

The Coronavirus Pandemic and the Overseas Indian Migrant Workers' Crisis: Impacts on Polity and Foreign Policy

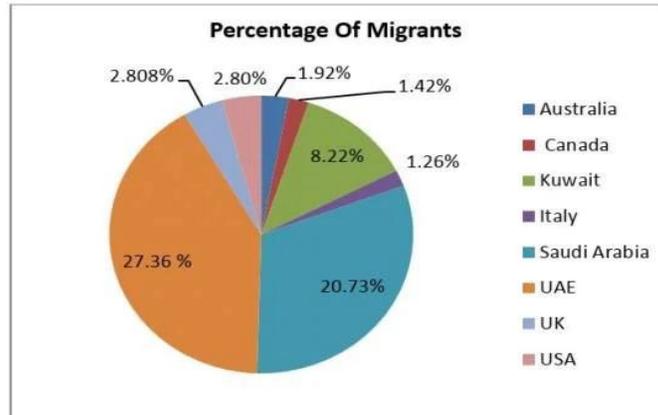
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The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the existential crises of Indian migrant workers, both domestic and overseas, to the centre stage of public discourse like never before. Millions of Indian migrant workers are stranded in foreign countries after losing their jobs; they face an uncertain future and even starvation. The migrant workers' plight is fast turning into a major humanitarian crisis for which the current union government was not prepared.

This paper seeks to analyse the various facets of the migrant workers' crisis, the importance of remittances in the Indian economy, the rising cases of coronavirus infection among overseas Indians and the challenges of repatriation, mitigation efforts by the Indian government and implications of the migrant workers' crisis for the Indian economy, society, politics and foreign policy. Finally, an attempt has been made to recommend policy measures to protect the interests of Indian migrant workers.

According to a *Quartz India* report, India has as many as 20 million migrant workers in different parts of the world. About half of them are in the six Gulf countries of Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Among them, 2.5 million have migrated from Kerala (Pullanoor 2020). It must be noted here that migrant workers based in the Gulf region were not the only ones returning to India amid the COVID-19 crisis. Thousands of workers in the United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom (UK), Singapore, Australia and Canada returned to India as well during the pandemic.¹ The percentage of Indian migrant workers present in the major destination countries is shown below:

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Source: Ministry of External Affairs

Migrant workers' precarious conditions

The overseas Indians, especially in the Gulf countries, work under challenging conditions, and the COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated those conditions. The migrant workers are mostly engaged in low-skilled jobs and earn meagre wages. According to reports, a large number of Indian migrant workers have had to put their lives at risk to earn a living, particularly in Qatar. Many of them have died while working on construction projects (Jain 2020). M. Bheem Reddy, Vice President of the Migrants Rights Council, an organisation working for migrant workers' rights, has pointed out that on average, 5,000 Indians die in foreign countries every year but the Indian government does not provide their families with any ex-gratia.²

Another serious issue is the poor living conditions of the Indian migrant workers in the Gulf. Many of them reportedly stay in shared accommodation without any scope for maintaining social distancing. These workers are very vulnerable to the COVID-19 infection and need utmost care from the host country.³ In addition to these, some other factors including lack of social support, language deficiency, and discrimination due to their 'foreigner' status have made their access to healthcare facilities in host countries increasingly difficult (Jain 2020).

The overseas migrant workers contribute to the economies of both host and home countries. However, the COVID-19 crisis has transformed them into some sort of international pariah. Their inability to return to India due to the ban on international flights during the initial stage of the pandemic made them refugees on foreign soil. As per the standards set by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the host country should provide basic services, including healthcare, to migrant workers and their families. In fact, they are entitled to all facilities available to the citizens of host countries. In the Gulf countries, however, the ILO

guidelines are hardly implemented; their domestic laws are meant to protect the interests of only the employers and not the employees (Jain 2020).

