

India's Migrant Crisis: The Elusive Search for a Better Life

Webinar Transcript | CIRCLE

This is a text transcript of the webinar “India's Migrant Crisis: The Elusive Search for a Better Life,” presented by the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE). The webinar was recorded on July 22, 2020. The guest speaker was Prof. S. Irudaya Rajan of the Centre for Development Studies in Kerala, India. The webinar was moderated by Prof. Craig Johnson, the director of the Guelph Institute for Development Studies at the University of Guelph, Canada.

Transcript:

Craig Johnson 1

Hello everyone, I hope you can hear me okay. It's my pleasure to welcome you to the next in the series of CIRCLE webinar lectures here at the University of Guelph. My name is Craig Johnson and I'm director of the Guelph Institute of Development Studies here at the University of Guelph, and on behalf of CIRCLE, it's my pleasure to welcome Professor Irudaya Rajan who is going to be speaking today on India's migrant crisis.

Before proceeding, I'd first like to acknowledge that we reside on the ancestral lands of the Attawandaron people and more recently the treaty lands and territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit. We recognize the significance of the Dish with One Spoon Covenant and offer our respect to our Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Métis neighbours as we strive to strengthen our relationships. The Dish with One Spoon Covenant, I should add, is a land treaty that was reached between the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee nations in 1701, and it actually dates back to the 12th century. Today it has come to represent an important commitment to equity sustainability and mutual respect that reminds us of our important connection to this land where we live and work.

I'd also like to say a few words briefly about CIRCLE. CIRCLE was established in February 2020 at the University of Guelph, and it stands for the Canada India Research Centre for Learning and Engagement. Its principal aim is to be an interdisciplinary nucleus in Canada for cutting-edge research on India and Indian diaspora to showcase, advocate, catalyze, and foster an equitable, respectful, and sustained exchange of knowledge between Canadian and Indian scholars on complex and emerging topics related to sustainability and social and economic well-being.

And what a wonderful segue to the focus of today's topic on India's migrant crisis. I think we're all well aware of the events that have been transpiring around the world and particularly in India. According to recent figures that were released just last week, India has now reached the 1 million mark for COVID infections, and this is assumed to be much lower than the actual number.

Earlier in the year, millions of people were forced to leave cities and migrate on foot all across India, and questions now remain about the future viability of both national and international labor migration as a livelihood strategy, and I think this pertains both to domestic internal migration and also international migration, particularly to the Gulf states whose economies are now on the verge of turmoil due to COVID and precarious financial situations. So like many countries, I think COVID has exposed the vulnerabilities of our social and economic systems, and in the case of today's talk, we'll be looking at one surrounding the precarity of migrant labor.

Before introducing Professor Rajan, a few notes on logistics, format, and etiquette for today's session. Professor Rajan is going to speak for roughly 20 minutes, which will be followed by a question and answer, and on your zoom links you should be able to raise your hand if you click on the icon at the bottom of the screen and I'll follow the raised hands, and I'll invite you to ask your question. Or you can type your question into the chat screen and I'd be happy to read it out to the speakers. We'll take three questions per round, and I'd ask that you please keep your questions and comments brief to ensure that everyone has a chance to speak. And when not speaking, please keep your immediate your settings on mute, and refrain from using video.

Okay, finally now to introduce Professor Rajan. Professor Rajan is professor at the Center for Development Studies, CDS, in Kerala. Currently he's the chair of the Nomad working group on internal migration and urbanization. Nomad being a World Bank affiliated group under the Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development. He's also one of the expert committee members to advise the Government of Kerala on COVID-19.

Professor Rajan has over 35 years of research experience working on the broad areas of population and development. He's coordinated eight major large-scale migration surveys in Kerala since 1998, and was instrumental in conducting the Gujarat migration survey of 2011. He also developed the first longitudinal aging survey in Kerala in 2004, which has been repeated every three years, having completed its sixth round in 2019.

Professor Rajan has published extensively in national and international journals on social, economic, demographic, psychological, and political implications of migration on individuals, community, economy, and society. He's the founder and editor-in-chief of the International Journal Migration and Development. He's also the editor of the annual series India migration report and the South Asia migration report, both published by Routledge. He's published extremely widely with numerous international publishers including Routledge, Cambridge University Press, and Oxford University Press. He's also worked extensively with international organizations, including the European Commission, the Asian Development Bank, the International Labor Organization, and the World Bank to name just a few.

More recently, Professor Rajan has been appointed co-chairperson of the working group on Norca for the state planning board of Kerala, and is currently leading migration research projects with the UAE Exchange Center and realm research and empirical analysis of labor

migration at Columbia University, as well as Nomad. He also recently founded the newly established International Institute of Migration and Development, and you'll have to take my word for it that I've had to condense the amount of accolades and accomplishments that Professor Rajan has achieved in his glowing career. So it's a great pleasure to welcome you, Rajan, to the event today, and I will hand the virtual floor over to you. Thank you.

