

Social Impact of COVID-19 Lockdowns on Indian Migrant Workers: A Survey-Based Investigation

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Abstract:

This research investigates the social impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Indian migrant workers, aiming to fill a literature gap by providing empirical insights into their experiences and challenges during the pandemic. Utilizing a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected through structured interviews with 200 migrant workers across various regions of India. The study analyzed the impact on employment status, sources of financial support, mental health outcomes, changes in social support networks, access to healthcare services, coping mechanisms, perception of government support, and willingness to return to urban centers for work. The findings highlight a significant decline in employment, reliance on savings and remittances, heightened mental health burden, erosion of social support networks, barriers to healthcare access, diverse coping strategies, dissatisfaction with government support, and reluctance to return to urban centers post-lockdown. These findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions and policy responses to address the socio-economic and psychological needs of migrant workers, promote resilience, and build more inclusive and equitable societies.

Keywords: COVID-19, Lockdown, Migrant Workers, Social Impact, Employment, Mental Health, Social Support, Healthcare Access, Coping Mechanisms, Government Support.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 has profoundly reshaped the global landscape, affecting various spheres of life, from health to the economy, and fundamentally altering social structures. The pandemic has been particularly impactful on the labor sector, with its effects resonating deeply among migrant worker communities worldwide. These impacts have not only highlighted the vulnerabilities and challenges faced by migrant workers but also brought to the forefront the critical need for robust policy frameworks to support these essential yet often marginalized members of society (D. Zacharia, 2024).

In India, migrant workers form a significant portion of the urban labor force, contributing to major sectors such as construction, manufacturing, and services. The sudden imposition of lockdowns in response to the pandemic left millions of these workers without income, housing, or food security, forcing a large-scale migration on foot back to their native villages (C. David & T. Pugaletnhi, 2020). This mass movement exposed not only the immediate hardships faced by these workers but also the long-term socio-economic implications of such disruptions (A. Vyas et al., 2024).

The significance of this research lies in understanding these multi-dimensional impacts, particularly the social consequences that extend beyond immediate economic hardships. By investigating the broader

social implications of the lockdown measures on Indian migrant workers, this study seeks to contribute valuable insights that could inform policy decisions aimed at better supporting migrant communities in future crises. This involves exploring aspects such as mental health, social isolation, and changes in social networks, which have profound implications for the wellbeing and social stability of this vulnerable population (R. Prasad & D.K. Behera, 2024).

The overview provided here, grounded in recent scholarly work, sets the stage for a detailed examination of how such unprecedented global health challenges have reshaped the lives of migrant workers in India, highlighting the urgent need for targeted research and intervention strategies to mitigate these impacts and support the recovery and resilience of this critical workforce segment.

2. Literature Review

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on migrant communities in India, triggering a wide array of social challenges that have been examined through various scholarly lenses. This section reviews key literature that explores the social ramifications of the pandemic on these communities.

ÖA Cetrez and S Kaynak (2023) focused on the psychosocial health of migrant workers in India, highlighting the cultural and religious resources that support resilience and coping mechanisms during crises. Their study emphasizes the severe psychosocial impacts caused by the pandemic, noting how migrant workers utilize their cultural and religious beliefs to navigate these challenges. The authors applied a qualitative methodology, gathering data through interviews and observations to provide a comprehensive analysis of the coping strategies employed by migrants during the lockdown period.

In another significant study, DS Panda et al. (2023) conducted a critical review of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Indian micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), with a particular focus on the displacement of migrant workers. Their research methodology involved a thorough review of existing literature combined with economic analysis to understand the broader economic disruptions caused by the migration of workers back to their native places during lockdowns. Their findings highlight the vulnerability of MSMEs and the cascading effects on employment for migrant workers.

G John, M Snowden, and J Halsall (2024) explored the economic impact of the pandemic on unskilled migrant workers in India, assessing how these impacts have altered social enterprise roles and support structures. They used a literature review method to synthesize existing research and applied economic theories to analyze the shifts in employment patterns and social safety nets. Their work illustrates the shift in social enterprises towards more supportive roles, providing essential services and support to migrant workers during the pandemic.

S Dwivedi and A Gupta (2024) addressed the strategic responses to skill gaps among health employees, indirectly highlighting the challenges faced by migrant workers in the health sector during the pandemic. Their research, using a systematic review of existing literature, pointed out the critical need for training and skill development to better equip the healthcare workforce, which includes a significant number of migrants, in managing pandemic-related challenges.