Apart from the current pandemic, the West Asian region has been facing a series of crises, including war, political upheaval, violent religious extremism, terrorism, and civil war since the early 1990s. It has been noticed that in times of crises, foreign workers are considered a burden by the host country. The pandemic has badly affected the oil-rich Gulf economy in many ways. The substantial decline in the oil demand has put extra pressure on the Gulf countries' economies, which are already preoccupied with myriad challenges.

The World Bank (WB) economists monitoring the ongoing crisis have noted that the abrupt economic downturn has reduced host countries' ability to provide protection to the migrant workers during the pandemic.⁴ Many Gulf countries, including the UAE and Kuwait, had reportedly sent repatriation requests to India, telling it to take back its migrant workers. The UAE had even threatened action in case of refusal (Jain 2020).

Indian migrant workers are also victims of growing protectionism and anti-expatriate political campaigns spearheaded by domestic groups in many regions of the world, including the Gulf, North America, Europe and Australia. Among them, the Gulf represents the worst scenario where any assimilation of the overseas workers with the local population is virtually impossible. In a significant development on 3 June 2020, Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, Prime Minister of Kuwait, announced his government's decision to bring down its expatriate population from 70% to 30% due to serious difficulties caused by the pandemic.⁵

The Kuwaiti government's decision came after its lawmakers' persistent efforts to minimise the number of foreign workers, especially those engaged in unskilled labour. The Gulf countries have recently floated several stimulus packages worth billions of dollars to assist the companies and banks and mitigate the economic slowdown mainly caused by the slump in oil prices. However, most of such initiatives are directed towards promoting business owners' interests rather than the employees who are predominantly foreigners.⁶

The Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) of India is aware of the severity of the challenges faced by migrant workers in the Gulf countries. In 2017, the MEA informed the Parliamentary Standing Committee that Indian workers were facing retrenchment and loss of jobs due to the closure of companies and abrupt termination of existing contracts. There are numerous instances of Indian workers not receiving unpaid dues/salaries in Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia in the recent period. Some of these countries have also imposed various restrictions on expatriates.⁷

A recent report published in *The Hindu* suggests that during the initial phase of the pandemic, migrant workers were asked to resign 'voluntarily' by their employers in UAE and Oman.

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Making them resign was a way of not having to pay them their termination benefits. According to their contracts, if the company terminated an employee's services, it would have to give him/her either a 30-day notice period or a 30-day salary. Since the company could not give the migrant workers the 30-day notice period, the workers, if terminated, would be eligible for a month's basic salary.⁸

However, in most cases, they were not paid this amount and compelled to work for an extended period, for which, again, they received no payment. The migrant workers were also not provided food allowance for thirty-five days, which, as per their contracts, the companies were obliged to pay at the time of termination. Thousands of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf countries have been victims of 'wage theft'.⁹ They were hurriedly repatriated in the beginning stages of the pandemic without being allowed to complete all the protocols. Several companies across the Gulf countries took advantage of the mass repatriation moves and did not pay the terminated workers their due wages/salary, compensation and benefits.¹⁰

The Indian migrant workers hail from different states in India and are engaged in diverse sectors in the Gulf countries. A report in the online news portal *Money Control* says that about 85% of India's unskilled and semi-skilled overseas migrant workforce is engaged in construction, manufacturing and retail sectors in the Gulf countries, while the rest are healthcare, domestic and unclassified workers. The report has noted that most migrants from Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, Haryana and Rajasthan are unskilled and work in construction projects and retail industries. Migrants belonging to Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala and Tamil Nadu are semi-skilled and work in the healthcare, retail and manufacturing sectors. Workers hailing from Maharashtra and Karnataka are skilled and most of them are engaged in the Information Technology (IT) sector (Nair 2020).

Importance of remittance in Indian economy

The overseas Indian workers play a major role in the country's economy by remitting their earnings. Remittances contribute substantially to the national forex reserves, help alleviate poverty, facilitate local business, promote entrepreneurship and create job opportunities. According to the WB, India continues to be the world's top recipient of remittances from its diaspora. In 2017, it received \$69 billion, which was a rise of 9.5% from the previous year. Studies show that remittances to India had increased twenty-two times in 2017 from a meagre \$3 billion in 1991. Remittances constituted 2.8 % of India's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2017 (Hussain 2015; Paliath 2018).

