

# Survival to Revival: COVID-19 and The Migrant Workers Of India

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**Abstract-** This paper analyzes the impact of COVID-19 on the labour sector in India from a microeconomic perspective as well as from the eyes of migrant grass-rooted work-force. This pandemic will also cause a tremendous upheaval amongst the different factors of production from labour to capital. This will necessitate policy changes by the government in order to aid the labour sector in its recovery amidst this growing distress. This paper also seeks to suggest labour reforms that must take place in order to revive the economy post-coronavirus.

**Index terms-** COVID-19, labour laws, migrants, workers

## I. INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 has been more than troubling global markets ever since it broke out in China in December, 2019. In order to control the outbreak, China entered a state of complete lockdown by January 2020. This caused a huge shift in the world manufacturing market as countries rushed to reduce their dependence for manufactured products from China and moved to nations such as the United States, Germany and Japan<sup>[i]</sup>. As China apparently got rid of the virus by April, 2020, nations such as the United States and India experienced significant growth in the number of coronavirus cases, leading to a complete lockdown in India effective from 25<sup>th</sup> March, 2020<sup>[iii]</sup>. In the face of this crisis, all forms of transportation were completely suspended, which effectively deprived the migrant labourers of their right to go back home to their villages and be with their families in these tough times. To add to this, there was absolutely no forewarning or notification of the lockdown. It was initiated just a few hours after its announcement. This left absolutely no time for migrants to escape the death that was inevitably waiting for them in the city, with almost no supply of ration or any other form of nutrition. This is where the issue of the labourers took a turn for the worse. It led to dissatisfaction on a number of parameters, eventually leading to crimes and illegal movement of labourers. However, the lockdown extension on 13<sup>th</sup> April, 2020 sealed the deal. The helpless labourers were in for a tough time.

## MONEY MATTERS

Unhappiness amongst labourers is ballooning. One of the main factors enhancing this state of depression are that these migrants are daily-wage workers, who strive endlessly to make ends meet. In the case of lockdowns and industries completely shutting shop, these workers have no source of work and income, and no shelter at all. Emotions are at an all-time high as everyone seeks to be safe with their families in these testing times. Many are in dire financial straits, as depicted in an excerpt from a conversation with a migrant worker from Bihar, currently stuck in Mumbai:

“There was a time when we used to send our savings home, but now, times are such that we are forced to write to ailing parents and starving families asking for money.”<sup>[iii]</sup>

Source : [As migrant workers struggle for lockdown aid, India seeks to count them.](#)

Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-migrants-fea/as-migrant-workers-struggle-for-lockdown-aid-india-seeks-to-count-them-idUSKCN22B005>

(Accessed 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2020)

Such is the helplessness of the migrant workers. Even with recent policy changes made by the Railways<sup>[iv]</sup>, according to which they will run special trains for the sole purpose of sending migrants home, many migrants cannot get access to a ticket or have willingly chosen not to go home for the fear that they might not get to come back for a very long time. Some migrants have completely lost any iota of faith that they might have had in the government. Deepak Kumar, a migrant from MP expresses his grievances and gives reasons for his decision to leave the city. Even in such times, respect holds great importance for these labourers. He is respected at home, and even if he died in this hellhole of a city, no one would care. He exposes the reality on the ground by telling us how ration fit for 2 families is given to 10, and supplies given for a day do not even last a single meal<sup>[v]</sup>.

## PANDEMIC PLANNING

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On 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2020, PM Narendra Modi announced a 20-lakh crore fiscal stimulus package to salvage the sinking Indian economy<sup>[vi]</sup>. However, as the Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman conveyed the details of the stimulus, migrant workers weren't very pleased. Following are details of the fiscal package:

1. FM Sitharaman has announced free food grains supply to all migrants in the next two months. The families of the migrants not holding ration cards will be given 5 kg wheat or rice or 1 kg pulse per family. Rs 3,500 crore will be spent on this in the next two months to benefit 8 crore migrant workers<sup>[vii]</sup>.
2. The government aims to make minimum wages applicable to all workers, which is now applicable only to 30% to workers. It also aims to remove the disparity between minimum wage and compulsorily give appointment letters to all workers.
3. More migrant workers can now get work in their own states under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) as more work has been generated. Wage rate has also been increased from Rs 182 to Rs 202<sup>[viii]</sup>.
4. The Centre has allowed state governments to use the disaster response fund to arrange food and shelter for the migrant workers. Rs 11,000 crore has been sent in that fund.
5. Govt to launch a scheme for affordable rental housing for migrant workers/urban poor to provide ease of living by converting govt funded housing in cities into Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) under Public Private Partnership (PPP) mode through concessionaire.
6. Ration cards portability to be introduced. As of now, ration cards can only be used in the state wherein they are registered. 'One nation, one ration card' will be implemented within August. Ration cards would be used anywhere in India<sup>[ix]</sup>.
7. 1200 Shramik trains to transport migrants to their homes are ready to run. Thus, 300 can be run each day.