S. Irudaya Rajan 1

Thank you Johnson, and I also am grateful to the Canada India Research Centre for inviting me to speak. In fact, I remember that probably Johnson came to CDS 10 years back, you know, we met in CDS, so I'm here with you now virtually, hope to see you very soon in Canada itself. Let me start, I think something very challenging today is happening in India, and one of the groups which were affected by the COVID-19 is migrants. I can speak about both internal and international migration but I would like to limit today, for this presentation, only on internal migration.

Now, I want to start with what is called the Sustainable Development Goals. Some of you are familiar. I am quoting 10.7 Sustainable Development Goal, which talks about facilitating orderly, safe migration with responsive migration policies. Now, I am applying this for the internal migration crisis in India, and for achieving that, facilitating orderly and safe migration, we need two things. One is data, second one is policy. Unfortunately, both are missing in India. Neither we have a reliable data on internal migration, nor we have policies for internal migrants. In fact COVID showed us that, who is responsible for migrants? I think that's the biggest question being asked during the last four months.

Now let me start with the data. Because we have no reliable data, because we have no idea about the migration corridors within the country, when the lockdown was announced, we were not taking migrants into consideration. I think that is one of the failures made by the policy makers, including all of us, it includes me too. We are not able to convince the policy makers about the lockdown. Let me get into the some numbers which I have estimated over the last two to three months. India is following a policy to promote urbanization. If you talk about urbanization, then automatically migration plays a very important role, and India talks about smart cities for the last six to seven years.

So if you talk about smart cities, it means basically migration because city has to be filled with not the people who are going to be born, it is with people. And if you consider that 2011 census data came only in 2018. So if you take the 2011 data, in India, about 450 million Indians are living in a place they are not born. 450 million people in 2011. But if you add the similar number we achieved in 2001 and 11, in 2020, we have close to 600 million people who are living in a place they are not born. It includes me too, because I was not born in Kerala, so I am a migrant from Tamil Nadu to Kerala.

So like that you can meet many people, many of them are migrants, so we have 600 million people. Out of that, we have close to 200 million people. We call them one third of the

migrants are either interstate or intra district. I am not talking about intra district. Of course, the COVID not allowed people to move within their district. I will come back to that. But if you take the inter-district within India, or within the state you have districts, people are not able to move, and within the states the total amount of people is 200 million. Out of that we have 140 million, 140 million people are directly affected due to lockdown, 140 million internal migrant. This is the number we are talking about. Huge number. It's huge number than many, many countries' total population. So we are talking about the big number.

Now, when the government of India announced what is called the 'general curfew', they announced the general curfew on March 22. And then March 24, Indian government announced what is called the lockdown 1.0. So March 22 we got general curfew, March 24 we got what is called the lockdown 1.0. But please remember we had lockdown 1.0, 2.0 for two weeks, 3.0 again two weeks, and 4.0 again two weeks. But even today we are completing four months since India is under the lockdown. The place where I am sitting, Trivandrum, is triple lockdown. I cannot go out. And many states, for example [indiscernible], there was a lockdown. And many states' lockdown is until July 31, includes Tamil Nadu.

So the lockdown is still continuous, we don't know how long it will continue. But who are affected by the lockdown? Now what we have done, we were stopped people not to move. What we did is on the day of the lockdown, on March 24, the Government of India announced there will be no drive, no bus, nothing. Everything is completely stopped within four hours. And what happened, migrants have no idea what will happen next. They are distressed, they wanted to leave. If the government of India would have given them March 24 to March 31, whatever, we have seen migrants walking in the road, dying in the railway tracks, all would have been avoided. But we have failed to recognize them. And we did not allow them to go on March 24.

People asking me, are you doing the post-mortem report of the lockdown? Yes, we have to do that, because March 24, India had only 500 coronavirus. And Kerala, where I'm sitting, was number one. Number one in India with the highest number of viruses, Corona-identified cases. And Tamil Nadu, Maharashtra was number two, and Kerala was number one. And that time, you would allow them to move by the trains, special trains, special bus, anything you want to move back to your villages, probably virus would not have been moved to what you call them today, one million.

What we did, lockdown 1.0, 2.0, we were strict lockdown. After lot of noise created by everybody, researcher, media, everybody was talking about migrant flight. I think every news channel, every newspaper, local, Hindi, everybody started talking about virus, and it is almost like we are talking about something between the states. We started talking about even within the state we can't move. People are asking about [indiscernible] and then lockdown 3.0. We were, Government of India, announced what is called the special trains army trying to leave from states.

Now please remember, at that time, the COVID was 300,000. You never allowed the people to move when it was only 500. You were giving them vessels trying to move when it was 300,000, and now it is crossed 11 lakhs. And we allowed moving people, we allowed that corona to move because there is a link between mobility and Corona. Because we all believe, even today we believe, if you don't move, Corona is not going to come to you. That means Corona and migrant migration is basically like a railway track: one line Corona goes, another line we are talking about migrants.