The recent data clearly indicate a trend of consistent increase in India's receipt of remittances, adding fresh impetus to the economy. India remained the top recipient of remittances, amounting to \$ 79 billion in 2018 (Nair 2020). In 2019, remittances scaled an all-time high of

\$83 billion.¹¹ According to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI), the UAE is the number one remitter to India, followed by the USA. A table showing the top five remitters to India and their remittances is given below (Nair 2020):

Country	Remittance (in billion \$)
UAE	13.823
USA	11.715
Saudi Arabia	11.239
Kuwait	4.587
Qatar	4.143

Source: Reserve Bank of India

The states that send the largest number of workers abroad include Kerala, UP, Bihar, Rajasthan and Andhra Pradesh. These states receive more than 80% of India's total remittances, with Kerala leading the group, while UP sends the maximum number of migrant workers, followed by Bihar (Nair 2020). An April 2016 report showed Kerala leading the share of remittances (40%), followed by Punjab (12.7%), Tamil Nadu (12.4%), Andhra Pradesh (7.7%) and UP (5.4%) (Paliath 2018).

The remittances act as economic lifelines for the families of migrant workers in their home-states. Several studies have been conducted regarding the pattern of utilisation of remittances by these families. The RBI has estimated that more than 50% of the remittances were used for 'family maintenance', 20% as bank deposits and 7% for purchasing land, property etc. (Nair 2020). Another study conducted by Grant Thornton has noted that in Kerala and Tamil Nadu, 25% of the remittances is utilised for debt repayment after household expenditure. In Odisha, 11% of the remittances take care of marriage expenses, while in the North East and Jammu and Kashmir, 55% is used for education (Nair 2020).

Rising cases of coronavirus infection among overseas Indians and challenges of repatriation

The rampant coronavirus infection among Indian expatriates scattered across the world is another critical aspect of the migrant workers' crisis. Reports indicate that most Indian migrant workers, especially the unskilled ones, stay in over-crowded dormitories, and many of them fell sick after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Gulf countries with huge Indian expatriate populations, such as Saudi Arabia, UAE, Kuwait and Qatar, reported a large number of COVID-19 cases during the initial phase. Saudi Arabia claimed that foreigners accounted for 70–80% of the positive cases.¹²

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However, it is to be noted that the Gulf countries' inept handling of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis has also come under the scanner. Human rights groups based in West Asia have pointed out that the Gulf countries' efforts to check the spread of the virus increased the hardships for migrants, many of whom were left short of food and water during the lockdowns.¹³ Indian workers based in other regions of the world also got infected in large numbers by the coronavirus and faced several challenges. Reports say that till 15 April 2020, a total of 3,336 Indians across fifty-three countries had tested positive for COVID-19 and twenty-five had died due to the infection. Most of the overseas Indians who had tested positive were based in the Gulf countries. Out of the total, 2,061 were in Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, UAE, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Besides, 308 affected Indians were in Iran.¹⁴

There is every possibility of an increase in the number of COVID-19-affected Indians stranded abroad, given the second wave of the pandemic that started in October 2020. However, no precise data is available regarding the number of overseas Indians, especially migrant workers, who have tested positive for COVID-19 in different regions of the world till mid-November. A vast majority of Indian nationals stranded abroad due to the pandemic want to return home as international travel restrictions have been eased. However, their evacuation is a big and challenging task for the Indian government as they are currently in financial distress. Another disturbing phenomenon, which has further complicated the overseas migrant workers' crisis, has been the growing apathy of the host countries, especially those in the Gulf, towards foreign workers even though they heavily rely on foreign workers. The UAE's tough stand on repatriation had put New Delhi in a tight spot as the Gulf country has a 3.2 million-strong Indian diaspora. The Indian government had to express its reservations on repatriation in the preliminary stage, insisting that evacuating and quarantining millions of returning nationals would be a logistical and safety nightmare.¹⁵

