Migrants Returning to Native - A Humanitarian "Side Effect" of Pandemic, India

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1   Walking Back to Native amidst Pandemic - Background

Millions of migrants walked thousands of miles distance, from urban centres to their native villages in India. Their exhausted, starved pictures are viral on social media and stories of fatalities are out. (1) Covid19 pandemic and subsequent lock down has resulted in a humanitarian crisis revealing socio-economic fragility of the governance. Over the last few decades, migration from villages to rapidly urbanizing cities has emerged as a crucial livelihood strategy for millions of rural poor in India. (2) Employment opportunities, industrial demand for labour, glittering urban life-style are commonest "Pull" factors while climate variability at native place and agrarian distress "Push" families to cities with no alternatives left. Rural poverty, thus, simply shifts to urban poverty as most migrants tend to settle in informal settlements and live, work in deplorable conditions. (3) During public health emergencies, migrants often prefer to return to their native place. On 24th March 2020, Government of India declared its "lock down" strategy to foster social (actually physical) distancing as a measure of Covid19 prevention. (4) Interstate transport services like trains and buses stopped overnight. Urban poor migrant families were the worst hit of this prevention strategy. It was again evident how such pandemic affects communities differentially.

2   Why Migrant Families Make A Choice to Return?

Why do city migrants decide to go back to native village by hook or crook? Urban anthropologists have always been curious in understanding migration phenomena and cultural dynamics associated with it. Covid 19 has again provided scope to understand socio-cultural dynamics of health and disease.

Our routine fieldwork interactions with migrants reveals that such a return movement during emergencies, is often sudden, unplanned and carries uncertainty whether they will return back to their destination city or decide to stay at native. This return movement arises due to causal factors– explicit and underlying.

Explicit factors are superficial and currently being reported in Indian media reportage. These include fear of catching the disease, no daily wage labor work available, no rent to pay for housing in the city, no food to eat, finished monetary savings. Underlying factors for such return movement during public health emergencies involve no support from work institution with which they are attached, psychosocial attachment with native place, worry of family left behind, lack of social network in city, sense of uncertainty in city and mental pressures (better to experience ncertainty with family at native!), lack of attachment with

city, possibility and preference of alternative to adapt and shift back, lack of preparedness of industrial sector to provide security to workers, open option to return back again to city easily once things get normal.

3   City's Preparedness Plans is the Key

The current response by Indian Government to this humanitarian crisis is "impromptu" with the arrangement of temporary shelters, meals, facilitating common transport and insisting migrants to stay back in the City to avoid infection spread. The crowds at state borders and chaos is also breaking the essential objective of so-called, social distancing. In turn, high risk of transmission of the virus to Indian villages is being predicted.

Every Indian city needs a systematic preparedness plan to support migrants during emergencies. On one side, cities can't afford to lose human resources which are the backbone of economic resilience. Another side, migrants also can be well benefitted if the city has defined policy responses for them. Insights from urban anthropology would be necessary to capture the "emic" perspective of migrant families. Cities are likely to see more such crisis situations in future, may be, results of climate variability or naive infectious diseases like Covid19. Cities must have evidence based planning, budget provisions and preparedness to deal with associated social disasters too. The essential steps in routine will be a "readymade" plan during disasters for administrators.

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