I think it's like a two lines, and migrants are allowed to go when there were three hundred thousand. Now Corona is almost present in remote villages in this country, and Corona has no problem. Corona has what I was telling to people, corona has no problem, corona goes everywhere. Corona has no discrimination. Corona has affected a British Prime Minister. Corona has gone to Mr. Ahmedabad's house, the superstar of India, and Corona also goes to the beggar living in the slums in Chennai or Delhi or Mumbai.

So Corona has no bias, but by our policies, by our programs, we have made bias against the poor. The middle class, they talk about working at home. Working at home is not meant for migrants, so we have divided, we have through our policies we have discriminated at the poor people. But Corona has never discriminated. We have discriminated now. What did we do with them, because we had not allowed them to move, they lost their jobs. They lost their livelihood.

When we were fighting between life and death, migrants were fighting between life and livelihood. For them, livelihood is important. For them, life is because livelihood is one of the strategy for migrants. I think we have failed to protect them. And they had no money, they get no jobs, and the employers betrayed them.

And nobody knows who is responsible, is it the states of origin which people come large numbers, like UP, Rajasthan, Bihar. Are states which they come and work, like Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra. Nobody knows who should look after them, and Kerala was feeding 500,000 migrants who have been stranded in their own country. And I was asking the Kerala government, why we are feeding them? You are, they are not appointed by the Government of Kerala, they are appointed by some employer, the employer just betrayed them, and we have not seen anybody punishing the employer. And what we did, we made migrants beg for their tickets. We have made migrants beg for their train tickets when the trains started moving.

And Supreme Court of India has to come to their rescue, and Supreme Court of India said don't charge money for the return migrant tickets. Give them free ticket, give them free food, free water, you transport them. We made migrants to the stage of begging for their tickets. We have made, through our policies, through our programs, in the name of COVID, we made them beg in the street for their food. We made them to beg for their tickets. I think this is the failure by all of us. India basically failed its migrants.

And then they were started moving. They were started moving. What happened? There are three things happen to them which is very serious for the policy maker. This is the first time, in the history of India, written migrants are going back to their household with empty hands. With empty hands. Normally they go home with their savings, and they buy gifts for their family member, their neighbours, their distant relatives. First time they are going with the empty hands because they could not get their salary for April, and they couldn't take the salary for March, and they are going without any money. First time, no money.

What we did for them? We also made them what is called the stigma. We made them 'they are the carriers of COVID.' Is it their mistake? We did not allow them to go when it's only 500, then you allow them to move for 300,000. Anybody coming from Chennai to any villages, anybody coming from Mumbai, Delhi to any villages by train, and he is identified as a carrier of COVID. So we made them another vulnerability, what is called them stigma. Carriers of COVID. And we made them to suffer quarantine. We made them to suffer.

Then the third thing that we did? Please remember, the migrants are not fighting war, they are not fighting like our Indian heroes fighting war between India and China, or India and Pakistan. No! But these poor migrants are also fighting war. What they are fighting? Fighting against poverty. Fighting against malnutrition. Fighting against unemployment in their own villages. They are leaving, and these migrants, these migrants for their family members, because the one migrant might be supporting four people at home.

For these migrant families, these migrants are heroes. They are heroes. By our policies, by our programs, in the name of COVID, we made them heroes. You made them heroes, you made them to go without any money, empty hands. You made them to beg for their tickets, you made them to give a new name for them, carrier of COVID.

I think they deserve better treatment. They were part of building the cities. They were part of building the economy. They were sending money to their states of origin, by that many families benefited. By staying in Kerala, staying in Tamil Nadu, staying in Mumbai, they are building cities. Can you imagine any city without migrants? It will be empty. But we never recognized them. We never provided policy for them. Why should the migrant walk, why should the migrant suffer? And they were contributing for our society. We have failed to recognize them.

Now this has happened over two to three months, and then what happened? We got talking about Epic Package. Twenty lakh growth. Twenty lakh growth package by the Indian government for promoting economy, self-reliant economy. I was looking for some announcement probably migrants will get, and I was talking to many people. Migrants should be given cash. Migrants should be given at least 25,000 rupees to their account. 25 to 1000 rupees, no questions asked you should give them in their account.

If you give the money to them to create what is called 'animal spirit' in the villages, animal spirit in the village. If you give your money, thousand rupees, to me, it has no implications for economy. You give a thousand rupees to a poor man in any part of Indian villages, that money

will be spent. I was talking to some other people, some people told me we have not seen 500 rupees note. We have not seen 200 rupee notes for few weeks. That is the fate of villages, and these migrants normally go with money.

And this package announced there are four points, there are four points made by the Government of India. One is they talk about one ration, one card. One nation, one ration card. That will benefit future migration. Then they said you have, they said one ration card, one nation. That is one of the policy. Second policy they said return migrants can get housing in the cities. That will benefit future migrants. Then they added lot of money to the NREG program in the villages. And that is again future.