The Indian government did evacuate hundreds of its citizens in batches from Italy, China and Iran during February and March 2020. Such efforts were subsequently discontinued, and the government asked the overseas Indians to stay on in the host countries. The union government officials reportedly noted that the country had enough quarantine facilities to accommodate them, but it was decided not to evacuate them considering the highly contagious nature of the COVID-19 virus. New Delhi believed that it would be prudent to keep the affected nationals in their present locations to 'avoid further spreading of the virus, both in their host countries as well as in India.'¹⁶

Indian government's mitigation efforts

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the government has been receiving appeals from millions of stranded Indians across the world. To cope with the current crisis, the MEA was called upon from various quarters to make all efforts to provide consular services for the dissemination of information, creation of welfare funds and collaboration with local welfare organisations

for extending help to the stranded Indian nationals. The union government undertook several steps to address the problems facing the Indian nationals abroad. These included making arrangements for repatriation, communicating with the heads of governments of countries where large numbers of Indians were stranded, sending a unit of doctors to Kuwait, setting up a COVID-19 Control Room by the MEA and the creation of a COVID-19 Emergency Fund (Nair 2020).

The repatriation of millions of Indian nationals from different parts of the world was a gigantic exercise that required sufficient time and resources. Under the Vande Bharat Mission (VBM), the Union Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) has been evacuating stranded Indians from thirty-one countries since 7 May 2020.¹⁷ According to reports, about 10 lakh Indians want to return, with more than two lakhs being from the UAE alone. Many of the migrant workers stationed in the Gulf have been evacuated by naval ships. Different ministries of the government, including the MHA, MEA, Ministry of Defence (MoD), and Ministry of Civil Aviation (MoCA), are coordinating with each other, and the process of evacuation has gained momentum in the recent months.¹⁸

On 16 September 2020, Minister of State for External Affairs V Muraleedharan told the Parliament that till 10 September 2020, a total of 3,08,099 migrant workers had returned to India via air, land and sea as part of the VBM. A vast majority of them were from the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) nations. As per the government's data, 84,497 Indian workers returned from the UAE, 50,536 from Oman, 49,000 from Saudi Arabia, 44,248 from Kuwait, 30,509 from Qatar and 14,920 from Bahrain. The minister added that not all of them had lost jobs, and some had only returned due to the pandemic situation.¹⁹

Health experts have cautioned that a mass exodus of migrant labourers, working mostly in construction projects in the Gulf countries, runs the risk of spreading the deadly COVID-19 virus at an uncontrollable rate in the world's second-most populous country. Therefore, they have called for initiating a comprehensive and full-proof mechanism to ensure that the danger of community transmission is avoided. According to reports, the Indian nationals were being thoroughly screened for COVID-19 symptoms before undertaking the journey back to India, and only asymptomatic persons were allowed to proceed. Following their arrival, they were quarantined for two weeks.²⁰

In the wake of a rise in the number of affected Indians, especially migrant workers, Prime Minister Narendra Modi communicated with the GCC countries' heads to tackle the situation. The Chief Minister of Kerala Pinarayi Vijayan reportedly wrote to the Prime Minister expressing concern regarding the well-being of Indian nationals in the Gulf region.²¹

The union government initiated some emergency steps to mitigate the crisis. On 3 April 2020, India dispatched a Rapid Response Team to Kuwait, which was hosting the maximum

number of overseas Indians who had tested COVID-19 positive, to hold discussions with the officials there. India reportedly also supplied large stocks of the anti-malarial drug Hydroxychloroquine, used in the treatment of COVID-19, to Kuwait. Moreover, in its bid to cope with the emerging situation, the MEA constituted a COVID-19 Control Room in March 2020 to act as a nodal agency for addressing the issues related to the welfare of the overseas Indians in the pandemic situation.²²

India is currently engaged in a dialogue with the GCC countries on COVID-19-related issues. On 3 November 2020, the External Affairs Minister (EAM) S. Jaishankar updated GCC leaders, during India's annual political dialogue with them, on India's progress in developing the COVID-19 vaccine and in manufacturing diagnostic and other types of equipment related to COVID-19 and assured them of New Delhi's full cooperation in tackling the pandemic situation.²³