These measures were announced by FM Nirmala Sitharaman as the 2<sup>nd</sup> tranche of the economic stimulus on 15<sup>th</sup> May, 2020. However, the nature of these announcements and the following implementation of such decisions taken previously leads many to question the success that these policies will enjoy. Following is a statement of reasons that seeks to demonstrate the many obstacles that these policies might face in their implementation:

#### POLICY PROBLEMS

The primary drawback of this fiscal package is how it aims to complete its goals by only August or September, which will be far too late a time for what the economy and the nation requires right now. The FM has stated that the government "aims to introduce ration card portability and aims to implement the 'One nation, One ration card' scheme by August. The economy and its workers have already suffered lakhs of crores of damage and this package seeks to fulfil its goals by August. This is not a feasible option. Migrants are walking thousands of kilometres in the sweltering heat to reach their villages, with many dying of starvation and dehydration along the way. Ramesh Kumar, a migrant worker heading home to Bihar along with his 8-month old pregnant wife and elderly mother have already travelled over 490 km and have to travel 486 km more on foot. Even his wife, who is pregnant, has not rested in the past 3 days and not had a proper meal in 2 days. The harsh reality of this crisis is that it is not the coronavirus so much, rather it is the government's appalling handling of this problem that may lead to many more migrant deaths.

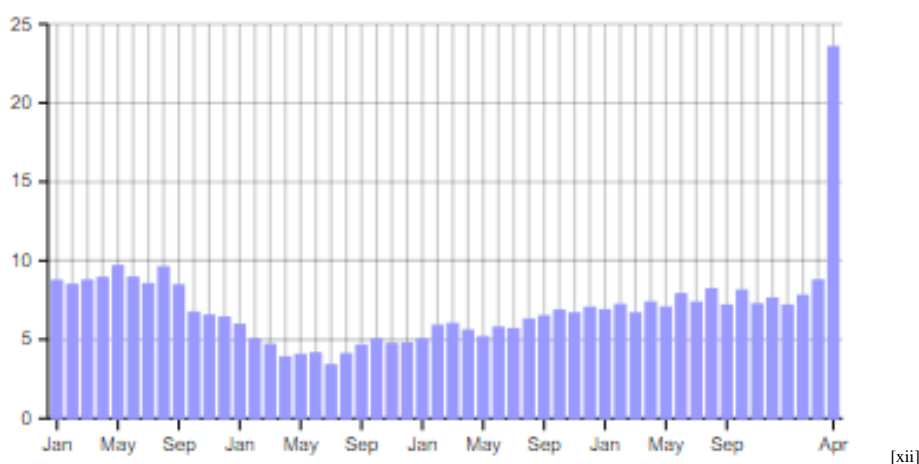
In addition to this, the FM announced that food grains will be provided to all migrants, free of cost for the next 2 months. However, this is the announcement with the biggest loopholes. The appalling lack of data collected by the government about the migrants is the biggest hindrance to this resolution. A campaign undertaken by Indus Action, an organization committed to bridging the gap between law and action, has revealed shocking results. In a poll of over 11,000 migrant workers, 94% of them were eligible for at least 1 benefit, however, 20% could not avail of any such scheme<sup>[x]</sup>. This worrying trend is attributed to Aadhaar linkage problems and mobile numbers not being registered by banks. Thus, this lack of data has come to bite the government in the back. There is no way for the government to identify which citizens should be allowed avail of this scheme as even non-ration cardholders are applicable to avail benefits. Thus, those who have enough will have the ability to get more ration which they do not deserve to avail of. The quality of ration provided at government outlets has also been the centre of much controversy and is a highly debatable issue. The chief and most glaring loophole is the fact that there is no mention in this package of how its implementation will be ensured. India is a country known for its corruption, and that must apply in this case too. There is absolutely no reference to the dishonesty of the government officials and this has been noticed very frequently in the recent past. It is a similar state of affairs in the state government's disaster response fund. The Centre has given state governments permission to use 11,000 crores towards providing shelter and food to migrant workers. However, corruption could cause a huge dent in this too. The government also claims that 8 crore migrant workers will benefit from this scheme<sup>[xi]</sup>. However, the ground reality is far from this figure. Deepak Pandey, a migrant who travelled over 900 kilometres in the past 2 days without food and a very young daughter says that he hasn't eaten anything but a few biscuits in the past 2 days. There was no ration left at his house. When reporters told him about the free ration scheme announced by the government, he aggravatedly said that the free ration is given to only those with money. People like him, who are dying of starvation are shooed away like dogs.