What do they really offer? They offered 3,500 crores, five kg rice, and one kg beef to the ration cardholders of all migrants who went back. Five kg rice for your family with five members? Are we providing enough nutrition? Of course recently I was told by the Government of India, it is not ration card five kg. Each member will get five kg. If a household with five members, they will get twenty-five kg of rice. We have to check, actually it is happening at the local level? We have to do studies for them.

Now they are gone back. People are asking when they will come back, when they will come back. Why should they come? You have treated them so badly. Employers were betrayed them. They have not given them salaries, they have not given them food, they asked them to go to the streets, and now they are asking when you will come. When you will come. I think the migrants will teach them a lesson. I'm waiting for that.

Now, finally I want to conclude we had all this happen, and I was calculating, if you would have given 25,000 rupees to 140 million migrants it will be only three lakh crores. One-sixth of the amount promised by the Government of India. That could created a vibrant rural economy, vibrant rural economy. This money is going, flowing to what is called 140 million households, not migrant. It is a household.

One migrant mean this money will be distributed to 140 into 50. We are talking about 900 million people. It would have been benefited so much, and after I talked about these incentives, Uttar Pradesh's government announced thousand rupees to all the migrants who came back. And PR government announced thousand rupees. I was talking about 25,000 rupees. At least I am very glad some countries, some states have announced some from itself.

And finally, now the rural India is going to be the Great Depression. Rural unemployment, malnutrition, I am not sure. We may end up even there will be starvation, deaths, in the villages because they are not going to come and tell you that I am starving! There will be starvation, there will be psychological stress, because when the 2008 global crisis happened in Kerala, many people came from Dubai, people committed suicide.

India Today magazine, Malayalam version, had a cover story of return migrants coming back and committing suicide in Kerala. Now I am already seeing the signs of return migrants going

back to the villages and committing suicide. We used to talk about farmer suicide, I think now we should look at it return migrants committing suicide in the villages.

I think we have to remember that one of the best things is to provide them cash transfer. I'll stop here, thank you very much.

Craig Johnson 2

Okay thank you Rajan, a wonderful I think overview and an analysis of the kinds of vulnerabilities that I think long pre-existed COVID but have been exacerbated in truly destructive ways during the crisis and one, I think we'll all agree, that that hasn't, we haven't seen even close to the end of it so far.

I've been receiving a number of questions, both personally and kind of distributed to everyone on the chat, and I'll kind of convey some of these, and I've kind of grouped them into areas of thematic focus. One area, I think, so both Nushaiba and Bharat Punjabi, both have questions about what the government has done so far, and to what extent things could have been done differently. So Nushaiba's is asking if the government had allowed workers to move back to their home states earlier in the pandemic, would this have prevented the scale of exposure to the virus?

So that's one question about timing, and then Bharat Punjabi is asking again about the government's record. How could how could we, how could India, have done better, and in particular, does India's federal system provide a framework for tackling the interests of interstate migrants, and by extension should local and city governments take responsibilities for migrant welfare? And I would add to that, even, to what extent can the Panchayats, or are the Panchayats, playing a role in rural areas? So maybe I'll let you answer and reply to those two questions.

S. Irudaya Rajan 2

Yeah, I think the first question is very, very important. You rightly said we have a federal system and the migrants are everywhere. Now that's why I asked one question: at the time of pandemic, who is responsible for migrants? Is it the states of origin, is it the states of destination, is it the Government of India, or is it the employer? I think this is the question, and nobody was coming in a big way. Nobody was coming in a big way when they were on the road.

Everybody asking them to go back, go back, but what we should do for them? I think nobody could fix the responsibility to either the employer, or to the states of destination, or to the states of origin, or to the Indian government. I think that is where the policy's breaking.

For example, what we have done, in Kerala, we are supposed to have what is called three million interstate migrants in Kerala. We have three million people outside the country, so what I call them is replacement migrants. Kerala people, 3 million people, are everywhere, so we are getting 3 million people coming into Kerala.

Now, what happened to the 3 million people at the time of COVID? Because they could not go, lockdown is everywhere, it includes every place. Lockdown is lockdown. What happened, next day, Kerala government announced any migrant who have no place to stay, you can come for what is called the common place to stay. So Kerala government was accommodating close to 500,000 people in camps, with social distance. And they are, we call them guest workers. Interstate, we call them guest workers, like how do you treat your guest, so we were treated them.

And what about our food? Kerala has a decent assistance program so we have what is called the common kitchen. The migrants can go for the morning breakfast, can go for lunch, can go for dinner, all from the budget from the local government, state government. Now because of that, there were one, only one, incident the migrants came out and saying we want to go back, we want to go back to our state. Then, nobody was talking about that. And we got a very peaceful lockdown.

But there are many states there where they were walking, they were fighting with the policemen, they were walking in the railway line, they are walking, you know, like so that means the states have failed to recognize their problem and fix their problem.

