category to category i.e. from refugees to asylum seekers to irregular migrants. The intensity also depends upon the settlement policies of the host country (Giacco D et al, 2018).

Irrespective of the fact that what is the legal status of few refugees or migrants they have had very long, complicated and troublesome travel experiences before arriving in the destination country. They have also faced severe poverty and adverse economic circumstances. Apart from these challenges refugees have to very frequently go through stressful situations like wars and various conflicts, fear of persecution, various kind of discrimination and many more difficulties even before starting their journey from the origin countries. Once migrants and refugees reach the destination country they have to face difficulties there as well. They have to accommodate to a different environment, they face language-related difficulties. Apart from all these issues many times asylum seekers and irregular migrants have to go through stressful circumstances due to administrative work which needs to be done for their stay in the destination country. Many times their movement is associated with the fate of their family, especially with the economic migrants. This responsibility of family put more pressure on migrants.

Those seeking asylum and irregular migrants stay in constant fear about the insecurity of not getting asylum or not knowing the stay period in the destination country. They face the fear of being deported or uncertainty about their stay till the time their status in the destination country gets decided. The majority of the time the movement from one country to another is not so smooth. Migrants and refugees have to move through various transit countries to reach the destination country. This makes the whole process of migration more complicated and stressful (Marković et al, 2018). When refugees and migrants reside in the transit country for a longer time it affects their economic condition thus, resulting in stressful situations. Staying in the constant fearful and stressful situation makes refugees and migrants more prone to mental disorders and they suffer a lot of complications due to it. In such a scenario providing them, treatment becomes very imperative. However, accessing medical facilities and services become more challenging for them. This is a common difficulty for almost all refugees and migrants (Lindert et al, 2008).

Major reasons for difficulty in accessing healthcare services are language barriers, lack of awareness about the available facilities in the destination country, not having proper entitlements to receive free services, different ways to understand the mental disorders, distinct attitude to psychological treatment, stigma related to mental health etc. in such circumstances those migrants whose educational qualification is good they could better interact with health professionals thus, ability to express the problems varies from individual to individual (Giacco & Priebe, 2018). Among all the categories irregular migrants are more vulnerable in terms of getting access to healthcare facilities as they usually are not able to afford the mental health treatment and free access becomes difficult due to their entitlement. Also, they avoid getting healthcare access because of fear of getting reported to the authority which results in various adverse circumstances for them especially the fear of being deported because of their irregular migrant status (Priebe et al, 2018). Various agencies and associations have recognized the need of providing physical and mental health treatment to refugees and migrants. However, the abovementioned factors limit their scope of access thus, making their condition worse.

Various debates have taken place regarding the responsibility to ensure mental health and it is being realized that this responsibility could be ensured at three levels; individual, state and institutions. People must recognise the mental health problems at the individual level then comes the responsibility of the state to make adequate policies to ensure mental health and then the role of institutions such as NGOs, civil societies, community groups, media etc to create awareness among people related to mental health problems. It should be a collective action from all the stakeholders so that smooth functioning and effective implementation could be ensured.

Indian migrant workers during covid-19: a case study

Migrants and refugees are often not very familiar with the new environment they move to. They become more prone to different socio-psychological and emotional traumas. The fear of not getting acceptance from the locals and neighbours and the security of families back at the origin country make the situation even worse. Workers move to another country or city for better economic opportunities so that they can earn more and provide a better life to their family back at home. Many times families depend on the earning of the migrant worker. Migrant workers are one of the most impoverished sections of society as they rely on the daily wages which they receive after their work. In this article, we are taking the case study of internal Indian migrant workers during a pandemic.

Around 100 million internal migrant workers work in the Indian industries (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009) which are a huge number to impact the economy of any country. Migrants who have moved from rural to urban areas for work are engaged in temporary and unskilled work. They get very low wages with negligible or no work security. Indian migrant workers comprise a huge unorganized working sector and workforce with the feature of the informal work environment (Zeitlyn et al, 2014.)