This shows the opacity of the government's statements on such problems and raises the issue of citizens' over-reliance on government figures and declarations.

Another major controversy is surrounding the implementation of the Shramik trains run by the government to ferry migrants stuck in cities back to their villages. However, there is a lot of debate about the fact whether this has actually been implemented. A number of major states have claimed that 300 such trains are running everyday and that migrants are being transported free of charge. However, the situation on the ground tells a different tale. According to migrants, they are being asked to pay amounts as absurd as Rs.3000 to 5000 for a one-way ticket. A migrant travelling from Delhi to Bihar says that he doesn't even have Rs. 100 to buy food. He almost jokingly asks where he would get Rs.3000 for a train journey.

Another very pressing issue is the government's claim of more opportunities being provided to people in their own villages and states, effectively ending the era of migrant workers. The FM, in her speech, claimed that many more opportunities have been opened up to workers in their own states, however, the soaring unemployment rates tell a different story.

**CMIE Series of Unemployment: unemployment rate (UER) ( $\geq 15$ )**



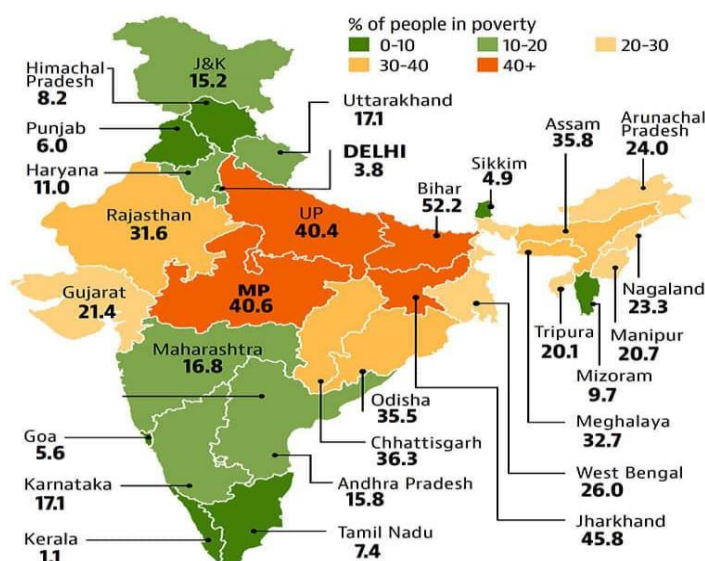
Source: [Unemployment rates in India, Live, 2020](#)

Available at: <https://unemploymentinindia.cmie.com/> (Accessed 15th May, 2020)

The MNREGA scheme aims to provide 100 days<sup>[xiii]</sup> of wage employment to the adult members of every household willing to perform unskilled manual work. However, this scheme has been in place since 2005, and the government has made no changes with regards to the astonishingly different state of the economy at this point in time. The amount of success that this scheme has enjoyed is also highly questionable. According to the Rural Development Ministry, the total spend on the scheme has been 3.14 lakh crore<sup>[xiv]</sup>. The ministry also claims that this scheme has been imperative in lifting a majority of rural households above the poverty line. However, this statement has courted much controversy given its inaccurate nature. The poverty rate in India in 2005 was 55% according to the MPI methodology<sup>[xv]</sup>. This rate eventually decreased to 28% for the whole of India by 2015-16<sup>[xvi]</sup>. However, what is not taken into account here is the fact that only urban areas have reduced their poverty levels. States such as Bihar and UP, which mainly consist of rural and developing areas, still have soaring poverty rates. MNREGA claims to have reduced these rates, however there does not seem to be any truth in that statement, as shown by the following figure. In the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley, "The **rich get richer** and the **poor get poorer**"<sup>[xvii]</sup>.