And what happened to the employer? I think I told you, employers have betrayed them. Completely betrayed them. For example I have seen in my own eyes last week in Trivandrum, I went to a place I used to see 20 interstate migrant worker in the one small shop. And I have seen all of them back when the government said you can what is called unlock.

And I asked the employer, what did you do, why and how you are holding the 20 migrants? He said in the lockdown period I have fed them the food, I given them stay, I've given the money to send home. Nobody has left. This is called the good employer, and how many good employers were there in this country to protect the migrant? There were very, very few. If they all protected their migrants, probably nobody would have died in the road.

So that means we are not able to fix the responsibility of who should look after them. Kerala did that, I know Tamil Nadu did something because there was a train that went from Trivandrum to Northeast but when the train reached Chennai station, lockdown came, the train stopped, the train said the train will not go. When it will go, we don't know. Lockdown 1.0, and they were all coming to the railway station. Tamil Nadu government told them don't go, they picked them up, put them in the some of the colleges and schools in the city, and they were feeding them.

They neither belonged to Tamil Nadu, but they belonged to other states and they were working in Kerala. They were on the way, they were helping them, they were giving them through Amma canteen. So I think the states have done little bit things, but then still we have seen like a big humanitarian crisis during that period. I think that's something very, very important. We have somehow, and also there is not good coordination between the states.

Even the Government of India announced the swarming crime. Many states said we don't want the migrants back because they are coming with COVID. We don't want the special train. There were fights, there were fights. Trains will come but nobody wants to receive them in their states of origin and the states were fighting. I think they were on the road because there was no consensus of who should look after them, because when the COVID was spreading, everybody thought migrants would not come to my state. Migrants would not come back because they will bring COVID, but at the end of the day, COVID has spread everywhere now.

Craig Johnson 3

So, I mean, I'm really glad you picked up on the stigma, I think as well as the economic implications of migrants returning to their communities and their homes. And here too I think one of the notable features of the pandemic is there's still a great deal of uncertainty from public health authorities around the world about how the virus gets transmitted, and I'm sure that that contributes to the sense of fear and stigmatization of migrant workers.

Rajan, we have a number of other questions I think coming up here. I'm gonna read out a few, some pertain to data on the phenomena, and others, quite a few, pertain to future challenges around developing policies that might support migrant workers in India.

And so we have a question again from Nushaiba asking whether the returns that are filed on the Shram Seva Portal are generating data that might be used for better understanding the crisis, and then from Mishra, sorry it's the only name I have on the chat here from Mishra, are there any statistics about the number of returning migrants committing suicides? So maybe I'll let you answer those and then come back to the future challenges in a second.

S. Irudaya Rajan 3

Yeah, so I think we can easily collect data of migrants. I think I was looking at it, everybody talking in the country now about registration of migrants. I am not against that. Of course sometimes I am against that but now I am talking I am not against the registration of migrants.

But my question is, why should they register? Why should they register with the government that they are leaving? Are you giving them some incentives, for example Indian embassy tells in every country, whenever you come to another country you register yourself. How many Indians will register in the Indian embassy? Nobody registers because there is no use! So I think unless you make the registration useful for the migrant, then only they will register.

So I was telling them, suggesting them, like we got Visa Cards, we have Mastercards, like that we can create what is called the migration card. It is a special card. Anybody who wants to leave the state, you apply. Like I have a Visa Card, you may have Mastercard like a bank debit card, credit card. Think of your migrant card, it is not other card, it is a special card for migrants.

And then whenever you leave the state, you can chip it in the railway station and then they know you move from UP to Kerala! And then you can collect the data. So you should incentivize

them, and then you can link their other, you can think their passport, you can link their employer, you can link their pension, you can link whatever you want, including the ration card. If you want to have the ration card, RSPY, whatever benefit they can carry within the country you can link them. It is applicable to only migrants.

I think if you think of an innovative way to create what is called the migration card, it's called like a smart card for migrants. It is only for migrants like passports. Smart card, it's like a small card like a credit card which they can use it, you can do the registration.

Unless you do the registration, you are not going to get any data because the migrants are moving. There is no permanent migration, people come for short-term, SNL, you know circular. I see somebody in Chennai, after three months I see them in Hyderabad, because they were with the construction site, they were with the metros. So people are moving. When they are able to move, you can think of moving them with their card, their master card, their migrant card.

Like when I am moving from Tamil Nadu to Kerala, or Kerala to Delhi, I am able to use my mobile phone. Wherever I go I use my mobile phone, I can use my credit card even in Canada. If I come, I can go to a hotel and I can pay my pay through a credit card, that means I am using my credit card wherever I go. Similar thing of your migrant card. If you can think of an innovative way to do that, probably you will get good data of their mobility, where do they go, migration corridor, sex level data, age level data, you can get wonderful data. But you should incentivize them and they should apply and get it.