These studies collectively offer a diverse perspective on the social impacts of COVID-19 on migrant workers in India, emphasizing the need for comprehensive policy responses and support systems to mitigate these effects. The literature demonstrates a significant development in the field, showing a progression from immediate economic analyses to more in-depth explorations of psychosocial impacts and the strategic planning required to support vulnerable populations such as migrant workers during unprecedented global health crises. The existing literature predominantly focuses on the economic and

psychosocial impacts of COVID-19 on Indian migrant workers, often neglecting to delve deeply into the survey-based examination of their social experiences during the lockdowns. This study aims to bridge this gap by employing a survey-based approach to directly gather insights into the social impacts of the lockdowns on migrant workers. By doing so, it seeks to provide a nuanced understanding of how social factors such as mental health, social isolation, and changes in social networks have been affected, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of the overall impact of the pandemic on this vulnerable population. Such insights are crucial for informing targeted policy interventions and support measures tailored to address the specific social needs of Indian migrant workers in times of crisis.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design:

This study employed a cross-sectional survey design to collect data on the social impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Indian migrant workers. The survey questionnaire was developed based on extensive literature review and consultation with experts in the field to ensure validity and reliability.

3.2 Data Collection:

The data for this study were collected through structured interviews conducted with Indian migrant workers who had been affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns. The interviews were conducted telephonically to ensure safety and convenience for the participants. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and was conducted in a semi-structured format to allow for both predetermined questions and exploratory discussions based on participant responses.

The interviews were carried out by trained research assistants who had prior experience in conducting surveys and interviews with migrant populations. Before commencing the interviews, participants were provided with detailed information about the purpose of the study, confidentiality measures, and their rights as participants. Informed consent was obtained from each participant before proceeding with the interview.

A purposive sampling technique was employed to select participants who represented a diverse range of demographic characteristics, including age, gender, occupation, and geographical location. Efforts were made to ensure adequate representation of different regions and sectors where migrant workers are prevalent, such as construction, manufacturing, and services.

Table 1: Data Collection Details

Parameter	Description
Data Source	Telephonic structured interviews with Indian migrant workers
Sampling Technique	Purposive sampling
Sample Size	200 participants
Interview Duration	Approximately 30 minutes per interview
Interview Format	Semi-structured
Interview Language	Hindi and English
Data Collection Period	November 2023 to January 2024

3.3 Data Analysis:

The qualitative data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis. This involved identifying recurring themes, patterns, and variations in participants' responses regarding the social impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns. The qualitative analysis was conducted using NVivo, a software tool commonly used for organizing and analyzing qualitative data. Thematic analysis allowed for a comprehensive exploration of the various social dimensions affected by the lockdowns, including mental health, social support networks, and coping mechanisms among migrant workers.

4. Results and Analysis

4.1 Demographic Characteristics:

Table 1: Distribution of Participants by Region

Region	Number of Participants
North	45
South	35
East	30
West	25
Central	20
Northeast	15
Total	170

Interpretation: The participants were distributed across various regions of India, with the highest representation from the North region (45 participants) and the lowest from the Northeast region (15 participants). This distribution ensures a diverse geographical representation, allowing for insights into the regional variations in the social impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on migrant workers. The distribution of participants by region indicates that the study has captured perspectives from different parts of the country, which is essential for understanding how the impact of the lockdowns varied across regions. Regional differences in government policies, healthcare infrastructure, and socio-economic factors may have influenced the experiences of migrant workers during the pandemic.

Table 2: Demographic Profile of Participants

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Gender	
Male	65 (76.5%)
Female	20 (23.5%)
Age Group	
18-30 years	40 (47.1%)
31-45 years	45 (52.9%)
Education Level	
Primary/Secondary	50 (58.8%)

Demographic Characteristic	Frequency (%)
Higher Education	35 (41.2%)
Occupation	
Construction Worker	60 (70.6%)
Factory Worker	25 (29.4%)

Interpretation: The majority of participants were male (76.5%), aged between 18-45 years (100%), and had primary or secondary education (58.8%). The most common occupation among participants was construction work (70.6%). The demographic profile reflects the typical characteristics of Indian migrant workers, who are predominantly male, young, and engaged in manual labor jobs. The high representation of construction workers aligns with the significant contribution of migrant labor to the construction industry in India. Understanding the demographic profile of participants is crucial for contextualizing the findings and tailoring interventions to address their specific needs.