## WHERE STATES STAND

Map shows % of poor people in Indian states in 2015-16



(Poverty rates in Indian states in 2015-16)

Available at: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/what-has-driven-india-s-poverty-reduction/story-s83YduiFxOfFyQGIqdLW5L.html> (Accessed on 13th May, 2020)

Another very persistent issue is that of the government’s aim to provide inexpensive and affordable rental housing for migrant workers. They aim to achieve this by providing subsidies to firms who are willing to provide such housing. This will only lead to more and more firms entering the affordable housing sector but will not assist the migrants by any means. The firms will build these houses in a PPP with the government and avail of these subsidies but there is no guarantee of them transferring the benefit to the migrants via cheaper rental rates. Thus, this requires more supervision from the government’s side, and some kind of accountability that these firms must assume if they are to be given any contracts.

The main, and most pressing question in this package is of its implementation being ensured. The government has given no indication whatsoever of appointing officials to oversee the execution and conveyance of these relief measures to the targeted individuals, the migrants. Thus, I argue that there must be apt supervision of the enactment of this relief package, in order for its effect to be felt by those who require it the most. I shall present more suggestions and policy changes that must be made to solve the loopholes in this fiscal package later in this paper.

### INDUSTRY IMBALANCE

The paper shall now move on to view this crisis from a microeconomic perspective, discussing its impact on individual firms and the industry as a whole.

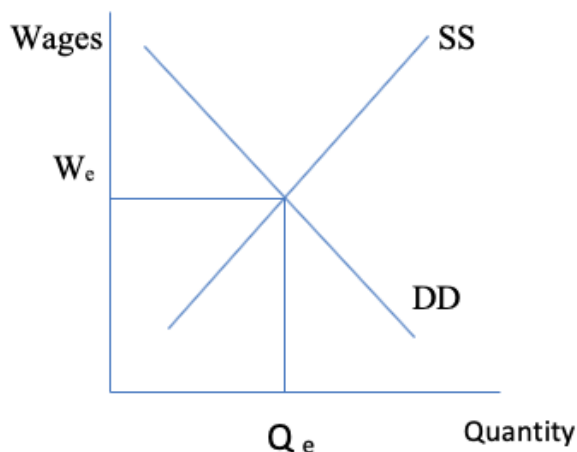
COVID-19 has led to a huge slowdown in the market as a whole. Many firms have filed for bankruptcy and many more are on the verge of falling apart. Firms such as Hertz and JC Penny have filed for bankruptcy and many others have also sought bankruptcy protection. The situation is so dire that the Indian government has taken the step of suspending the Indian Bankruptcy Code for one year<sup>[xviii]</sup>. Amidst all of this, one of the main issues troubling investors is that how is the industry going to restart and avail of all the benefits announced by this package, if the most vital individuals are not available to work, i.e., the migrant workers.

Migrant workers comprise a very integral part of the Indian industries. The informal labour sector in India contributes 10% of India’s total economic output, according to the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization<sup>[xix]</sup>. Of these, there are 100 million internal migrants who play a vital role in strengthening India’s economy. However, with these migrants returning home, industries will find it impossible to restart. The government claims that the MNREGA scheme has created many more opportunities for migrants to now work in their own states. Nonetheless, the poverty and unemployment levels in states such as Bihar and UP, where these migrants come from, reveal the shocking truth. There is a complete dearth of opportunities and this will lead to both, the migrants and companies being damaged in the short run.

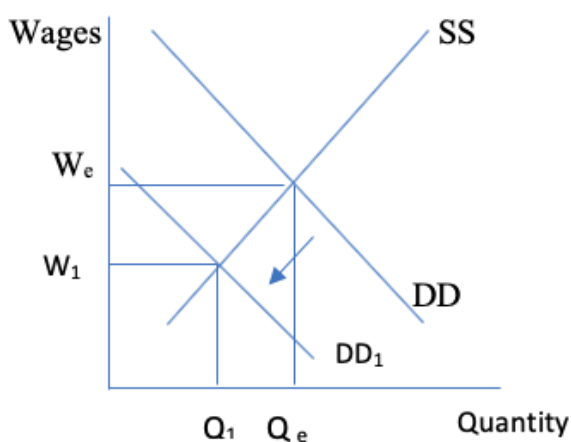
The migrants’ returning home has led to a huge decrease in the supply of labour in urban areas, thus leading to industry slowdowns. Thus, firms are bearing a huge fixed cost, spending on salaries and rent, while having no output whatsoever. This has led to a huge jump in the average fixed cost. Therefore, firms’ average total cost, i.e. their cost of producing one unit of output, will be equal to their total fixed cost, which means a huge loss for firms. On the other hand, migrants will not have a source of