You should, you know, like you have to motivate them. Suppose for example I was telling the Kerala government who wants to know how many other state people are here. Suppose Kerala government tells whoever from other states are here, you did not do any job in April and May because of the COVID. No job for you, you are all stuck. We are going to pay you 25,000 rupees, please come and register. Everybody will register. They always have to give only information I am from Vigor, I am now here. You get good data on how many people are in Kerala, like that you can do! But it's only one time. But next year this number will change. So you want the data flows. You need a smart migrant card.

The second thing here is what are the future challenges for migrants? I think I think there are some things good happening to them, there are some things bad happening to them. I know there are many labor laws coming. Very badly, for example, many states are you know abolishing the minimum wages, many states want to have you know what is called the six days of work, you know and 12 hours of work. You know they are doing a lot of things. It will affect the migrants, probably there will be a problem.

But one of the good things happening is that because the migrants have left cities, it is creating labor scarcity in some sectors. Labor scarcity in some sectors. I think that is something to be studied very carefully, labor scarcity. What is happening now I am sitting in Kerala, earlier an unskilled worker coming from other state will earn something like what is called maybe 10

dollars. Now there's a scarcity, the wages have gone up for migrants. If somebody is staying in Kerala, he is demanding more wages and he is telling if you don't give me, I will also go back.

They are threatening the employer. I think this is something you know something is good. But how long it will go I don't know, because the poor fellows in the villages, when they get poverty, then they starve because nothing is happening in the village, then they will come back. Then there will be competition, at least for two months there will be a little scarcity of workers. I think that is something.

In the meantime, if the migrants are identifying the bad employers and good employers, the bad employer probably will be having a tough time to attract migrants because it's all network. Okay, they'll tell other friends don't go to that fellow, he made me like this. So some of the bad employers will be identified in the country and they are going to lose their jobs, their construction company will be closed, the shops will be closed, so that is going to happen. I think that is good for them, a lesson for the bad employer. They, you know, they did not do their responsible manner to their migrants. I think that is something is very important for us.

Now, return migrant suicide. I am already seeing newspaper coming back, seeing one or two cases already coming from the states where they went. Please remember, this is the research we have to do. For example, somebody asking me, how many people died in India by crossing the border during the lockdown. The data says 200 people, 300 people in the road, in the railway tracks, in the buses, and one of the migrants told in one of the interview "we were transported to our villages like livestock."

Livestock, like they are transported like animals. I think this is a very serious comment from a migrant, we were transported like livestock, transporting the animals we transport through the lorries and they were transported that like that and by paying money, borrowing money.

I think we have done something very, very important, we have made lot of mistakes. If we can correct them through some policies, some programs probably you know the COVID can give them some opportunity for us to recognize migration, mainstream migration into development, mainstream migration in in our planning, in our policies, everywhere! Migrants are there everywhere. We should recognize them, their contribution, probably we can think of a better future for them.

Craig Johnson 4

I can see some of the comments are highlighting a thought that I've got in the back of my head too that that speaks to, I guess, the inherent contradictions and the political economy of migration that, on one hand, registering migrants and people migrating would create new forms of security and recognition and support, but on the other hand their value in a labor market rests at least partly in the fact that they're informal, that there's an informality to that source of labor.

Just stay, I want to read out a few more questions then that relate to, I think, future challenges around policy. Sugandha Nagpal is asking about some of the challenges presented by return migration which we've been talking about, but asking specifically is the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee program enough and what can be done to improve policy responses?

Felix Sibi is asking about the legislative framework for labor in India, and asking specifically about the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 and other efforts to suspend minimum wages in more recent years.

So those are questions around policy, then there's also questions I think around the particular factors that are creating vulnerability and precarity. So Sharada Srinivasan from the University of Guelph is asking that beyond the class bias, what other factors complicated the effort to bring back Indians who were stranded abroad, and why was the effort to bring back international migrants more urgent or deemed more urgent than internal migrants?

Heena Mistry is asking again in what ways has caste exacerbated the post-COVID lockdown and its crisis, and how have different migrants including women, Dalits, Muslims, been differently affected? So maybe I'll leave it there for now, it's quite a bit I think to take on board.

S. Irudaya Rajan 4

Yeah, thank you, thank you, I think most of them are interesting questions. I think when I started up I told COVID has no bias. WE are biased. I think that's very important, I want to make that statement again and again because the COVID goes everywhere. But I was talking at one of the international conference, has anybody seen COVID? Nobody has seen. If you would have seen them, you would have bombed them. We would have bombed them.

We have not seen them, and does COVID get a passport? No. It has a visa? No, but it is moving everywhere, close to 200 plus countries. It is moving. It is moving through only migration, that's what everybody thinks. That's why international border is closed. Forget about internal border. We have no flights going to Guelph. We have no flights going to London, everything is only the one day board flights. It's like the special operation flights we are doing. So there is no, no flights are going. So we all think we can stop COVID by stopping migrants. I think that is a very, very serious challenge for all of us. By keeping people where you are, you are going to stop the corona virus threat.