Covid-19 affected people around the world not only physically but psychologically as well. One of the most vulnerable groups who got affected by the pandemic is internal migrant workers. Factors that make them more vulnerable are they could be potential carriers of the virus, pre-existing physical health issues due to work, psychological issues like lack of or no family support during a pandemic, staying away with family, overcrowded living space, struggling to get necessities etc. Financial burden, because of loss of work and no safety in the pandemic, among this group made them more vulnerable to the Covid -19. During the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, immediate lockdown and various restrictions were imposed on day-to-day work activities to implement social distancing so that virus could be contained. The travel ban was also introduced as a precautionary measure. Due to restrictions on a day to day activities daily wages workers could not get work and money. Such a situation made it more difficult for migrant workers to manage the necessities of their day to day life like food and shelter. It triggered anxiety among them. Because of anxiety, they could not think about anything as they wanted to go back to their native place or place of residence where their families were residing. Migrant workers started gathering at the railway stations and bus stands to go back to their native places. They tried all possible ways to reach their home. Many migrants got stuck at borders. Their anxiety level went so high due to restrictions and difficulties that they started moving from the place of their work to the place of their resident by walking. In the majority of cases, this distance was hundreds and thousands of kilometres. This incident of huge gathering made migrant workers more vulnerable as they were at the risk of twofold setback. One, to getting affected by the virus two, becomes potential carriers of the virus. In the latter case, they had to face harassment and negative reactions from the locals and neighbours. The most crucial psychological effects of Covid-19 among workers were anxiety and fear. Various reports of nervous

breakdown, depression and anxiety and panic attacks have been reported among migrant workers (Shastri, 2020).

Migrant workers have to go through various psychological consequences due to multiple stresses and various negative factors like poverty, no social protection, malnourished, difficulties of adapting new environment and culture, poor healthcare facilities etc. In India following are the most crucial factors their mental health issues:

- 1.) Potential carrier of Covid-19; due to huge gatherings, living in an unhygienic and overcrowded place and lack of sanitation migrant workers become more potential carriers of the virus.
- 2.) Pre-existing health conditions as a risk factor; the majority of daily wages workers and migrant workers have some kind of pre-existing disease like TB, silicosis, hypertension which makes them more prone and vulnerable for covid-19. The major reason for these pre-existing diseases is the poor working condition.
- 3.) Staying away from the family in a pandemic; increases the distress among workers triggering the feeling of loneliness and fear of losing a family member due to the virus. It also creates anxiety among workers by making them feel incapable of providing the necessary medical services.
- 4.) Barriers in following the norms; due to lack of awareness and lack of resources majority of migrant workers could not follow the rules of social distancing and other norms to contain the virus.
- 5.) Limitations in getting psychiatric help; migrant workers are not aware of the psychiatric facility. The financial limitation is another barrier in this case. Also, there is a stigma attached to the psychological treatment among those strata of society where educational level is low. Awareness is very low.
- 6.) Not having effective laws for the unorganized sector; due to the nature of this sector, there is no security and insurance Scheme for migrant workers. They are the most neglected workforce and have to suffer a lot due to this limitation.

WAY FORWARD

In the pandemic, migrant workers have faced various challenges, from making efforts to reach their native places to staying temporarily at the quarantine centres. All these experiences have filled anxiety and fear among them. In such a scenario it becomes very imperative to assess and address the psychological health issues of these workers and provide them psychosocial support. To implement and deliver the solutions to the challenges following measures could be taken; First, treating migrant workers with empathy and dignity and trying to understand their difficulties. Second, Pay attention to the needs and requirements of migrant workers. Third, Not treating everyone from the same lens as every individual face or experience different kind of difficulties. An approach is needed where everyone's specific needs get

recognized. Fourth, Reassure the migrant workers that this pandemic situation will be over soon and life will get back to normal again. Fifth, Make migrant workers aware of all the help and facilities provided to them by governments and various organisations. Sixth, Making migrant workers aware of the risk which is related to the mass movement and how such incidents could adversely affect the efforts which are being taken to contain the virus. Seventh, Appreciate their contribution to the economy and society to boost their morale. Eighth, make them realize their importance in the workforce and among their family as well. Ninth, Giving reassurance to them that even if migrant worker's employers are not able to pay them charitable organisations and administrations would extend their help. Tenth, Providing reassurance amid the fear of getting affected. Eleventh, Tell them that their families would be safe if they stay away from them and would not rush together to reach their native places.

To achieve all these, a very strong social protection policy is required. Some measures of immediate response could be providing community shelters and community kitchens, providing resources of necessities, making workers aware of the importance of social distancing, tracking cases of infection and taking appropriate measures to manage such situations like setting up mechanisms to get the infected workers in contact with family members through virtual platforms. It will help the workers in dealing better with the infection and pandemic. Such interventions could help in promoting the mental health of migrant workers. There could be an approach to identify those migrant workers who need special attention and then their mental health should be handled accordingly. For example, irregular migrant workers need special attention as they have to face much more challenges as compared to regular migrant workers. A guideline could also be created to assess and provide mental health treatment to one of the most vulnerable groups of people, especially during the Covid-19 Pandemic. Apart from these initiatives is also very significant to recognize that it is individuals who need to be more aware and responsible for their health securities.

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