The MEA made efforts to address the problems of Indian nationals stranded in various parts of the world through its diplomatic missions. Reports suggest that the MEA's endeavours fetched different results in different regions. While the Indian High Commission in London was able to work out a repatriation plan in consultation with the British government, the embassy in Doha could not provide meaningful assistance to the suffering Indian migrant workers stranded there (Jain 2020). The Gulf region, which has the highest concentration of Indian expatriates, continues to be an area of concern for the MEA. The condition of Indian migrant workers in the Gulf countries is perilous as they cannot assimilate with the local population and obtain citizenship.

Consequences of migrant workers crisis

Describing the COVID-19 as a 'once-in-a-century health crisis', the World Health Organisation's (WHO) chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on 22 August 2020 expressed hope that the coronavirus pandemic would end in less than two years.²⁴ For a developing country like India, with a huge population of more than 130 crores, the challenges thrown by the COVID-19 crisis are insurmountable. The reverse migration of millions of workers has had debilitating impacts on India's economy, society, politics and foreign policy.

Economic

The COVID-19 crisis has severely affected economic activities in the Gulf countries. Numerous mega construction projects, where lakhs of Indian migrant workers are engaged, are reported to have stalled following the outbreak of the pandemic, leading to a large-scale loss of jobs. The pandemic has also immobilised the Gulf countries' transport sector as well as hotel and tourism industries, which implies that these economic enterprises are unlikely to recruit new migrant workers for some time. One of the direct consequences of the ongoing

crisis is the migrant workers' inability to earn as much as before. As a result, they are in no position to send money as they used to.²⁵

The loss of income of migrant workers across the world has badly affected the economies of remittance-recipient countries like India. Reflecting on the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on the flow of remittances throughout the world, the WB Group President David Malpass recently remarked: "Remittances are a vital source of income for developing countries. The ongoing economic recession caused by COVID-19 is taking a serious toll on the ability to send money home and makes it all the more vital that we shorten the time of recovery for advanced economies" (World Bank 2020).

The flow of remittances fell by as much as 21.1% in South Asia in 2020, and as per the projection of the WB, it was likely to reduce further in all regions of the world. Economists at the WB predict that India, the world's top recipient of remittances, will witness a fall of almost 23 per cent and that it will come down to \$64 billion in 2020 from \$ 83 billion in 2019 due to the COVID-19 crisis. The significant fall in remittances will constrain India's ability to fulfil international payment obligations (World Bank 2020; Jain 2020). Moreover, the job loss faced by millions of workers will create serious economic difficulties for them and hamper the growth of the Indian economy.

Remittances play a major role in improving the recipient families' socio-economic status, particularly in developing countries like India. Studies have shown that remittances contribute significantly towards alleviating poverty in lower- and middle-income countries, improving nutritional requirements, enabling higher spending on education and reducing child labour in economically weaker families. The fall in remittances has affected recipient families' ability to spend on these areas since more of their financial resources are focused on addressing food and livelihood issues (World Bank 2020).

The Indian economy, already under strain, is being put under additional pressure by the return of millions of unemployed migrant workers. Some Indian states relying on remittances are facing serious challenges on the financial front. The returnees will not get jobs immediately in their home states which are already reeling under high unemployment rates. Due to the ill-conceived economic policies of the current political dispensation at the Centre, India is now facing a 45-year-high unemployment rate. The return of the migrant workers will further exacerbate the unemployment crisis in India.²⁶

Not all Indian states having a sizeable expatriate population are equally dependent on remittances. According to a *Money Control* report, the economies of the two states of Kerala and Punjab are more remittance-dependent than the others. Kerala, in particular, is facing the biggest challenge as the state sends the maximum number of workers to the Gulf countries. According to the Kerala Government's Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs, nearly

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half a million workers registered to return to the state due to the COVID-19 crisis. Among them, 61,000 mentioned job loss as the reason. Those who lost their jobs are predominantly poor and need money for survival.²⁷