Table 3: Impact of Lockdown on Employment Status

Employment Status	Before Lockdown	During Lockdown
Employed	150	40
Unemployed	20	130
Total	170	170

Interpretation: Before the lockdown, the majority of participants (150 out of 170) were employed. However, during the lockdown, the number of employed participants decreased significantly to 40, while the number of unemployed participants increased substantially to 130. The data indicate a drastic impact of the lockdown on the employment status of migrant workers, with a sharp increase in unemployment rates. This abrupt loss of livelihoods highlights the vulnerability of migrant workers to external shocks such as pandemics and underscores the need for interventions to support their economic resilience during crises.

Table 4: Sources of Financial Support During Lockdown

Financial Support Source	Percentage of Participants
Savings	40%
Remittances	25%
Government Aid	20%
NGO Support	10%
Family and Friends	5%

Interpretation: The majority of participants relied on their savings (40%) and remittances from family members (25%) as their primary sources of financial support during the lockdown. A smaller percentage received aid from the government (20%), NGOs (10%), or assistance from family and friends (5%). The data illustrate the diverse sources of financial support accessed by migrant workers during the lockdown. While savings and remittances played significant roles, government aid and NGO support were also

accessed by a considerable portion of participants. Understanding these support mechanisms is crucial for designing targeted interventions and strengthening social safety nets for migrant workers in times of crisis.

Table 5: Perceived Mental Health Impact of Lockdown

Mental Health Impact	Percentage of Participants
Increased Stress	65%
Anxiety	50%
Depression	40%
Loneliness	30%
PTSD Symptoms	20%

Interpretation: The majority of participants reported experiencing increased stress (65%), followed by anxiety (50%) and depression (40%) during the lockdown. A significant portion also reported feelings of loneliness (30%) and symptoms indicative of post-traumatic stress disorder (20%). The data highlight the adverse mental health impacts of the lockdown on migrant workers, underscoring the need for mental health support and interventions. The prevalence of stress, anxiety, and depression among participants reflects the psychological toll of economic uncertainty, social isolation, and fear of the virus. Addressing mental health needs is essential for promoting the overall well-being and resilience of migrant workers in crisis situations.

Table 6: Changes in Social Support Networks

Changes in Social Support Networks	Percentage of Participants
Decreased	55%
No Change	30%
Increased	15%

Interpretation: A majority of participants (55%) reported a decrease in their social support networks during the lockdown, while 30% reported no change, and 15% reported an increase. The data indicate a significant disruption in the social support systems of migrant workers during the lockdown. The decrease in social support networks may exacerbate feelings of isolation and contribute to heightened mental health concerns among this population. Understanding these changes is critical for developing targeted interventions to strengthen social support systems and promote resilience among migrant workers facing crises.

Table 7: Access to Healthcare Services During Lockdown

Healthcare Access	Percentage of Participants
Decreased	60%
No Change	25%
Increased	15%

Interpretation: A majority of participants (60%) reported a decrease in access to healthcare services during the lockdown, while 25% reported no change, and 15% reported an increase. The data highlight challenges in accessing healthcare services faced by migrant workers during the lockdown. Reduced access to

healthcare may exacerbate health inequalities and hinder timely medical interventions, potentially worsening health outcomes for this vulnerable population. Addressing barriers to healthcare access is crucial for ensuring the health and well-being of migrant workers, particularly during health crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 8: Coping Mechanisms Adopted During Lockdown

Coping Mechanism	Percentage of Participants
Prayer/Meditation	45%
Engaging in Hobbies	30%
Seeking Social Support	25%
Exercise	20%
Substance Use	10%

Interpretation: The most common coping mechanism reported by participants was prayer or meditation (45%), followed by engaging in hobbies (30%) and seeking social support (25%). A smaller percentage reported coping through exercise (20%), while substance use was reported by 10% of participants. The data reveal diverse coping strategies adopted by migrant workers to navigate the challenges posed by the lockdown. While religious and recreational activities provide solace for some, others rely on social connections and physical activity for support and stress relief. However, the presence of substance use highlights the need for targeted interventions to address maladaptive coping behaviors and promote healthier alternatives during times of crisis.

Table 9: Perception of Government Support

Perception of Government Support	Percentage of Participants
Inadequate	70%
Adequate	20%
Not Sure	10%

Interpretation: The majority of participants (70%) perceived government support during the lockdown as inadequate, while 20% considered it adequate, and 10% were unsure. The data reflect widespread dissatisfaction among migrant workers regarding the level of government support received during the lockdown. Perceptions of inadequacy may stem from delays or difficulties in accessing relief measures, inconsistencies in distribution, or inadequacy of support provided. Addressing these perceptions is crucial for building trust and ensuring effective government responses to future crises affecting migrant populations.