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work in their villages immediately, thus leading to a huge opportunity cost, in a concept known as economic cost. The economic cost is equal to the implicit costs, which is the opportunity cost of not performing the next best task. Thus, this will lead to negative economic profit for firms in the short run, as the productivity that could have been achieved by the labourers working was not realized. This will lead to a huge shift in the factor market as I shall now illustrate by means of a simple demand-supply graph.

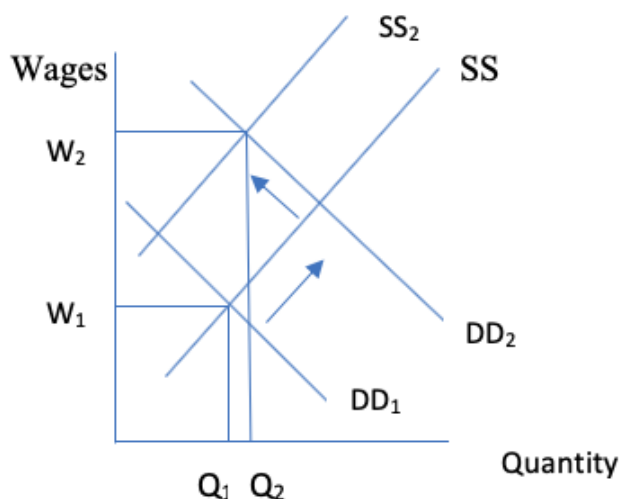


This graph represents the state of the labour market before COVID-19. The DD curve represents the demand for labour, while the SS curve represents supply. The quantity represents the total supply or demand. The wages are indicative of the wage rate.  $W_e$  indicate the equilibrium wage rate, while  $Q_e$  shows the equilibrium quantity. Here, the wage rate is at an equilibrium at which both, the employers and the labourers are satisfied. However, the following graph explains the huge alteration in the labour market brought about by the coronavirus.



The above graph represents the huge fall in demand for labour as soon as the lockdown was implemented in India. This led to a huge fall in wages and very few work opportunities were available. Thus, workers had no choice but to return to their homes for food and shelter or stay put without them. Now, I shall go on to demonstrate the situation when the lockdown is lifted and industries reopen.





(The above graphs were made by the author based on calculations as outlined in the above text.)

With industries opening, demand for labour will shoot up in the short run, as industries such as real estate, which require a huge amount of labourers, will rush to complete projects. However, in the short run, the supply of labour will also decrease as a vast majority of labourers have gone back to their villages and have taken up different occupations such as farming and building in their own villages, since many feel that such a situation arising again will leave them as helpless as they are at this time. This will lead to a huge increase in the wage rates and firms will have to suffer.

There are a great many number of industries which cannot function without labourers in the long run. Thus, the demand for labour is likely to be high in the long run. The government has introduced many measures for giving incentives and subsidies to those firms providing affordable housing. This will lead to many firms entering the affordable housing sector in the long run, thus creating perfect competition wherein the consumers would be happy purchasing real estate from any firm and labourers would be required in a large number for developing such real estate.

However, one of the main issues concerning labourers and firms alike, are the existing labour laws and working conditions prevailing in India. The primary point of concern is the lack of data collected by the government. That is one of the biggest hindrances in realizing any goal relating to the informal working sector in India, particularly the migrants. Let us take for example the Unorganized Workers Social Security Act (2008)<sup>[xx]</sup>. Almost no worker possesses the smart card required for ration and social security as per the act. The biggest question here is that of how will this stimulus reach the targeted individuals, i.e. the migrants, if the vast majority of them are undocumented? This crisis has pointed out astonishing shortcomings in not only understanding the needs of migrants and their roles in nation-building, but shown something very essential - a complete lack of data. Therefore, any proclamation about registering these workers in databases will only help in the future.