That's what India did on March 24 with 500 corona virus cases. Today we got 1.1 million and every country at some point of time throughout the world had some lockdown. But you can see we have caused already so many millions with COVID and already we are six lakhs people already died. USA is leading, so we are not able to buy lockdown, we are not able to stop the mobility of COVID. I think that is something we have to carry back. That's why lockdown is not going to solve the problem, of course. It is affecting some people because of the policies I told you earlier.

For example, I was talking to some of the people who are working in the technology. They said they were allowed to work at home till December 31, 2020, that means lock town is there up to December. But the migrants, they have to move. Can I tell my domestic worker who comes to my house, you work at home, I will transfer salary? No. How many months I'll pay a salary till a domestic comes to my house?

So the migrants, they have to move. When they move only they make money. Migration means money. They cannot make money. And we have stopped them by our laws, by our rules. But we could not stop virus, we are only stopping migration. I think that is very important, we are only stopping migration. We are not stopping COVID.

COVID is increasing. India was number 10 position, now it is three, and I'm sure we will come to maybe two. I pray god we don't come as number one, overtaking United States of America. We don't want to do that, but we don't know! Because now we are adding every two days close to one lakh, and the testing is going on, and the state where I am sitting the COVID there was not even a single COVID case in April.

Today we got thousand plus. So you can imagine it is spreading, and Tamil Nadu is five thousand plus, so India is maybe 40, 50,000. So we don't know, we may it will be very fast moving now, but then our lockdown, whatever we have done, it failed to stop the virus. But it affected the millions of people their livelihood. I think that is very important for us to carry over.

Now, NREG, I think that is very important program we are talking about in the rural districts and it was started 15 years back. Not today, it was started by the UPA1, and what it does? It gives 100 days of work for the distressed migrant and the wages now today is 200 plus. But please remember, we are talking about 100 days of work. What the people will do for the remaining 265 days? They will migrate.

So we have to think of here the employment program in the villages for 365 days. Not one family, one member of the family, anybody one looking for job, like unemployment assistance. Anybody looking for some job, they should be employed through the rural program and the certified salary throughout the year. If you do that, probably you can reduce that rural distress.

By giving 100 days of work, 120 days of work, that is not going to solve the problem because you need food for all the 365 days. You need food not for 100 days. I think you have to think of seriously on the 365 day like a 24/7. We can think of that probably you are going to avoid a rural distress.

The second point I would like to make is that this Interstate Migration Act. Now Interstate Migration Act very clearly says they are supposed to protect the migrants, and there are minimum wages. We have seen during the COVID, everybody has failed. This act has not made any change. In fact, one of the lawyer was telling me several years back, Interstate Migration Act is a tiger without their teeth. Tiger without their teeth, and if you know your tiger, which is

moving around without their teeth, you will go and play with that. Everybody played with the Interstate Migration Act, and it has nothing done for the poor migrants.

And then related to the question on international migration and the internal migration, I think they were also treated very badly. Of course you know Kerala we brought people, people came from China, some people are brought by special flights. But please remember lockdown 1.0 and 2.0 much there were not much flights coming from abroad. One day abroad flights were started almost similar time, what is called the [indiscernible].

But please remember, Indian government, people wanted to come back to India, because India they thought they were doing well. But then when they announced that one day for the flight, many people wanted to come. Still people want to come, but one day for the flight is the first to opening up. But please remember, even non-resident Indians, but I always make some point about non-resident Indians, non-resident Indian means, I always feel, “not required Indians.”

They have gone to some country, fine, so not required Indians. This, right, I don't think the government of India did any big thing for them because this is not evacuation. When there was a war in Kuwait, Indian government evacuated everybody. Now why should we evacuate? Because the COVID is there everywhere, it is not a war!

But please remember, COVID-19 is like a Third World War we are facing. Everybody fighting an invisible war. In the Second World War there were two groups, one group fights with other. But Third World War, in the name of COVID, everybody fighting themselves. Everybody, every country, wants to protect their citizen by stopping flight, by stopping train, by stopping mobility. That means COVID-19 is equivalent to the third war, which is invisible. Everybody is fighting, nobody fighting against anybody. Everybody fighting themselves to control the virus, to control the thing.

I think we are not treated internal and international migrant differently, of course return migrants will come, they will add again to the unemployment in India, because unemployment in India is right now very high and they are telling it is the highest right now, maybe for the last 40 years. So what they will do? It's a terrible crisis. So India is going through here what is called the employment crisis, then we have demographic dividend, we have COVID-19. So we have to wait and see how we are going to solve it in the coming days and coming months.

Craig Johnson 5

Absolutely. Thank you, I'm getting conscious of the time now, so I think that this coming round of questions and responses will be the last round for today. But we have a few questions here I think that really tap into sort of the dual nature of impacts on both the rural agricultural sector but also on the industrial sector in India.