Table 10: Willingness to Return to Urban Centers for Work

Willingness to Return	Percentage of Participants
Yes	40%
No	50%
Undecided	10%

Interpretation: A significant portion of participants (50%) expressed unwillingness to return to urban centers for work post-lockdown, while 40% indicated willingness, and 10% were undecided. The data suggest apprehension among migrant workers about returning to urban centers for work, possibly due to concerns about future lockdowns, job security, or health risks. Addressing these concerns and creating conducive work environments will be essential for rebuilding migrant workers' confidence and ensuring their participation in economic activities post-pandemic.

5. Discussion:

The findings presented in Section 4 shed light on the multifaceted impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on Indian migrant workers, offering insights into their socio-economic and psychological experiences during this unprecedented crisis. In this discussion, we analyze and interpret the results, compare them with existing literature, and explore their implications in addressing the identified literature gap.

Impact on Employment Status: The data revealed a significant decline in employment status among migrant workers during the lockdown, with a substantial portion transitioning from being employed to unemployed. This finding aligns with literature highlighting the vulnerability of migrant workers to economic shocks during crises (DS Panda et al., 2023). The abrupt loss of livelihoods underscores the precarious nature of informal employment in India's urban sectors, where migrant workers are often employed in low-skilled and temporary jobs (G John et al., 2024). By providing empirical evidence of this phenomenon, our study corroborates previous research while offering real-time insights into the scale and immediacy of the impact.

Sources of Financial Support: The reliance on savings and remittances as primary sources of financial support during the lockdown mirrors findings from existing literature on coping strategies among migrant workers during crises (ÖA Cetrez & S Kaynak, 2023). However, the relatively low percentage of participants receiving government aid highlights gaps in relief measures and the need for more inclusive and accessible support mechanisms (A. Vyas et al., 2024). Our study underscores the importance of strengthening social safety nets and ensuring equitable access to assistance programs to mitigate the socio-economic fallout of future crises on migrant workers.

Mental Health Impact: The prevalence of increased stress, anxiety, and depression among migrant workers during the lockdown underscores the profound psychological toll of the pandemic. These findings resonate with literature emphasizing the psychosocial vulnerabilities of migrant populations during periods of uncertainty and upheaval (ÖA Cetrez & S Kaynak, 2023). The high levels of psychological distress underscore the urgent need for mental health support tailored to the unique needs of migrant workers, including culturally sensitive interventions that acknowledge their religious and social coping mechanisms (R. Prasad & D.K. Behera, 2024). Our study contributes to filling the literature gap by providing empirical evidence of the mental health challenges faced by migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Changes in Social Support Networks: The decrease in social support networks reported by a majority of participants highlights the erosion of social capital among migrant communities during the lockdown. This finding is consistent with literature documenting the disruption of social networks and support systems among migrant populations during crises (G John et al., 2024). The diminished social support may exacerbate feelings of isolation and exacerbate mental health issues, emphasizing the interconnectedness of social and psychological well-being (ÖA Cetrez & S Kaynak, 2023). Our study

underscores the importance of strengthening community-based support networks and fostering social cohesion among migrant workers to promote resilience in times of adversity.

Access to Healthcare Services: The reduced access to healthcare services reported by a majority of participants reflects systemic barriers to healthcare faced by migrant workers, exacerbated by the pandemic. This finding echoes existing literature highlighting disparities in healthcare access and utilization among migrant populations (S Dwivedi & A Gupta, 2024). The lack of adequate healthcare access during the lockdown not only jeopardizes individual health outcomes but also poses broader public health risks, as undetected and untreated illnesses may exacerbate the spread of infectious diseases (DS Panda et al., 2023). Our study underscores the need for policy interventions to address structural barriers to healthcare access and ensure equitable health services for migrant workers.

Coping Mechanisms: The diverse coping mechanisms adopted by migrant workers during the lockdown reflect their resilience and adaptability in the face of adversity. While religious practices and engagement in hobbies provide solace for some, others rely on social support and physical activity for stress relief. However, the presence of maladaptive coping behaviors such as substance use underscores the importance of targeted interventions to promote healthy coping strategies and address underlying psychosocial stressors (ÖA Cetrez & S Kaynak, 2023). Our study contributes to filling the literature gap by providing insights into the coping mechanisms employed by migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting both adaptive and maladaptive strategies.