Social

In the current pandemic situation, the return of tens of thousands of overseas workers poses a threat to social stability and peace in their home states. Reintegration of returning migrants into their own communities is a serious issue. Another issue that requires attention is how fellow community members will receive those who test positive for the coronavirus. Experts on migrant workers are emphasising that they need great care from the home states after their repatriation.²⁸

The tackling of the post-repatriation situation against the backdrop of the fast-rising COVID-19-positive cases in India is a hugely challenging task for the home states. Labour experts apprehend that the return of lakhs of overseas migrant workers might increase the spread of COVID-19, resulting in social unrest. They also warn that the government's subsidies and aids or benefits are unlikely to reach all segments of migrant workers, which could lead to food riots and social chaos.²⁹

Following repatriation, the reintegration of millions of overseas workers with their home states may further complicate the domestic migrant workers' crisis. According to the ILO and the Asian Development Bank, as many as 41 lakh workers have lost their jobs in India due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³⁰ The combination of jobless return-migrants with such a colossal unemployed working population has enough potential to transform into a nationwide protest movement threatening law and order. The COVID-19 crisis, among other things, has also brought into limelight the indifference of the present right-of-the-centre ruling coalition, led by the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), towards the poor and under-privileged sections of the society. The domestic migrant labourers trying to escape job loss and hunger during the lockdown had often been victims of police highhandedness.

Political

It is a shame that despite the overseas migrant workers sending much-needed foreign currency to India, their COVID-19-induced misfortunes are yet to become a part of a regional or national political agenda. Most migrant workers come from a poor socio-economic background. This restricts their ability to influence India's ruling elites or develop their own constituency and boost their political clout. Kerala, a major labour-exporting state, is ruled by political parties that are not adequately represented at the national level. Other states having sizeable emigrant populations like Punjab, UP and Bihar are ruled either by national parties or regional groups allied with them. All such ruling parties have failed to demonstrate any political will to accommodate the causes of the overseas migrant workers in their political

programmes. While some former members of the diaspora can now be seen in state and national legislatures, there is no information regarding the representation of former migrant workers in the law-making process. Under the prevailing conditions, the impact of the challenges faced by overseas migrant workers on India's political dynamics has been insignificant (Pethigoda 2017).

Foreign policy

The loss of millions of overseas migrant workers' jobs also has wider implications for India's foreign policy. India is a major player in the international migration scene, particularly in terms of numbers, and, strangely, it has not yet formulated a coherent policy on international migration. The Ministry of Overseas Indian Affairs (MoIA) established the India Centre for Migration (ICM) in 2008 to serve as a research think-tank on all matters regarding international migration and to provide policy inputs to the MEA (Gurucharan 2016). The role of the ICM has become more relevant in the present pandemic situation.

In an attempt to add impetus to the overseas Indian affairs, the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government had in 2016 streamlined the institutional mechanism by merging the MoIA with the MEA, thereby entrusting the affairs of overseas Indians to the MEA and acknowledging the diaspora as an integral segment of India's broader foreign policy agenda. In recent years, top leaders of the present NDA government, including the PM and the EAM, have been trying to address the challenges facing Indian migrant workers in different regions of the world. They have addressed Indian diaspora gatherings and expressed their appreciation for their contributions to the home country. They have also visited several labour camps, especially in the Gulf countries, expressing concern for the workers' well-being (Pethigoda 2017).

India tries to promote migration for its dual benefits—remittance and employment. However, the Indian government has not succeeded in addressing the fundamental issues of migrant workers: safety and welfare. Nearly 80% of Indian migrants are poor and illiterate blue-collar workers. They go to foreign countries to earn and send most of their earnings back to their families. A crisis such as the ongoing pandemic hits them worse than the others, and their families suffer the consequences along with them (Hussain 2015).