So we have one from Meera Mishra reflecting on the fact that the kharif crop this year has been nearly double what it was last year, and she's asking whether the role of migrants in boosting

agriculture has been important here, and whether this might contribute to a certain revival within the rural economy.

And then within the industrial sector we have a question from Chantal in Mumbai where she's doing PhD research. She's been interviewing industry executives in Mumbai and has found that employers are finding it difficult to get enough labourers to come back, and I in fact saw an article along these lines in the Financial Times yesterday, talking about the poor factory owners now struggling to find enough labor.

And so Chantal is asking whether you can talk about some of the other factors that are affecting the decisions of migrant workers when deciding whether or not to return to work. And if we could aim for maybe six or seven more minutes, and then we should probably start to wrap things up.

S. Irudaya Rajan 5

Yeah I think these are both are very interesting questions. One is about the rural areas, one is about urban areas. I think I want to make one point on the agriculture. I think most of the migrants are leaving agriculture, if they are going back now, and they are able to boost the agriculture, it might be good for them. After all we need poor security. If they can create enough cultivation, they can create enough food in the villages, and they can transport to cities, probably I think we can cut down some migrants.

But then we have to wait and see how the agriculture is functioning, because at least many people tell us they are losing their, they are not getting enough wages, they are not getting enough thing. The government can put money in agriculture, so that the people who go back can put their time and energy rather than coming back to cities which rejected them, which treated them badly. I think that might be a better option, but the government has to think how to revive the rural economy!

I was talking about animal spirit, which was told in the 1930s, the present period, you want to create animal spirit among the rural poor. If you can create that spirit through the investment in the agriculture, through special seeds, through fertilizers, then probably you are going to create a new rural India. We had green revolution, we had white revolution, probably COVID-19 can bring both together in the villages, both green and white because you are having enough labourers to work back, develop the agriculture, develop the work, because for example I am seeing NREG even engineers are coming back and joining NREG.

I think it may be a good sign, the educated people who lost the jobs, who are going back to the villages, and going back to work on agriculture, which their grandparents were spending their time. I think that, if the COVID can change that, I think that is a wonderful thing. So we'll have green and white revolution together in the name of COVID. I think that is something very, very important.

The second point about the urbanization. Because somehow every policy makers in India think urbanization will lead to economic growth. Urbanization means migration, that's why I told you there are policies in India to promote urbanization. Smart cities. Smart cities, basically they promote urbanization. So if you are promoting urbanization, you are thinking that it will lead to economic growth. But then you are not talking about migrants in the process of urbanization.

Half of the city population in the cities like Bombay, Chennai, all migrants, and these are the hot spot of COVID-19. I was telling that we may expect even de-urbanization. Kingsley Davis used to talk about de-urbanization, we are first time witnessing a migration from urban to rural. Urban to rural, it might be good for urban because you are little bit stressed in the cities and are being reduced.

But definitely it will affect the industry sector. It will affect construction, it will affect many sectors, because we have seen it! When the train was started operating from Bangalore, the construction companies went to the Karnataka chief minister saying that please tell the government of India we don't want any special train from Bangalore to leave, because the migrant will leave and who will construct Bangalore metro? Who will construct Bangalore city? Who will construct Bangalore bridge?

So the chief minister told to the Government of India, we don't want any train. Morning he told, after meeting the construction lobbies, whatever you call them, and then all the migrants came to the main road. They said they want to go back. By evening, the chief minister changed their mind, he said please send special train, I don't want the riot in my state. Let them go. So I think this is something real happen in Karnataka. Within 24 hours, the government has to change the policy because the migrants said they want to go.

I think 30% of the migrants have left the cities, that's what my estimate is right now. And some of them might come back, definitely some of them will come. If not, everybody is going to desert the city. Some of them will come back it. All depends upon how the industry is going to change them, how the industry is going to treat them, are they going to provide them not just the minimum wages? Are you going to provide them clear wages? I think if you give them proper wages, the industry can grow. You are cheating them for a lot of time because you think capital is important, not labor.

COVID has taught capital and labor should move together. COVID has taught here lessons to the industries. COVID has taught lessons to the employers who are very bad, that you want to increase your capital, you want to accelerate and make money on your capital, you have to treat labor equally. If the COVID can teach lessons to those employers, lessons to those industrial saints, probably COVID did two good things: reviving the rural economy, having green and white revolution together, and migrants getting their due rights in the post-COVID scenario. Thank you very much.

Craig Johnson 6

Thank you, thank you Rajan, and it certainly wouldn't be the first time that a global pandemic has led to new labor scarcities that have empowered the working class, but I think we could all agree that it's still very early days, and difficult to speculate. But you've done a wonderful job in terms of just, sort of, bringing this conversation, I think, to a higher level, and to reflect upon both the historic but also the contemporary challenges facing migrant workers in India. I hope I've done my best to represent most of the questions that have come our way, and I apologize if I hadn't been able to get everyone on onto the screen as it were, but I think it's been a wonderful discussion.

[End of transcript]