Perception of Government Support: The perception of inadequate government support among a majority of participants reflects systemic shortcomings in relief efforts and highlights the need for more effective and inclusive policy responses. This finding resonates with literature critiquing the uneven distribution and effectiveness of government aid programs in reaching marginalized populations, including migrant workers (A. Vyas et al., 2024). The perceived inadequacy of government support underscores the importance of accountability and transparency in relief efforts, as well as the need for community-based approaches that empower migrant communities to advocate for their rights and access resources (G John et al., 2024). Our study contributes to filling the literature gap by providing empirical evidence of migrant workers' perceptions of government support during the pandemic, highlighting areas for improvement in future crisis response efforts.

Willingness to Return to Urban Centers: The reluctance of many migrant workers to return to urban centers for work post-lockdown reflects lingering concerns about safety, stability, and livelihood security. This finding aligns with literature emphasizing the importance of addressing structural vulnerabilities and creating enabling environments that support migrant workers' well-being and agency (DS Panda et al., 2023). The hesitance to return underscores the need for comprehensive policy responses that address both immediate economic needs and long-term systemic challenges, including access to affordable housing, healthcare, and social protection (A. Vyas et al., 2024). Our study contributes to filling the literature gap by providing insights into migrant workers' intentions and preferences regarding post-lockdown migration patterns, informing policy discussions on urban planning, labor markets, and social welfare systems.

Overall Implications and Significance: The findings of this study have significant implications for policy, practice, and research aimed at supporting Indian migrant workers during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. By documenting the socio-economic and psychological impacts of lockdowns on migrant communities, our study underscores the urgency of tailored interventions that address their unique needs and vulnerabilities. From enhancing access to healthcare and social support to strengthening economic resilience and promoting mental well-being, the findings provide valuable insights for policymakers,

practitioners, and advocates working to build more inclusive and equitable societies. Moreover, by filling the literature gap through empirical investigation and comparison with existing research, this study contributes to advancing knowledge and understanding of the social impact of COVID-19 on Indian migrant workers, paving the way for future research and intervention efforts in this critical area.

6. Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive examination of the social impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on Indian migrant workers, shedding light on their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies during this unprecedented crisis. The main findings of the study highlight the profound socio-economic and psychological repercussions of the pandemic on migrant communities, underscoring the need for targeted interventions and policy responses to address their unique needs and vulnerabilities.

The findings reveal a stark decline in employment status among migrant workers during the lockdown, emphasizing the precarious nature of informal employment in urban sectors and the urgent need for economic support and livelihood interventions. Moreover, the reliance on savings and remittances as primary sources of financial support underscores the inadequacy of existing social safety nets and the need for more inclusive and accessible relief measures to mitigate the socio-economic fallout of future crises on migrant workers.

Furthermore, the study highlights the significant mental health burden faced by migrant workers during the lockdown, with high levels of stress, anxiety, and depression reported among participants. These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing mental health support and psychosocial interventions tailored to the unique needs and coping mechanisms of migrant communities, including culturally sensitive approaches that acknowledge their religious and social contexts.

The erosion of social support networks among migrant workers during the lockdown further exacerbates feelings of isolation and distress, underscoring the interconnectedness of social and psychological well-being. Strengthening community-based support systems and fostering social cohesion among migrant communities are crucial for promoting resilience and enhancing overall well-being in times of crisis.

Moreover, the study highlights systemic barriers to healthcare access faced by migrant workers, exacerbated by the pandemic. Addressing these structural inequalities and ensuring equitable access to healthcare services are essential for safeguarding the health and well-being of migrant populations and preventing further health disparities.

The findings also reflect widespread dissatisfaction among migrant workers regarding the adequacy of government support during the lockdown, highlighting the need for more effective and inclusive policy responses that prioritize the needs of marginalized populations. Building trust, transparency, and accountability in relief efforts are crucial for ensuring that migrant workers receive the support and resources they need to navigate crises and rebuild their lives.

In conclusion, this study contributes valuable insights into the social impact of COVID-19 on Indian migrant workers, filling a significant literature gap and informing policy, practice, and research efforts aimed at supporting and empowering migrant communities. By documenting their experiences, challenges, and coping strategies, this study underscores the resilience and strength of migrant workers in the face of adversity, while also highlighting the systemic inequalities and structural barriers that perpetuate their vulnerability. Moving forward, concerted efforts are needed to address these issues and build more inclusive and equitable societies that prioritize the well-being and dignity of all individuals, regardless of their socio-economic status or migratory status.

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