Seeing the stranded migrant workers' current deplorable conditions, especially in the Gulf, the Indian embassies are being called upon to play more proactive roles and provide financial assistance to the stranded migrants (Jain 2020). India's remittances from its overseas workers in the Gulf region is much higher than those received from other destinations. Despite unfavourable working conditions, the Gulf has attracted millions of Indian nationals over the years. Nevertheless, several pressing issues, including non-payment of wages, increasing cost of living and more restrictions on foreign workers, are casting a shadow on the Gulf's reputation as the favourite destination of Indian workers (Gurucharan 2016).

Even after noticing the fast-deteriorating conditions in the region known to be a major destination for Indian migrant workers, New Delhi is yet to develop an institutional and permanent mechanism with host countries to evacuate its workers in times of crises (Gurucharan 2016; Hussain 2015; Paliath 2018). Even in emergencies, the Indian government's approach towards this volatile region is more reactive than proactive. The present pandemic has once again demonstrated the government's lackadaisical attitude towards migrant workers in the region.

Repatriation and rehabilitation of the migrant workers: A roadmap

Many Indian workers stranded in foreign countries, especially in the Gulf, cannot afford air tickets to go home. Social activists have pointed out that the union government is ignoring the plight of migrant workers: it is not utilising the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF), which is meant to help Indian expatriates during emergency as well as critical situations. The ICWF provides lodging, emergency medical care, air passage, legal assistance, and other services to the expatriates in need. Social activists argue that despite the ICWF having a surplus fund, the MEA has not initiated any step for its utilisation in a grave pandemic-induced crisis like this (Pethigoda 2017).³¹

The protection of overseas migrant workers is the responsibility of the MEA. However, once they are brought back home, the government's intervention ends. Indian workers stranded in different regions of the world are now returning in phases. Some of these returnees have financial resources and will look for suitable opportunities to invest in projects to earn a living in India (Pullanoor 2020).

The return of workers from foreign countries, especially the Gulf, is not a new development. This has been happening for the last 2–3 decades. The ongoing COVID-19 crisis has exposed the Indian migrant workers' miserable conditions once again. A major issue is that the state governments, except Kerala and Telangana, do not have well-defined policies or programmes for the rehabilitation of returnees. The non-governmental organisations (NGOs) focusing on the problems of migrant workers argue that they might have gone abroad as just labourers but have returned with some skill and experience. The government should provide them institutional support for rehabilitation.³²

Labour experts believe that the pandemic has opened up fresh opportunities for migration to new destinations for the repatriates, but they need to upgrade their skills before re-migration. The repatriates could improve their abilities under the Skill India Scheme for at least six months. Such capacity-building will facilitate their re-migration to new countries like Indonesia, Japan or Kenya by next summer (Pullanoor 2020).

With the objective of making the best of skilled Indian workers returning to the country due to the pandemic, the union government has recently launched an initiative called Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) to conduct a skill-mapping exercise of the returnees under the VBM. In order to generate employment opportunities, details of SWADES registration have been integrated with Skill India's Atmanirbhar Skilled Employee Employer Mapping (ASEEM) portal, which was launched on 10 July 2020. All data regarding returning Indian workers have also been shared with relevant state governments.³³

An expert committee on COVID-19 appointed by the Kerala government has recommended that the poor returning migrants be provided a sum of Rs 20,000 to 1,00,000 for at least two months and helped improve their skills to find jobs outside the Gulf. To rehabilitate returning migrants, the Kerala government has also launched a scheme offering subsidised loans of up to Rs 3 million for setting up small business enterprises.³⁴

In another positive development, the Telangana government has stepped up efforts since September 2020 to rehabilitate the Gulf migrants who have recently returned to the state. The state government has decided to train the returnees, especially those working as labourers in the construction sector, at the National Academy of Construction (NAC) and has assured them of employment in the local construction sector in consultation with realtors and builders. Till 5 September 2020, over 19,000 migrants had registered with the NAC following their return from the Gulf countries. Details of the registered returnees have been shared with different realtors and builder associations.³⁵