Many more such labour laws have been introduced in the years after independence, but have failed to achieve their aims due to a complete lack of data. Let us take the example of the minimum wage law, according to which, the minimum wage of a worker has to be Rs. 6060 per month<sup>[xxi]</sup>. However, this is not fully enforced as many labourers are not aware of this and many employers illegally give lower wages than allowed under the law. Even Rs. 6060 per month is a meagre amount compared to the minimum wages in countries like China, where it is almost double the amount in India. Another law which has been part of India's constitution since its very foundation, is the Equality before the law and gender indiscriminate law. Under this law, employers or the government may not discriminate on the basis of gender, caste, creed or colour in the matter of providing job opportunities to individuals. However, in practice, this law is not fully enforced in many rural parts of the country. The practice of bonded labour is also prevalent in the rural areas as citizens are illiterate and believe in this practice which is now illegal. Along with this, the illiteracy amongst labourers in the informal labour sector in India means there is no awareness whatsoever amongst them about any law or regulation that is set up to safeguard their livelihoods. Announcements such as launching awareness programs are important. Declarations like these are also very welcome. Notwithstanding, these reforms will take a long time to bear fruit. However, then, it might be too little, too late.

## II. CONCLUSION

This paper sought to bring to light the plight of the migrant labourers of India with regards to the new policy changes introduced by the government, as well as view this crisis from a microeconomic standpoint. The main objectives, as highlighted in the abstract, have been showcased through policy changes, suggestions and amendments as listed in the conclusion below.

In this manner, the labour sector in India is highly disorganized and has a complete lack of data on its members. Policy changes must be carried out in order to organize this and achieve the aims of various labour regulations. Most integral to the working of

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labour laws is their supervised implementation. Various labour regulations have been introduced in the past with similar aims, however, most have not been able to accomplish their goals due to factors such as corruption and a poor state of laws in the country. Labour regulations which increase the minimum wage rate will be welcomed by workers, which will further lead to more happiness and increase the marginal revenue product of labour i.e. the additional amount of output that the next unit of labour provides to the firm. If labourers in urban areas are happy, more workers from rural areas will come back to the cities for work, thus decreasing the marginal resource cost and keeping firms happy. The government has taken the step of raising the minimum wage rate by Rs.20 to Rs. 202. However, with most of the labourers not being employed as of now, other measures such as the implementation of the ration card scheme must take top priority. Acts such as the Industrial Disputes Act must be altered in a way that firms do not have to keep chasing the government in order to fire or lay off a few employees. This will encourage firms to hire more employees. The most important reformation that needs to be made is formalisation of the labour sector. Currently, 90% of India's workforce is part of the informal labour sector<sup>[xxii]</sup>. However, if the sector is formalised and more data is collected about the labourers, it will help them enjoy better salaries and social security benefits. Thus, even though the government has announced plans to collect the data of all labourers for the 'One Nation, One Ration card' scheme in India by March, 2021<sup>[xxiii]</sup>, it must be ensured that this time, the aim is successfully achieved. In order to attain this goal, the Digital India movement must also be propagated. As the world is becoming increasingly dependent upon technology, India's ration cards are also proposed to be digitized. Thus, each labourer must be made aware of technology available at their disposal in order to realize the goal of 'One nation, One ration card'. One of the main reasons for worker distress in India is that many workers are not aware of the facilities available to them. Thus, there must be more awareness programs organized by the government. Additional measures such as scaling-up of the MNREGA scheme are integral as they will lead to the development of rural areas and make more job opportunities accessible to the labourers. Those firms building affordable housing for migrants via availing of the subsidies and incentives given by the government must have some amount of accountability for the prices which they offer to migrants later. Their prices must also be monitored so that they do not take advantage of many illiterate migrants.

These issues must be corrected immediately if India's dream of becoming a 5 trillion dollar economy by 2024<sup>[xxiv]</sup> is to be realized. The workers of the informal labour sector contribute to 10% of India's economic output. If their needs and requirements are understood by the government, it can lead to a massive economic revolution in India. What these workers need are better designed labour regulations. The existing labour laws have constrained the growth of the formal manufacturing sector, where these laws apply the most. Better regulations can attract a lot of labour intensive investment and create opportunities for many unemployed individuals. Given that India is the fastest growing economy in the world, this window of opportunity to improve the labour laws and working conditions must not be lost in order to harness the dormant potential of India's silent labourers, the migrant workers.

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