Recent reports suggest that the local construction sector has already absorbed about 4,500 repatriated workers. The NAC seeks to train 15,000 returnees in the next six months. Top officials of the Telangana Overseas Management Company (TOMCOM), a state government initiative for skill development, training and overseas recruitment, have observed that the demand for skilled professionals in the post-pandemic period is expected to rise across the world. According to them, the pandemic has triggered a loss of jobs mainly for unskilled workers; employers are willing to retain skilled employees.³⁶

The government should also keep in mind the female migrant workers while undertaking rehabilitation measures. Women are said to constitute nearly half of all international migrants. The Indian female migrant workers are primarily engaged in the health sector in the Gulf countries. The COVID-19 crisis has equally affected the overseas female workers, and they too deserve special attention. A South Asia migration specialist at the ILO has suggested that the government initiate 'gender-responsive' policies that would ensure jobs and employment contracts protecting female workers' rights.³⁷ Experts hope that there will be a surge in demand for healthcare and nursing professionals in the UK, Japan and other countries. The TOMCOM has recently signed Memoranda of Understanding with the UK to facilitate recruitment of nurses from Telangana.³⁸

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Labour experts believe that about 1,00,000 returnees will re-migrate. In recent months, Indian workers have already started to return to the Gulf and other countries to rejoin their jobs. During the 3 November 2020 annual dialogue, EAM Jaishankar urged GCC countries' leadership to facilitate the return of Indian workers and professionals who want to resume work following the easing of COVID-19-related restrictions through sustainable travel-bubble arrangements with India (Pullanoor 2020).³⁹

The MEA must formulate a long-term plan to protect the interests of migrant workers. This has become all the more necessary in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. The MEA should recalibrate its policies to counter growing protectionism in countries with a huge presence of Indian expatriates by leveraging its economic prowess and close commercial ties with those countries. Labour experts suggest that Indian embassies in the Gulf countries could file cases in labour courts to recover wages. The migrant workers, who are not in a position to hire lawyers and fight a court battle in a foreign country, could give power of attorney to the Indian embassy to litigate on their behalf.⁴⁰

India needs to devise a comprehensive strategy to engage with the recruitment agencies and employers in the Gulf countries on behalf of the affected migrant workers at bilateral as well as multilateral levels. A number of NGOs and philanthropic organisations operated by the Indian diaspora in the Gulf countries, including the Migrant Workers' Protection Society (Bahrain), Indian Forum (Saudi Arabia), Indian Social Club-Charity Wing (Oman) and Kerala Social Centre (UAE), have been urging the MEA to address the problems of the stranded Indian migrant workers (Ministry of External Affairs n.d.) Adopting a proactive and action-oriented approach to diaspora affairs will not only protect India's core economic interests but also facilitate a forging of mutual partnerships with the Gulf countries. Besides, it will offer New Delhi an opportunity to leverage its soft power in a strategically important region (Pethigoda 2017).

Conclusion

The rehabilitation of millions of migrant workers across India is the most serious post-repatriation issue facing the union and state governments. It is quite disheartening to note that the country's ruling classes have so far only resorted to occasional political rhetoric on the issue; the measures announced for the welfare of migrant workers have been half-hearted and piecemeal. In view of the lingering COVID-19 crisis and its adverse economic consequences, the prospect of unskilled migrant workers getting their jobs back is bleak. Under such circumstances, the repatriated workers must find livelihood options within the home country until the world gets rid of the novel coronavirus. Both the union and state governments need to tackle the returnees with empathy. A proper utilisation of their experience and skill through financial and institutional support could be beneficial for the migrants as well as the country.

India's governing elites must adopt a holistic approach and generate sufficient political will to address the unprecedented humanitarian crisis set in motion by the pandemic that has devastated migrant workers. The current political dispensation at the Centre must look beyond the conventional paradigm of India's federal polity, where the Constitution delineates the subjects of governance between the union and state governments. It is not an appropriate time to indulge in political expediency of the Machiavellian variety. Labour rights activists across Asia have reasoned that extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures—this is all the more relevant for a leading labour-exporting country like India. The need of the hour is to develop a synergy between domestic and foreign policies concerning the overseas migrant workers by taking all stakeholders on board.

Notes

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