



COVID-19 Lockdown and Internal Migrants in India: Issues, Vulnerability and Mitigation

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Abstract

India was one of the worst COVID-19 disease-affected countries in the world. This situation impelled the government to implement a nationwide lockdown for a period of sixty-six days. All the sectors of the economy, including manufacturing, construction, trade, and commerce, were closed, jeopardizing the livelihood of the nation during that time. Millions of informal sector workers lost their jobs. Migrant workers, especially the daily-wage labourers, dropped into a vulnerable situation. Many of them started walking or bicycling towards their hometown or villages. Hundreds of them died of hunger or from meeting with an accident on their journey. To alleviate the situation, the Government of India took a number of important measures, like arranging trains, free rationing, free food and shelter, free treatment, job openings, direct cash transfer for their livelihood, and so on. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the issues and vulnerability of India's internal migrants faced during their return journey, the steps taken by the government, and recommendations for the way forward.

Keywords: Pandemic situation; COVID-19 lockdown; Migrant workers; Internal migration; Vulnerability;

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 disease, caused by the corona virus, was first identified in Wuhan City in China in December 2019 (Singhal 2020; WHO 2020a). Along with other countries, the pandemic spreads gradually all over India on and after 27th January, 2020. This situation impelled the government to implement a lockdown with strict restrictions on mobility and transportation from 25th March for a period of 21 days (Das, R., & Kumar, N. 2020). Thereafter, the lockdown was extended gradually, phase by phase, up to 30th May, 2020.

COVID-19 disease and the associated lockdown prohibited the people from stepping out of their homes and impacted the nations across the world by disrupting the lives, economy, and societies. During this period, all the sectors of the economy, including construction, manufacturing, trade, and commerce, were closed in India (Gopinath, G., 2020). The suspension of economic activities instantly cracked the earnings of common people, especially of informal and migrant labourers. A huge number of informal sector employees, particularly migrant workers, lost their jobs. In the *no work, no money* situation, they faced multiple hardships in the new places. Job loss, food insecurity, economic vulnerability, and uncertainty about their future become the frightening reality for millions of migrant workers and daily wage earners. They simply wanted to exit the station because they were worried about getting infected with the virus. But, due to the lockdown situation, all the means of transportation were closed. In these circumstances, thousands of workers started walking or bicycling hundreds of kilometers to return to their native villages or towns (Jaiswal P., 2020).

But returning to their homes was not at all an easy task; rather, it was really an expedition. During their journey, they faced multiple hardships on the way. They walked for weeks for a destination, some with their family and children. *The most vulnerable among them were women, children, and the elderly.* They slept on tracks, railway stations, or adjoining villages. Many of them were arrested for violating lockdown principles. One hundred and ninety-eight (198) migrants died by accident or due to exhaustion during lockdown (Dutta A., 2020).

To cope with the situation, the central and state governments **took** different steps. A sufficient number of *SHRAMIK SPECIAL* trains **was** arranged for them. Some state governments arranged bus services for returning home. A large number of *relief camps* with medical facilities were arranged to house the migrant workers at different points on their way. A huge amount of funds was allotted by the central government for their free rationing, housing, direct cash transfer for livelihood, health and employment openings, and so on. In this light, the present paper is an attempt to analyze the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown on the issues and vulnerability of India's internal migrants faced during their journey towards home, the steps taken by the government, and recommendations for the way forward.

An Overview of Internal Migration in India

In a vast country like India, a huge number of people are forced to migrate elsewhere, leaving their wives, children, and parents behind due to a lack of employment opportunities, low wage rates, agricultural crises, small landholdings, low productivity, and *low income* in the native areas (Keshri and Bhagat 2013). They move towards the towns and cities or elsewhere within the district or beyond the districts and states in search of better living opportunities. Bulk share (70%) of the internal migration (83% for female and 39% for male) in this country is intra-district in nature, and it is due to the reasons of marriage, education, or family shift with variations between male and female migrants (Rajan, S.I., and M. Sumeetha, 2019a). Records from the Economic Survey (2016-17) show that there were **sixty** million migrations between states and **eighty** million migrants between districts. (Government of India 2017 a). The World Economic Forum estimated that there are around **one hundred and thirty-nine** million migrants in the country, the majority of whom are daily-wage labourers working in the sectors of manufacturing and construction (Nair S. *et al.*, 2020). Uttar Pradesh and Bihar are the leading *suppliers* of migrant workers, while Maharashtra and Delhi are the largest *recipient states*. Categorically, Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, Kerala, Karnataka, etc., are the *net in-migrant states*, whereas the states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, West Bengal, Jharkhand, Orissa, and Assam are known as *net out-migrant states* in the country. According to the study of the National Sample Survey Organization, during 2007-08, the volume of interstate migrant workers was about **eighty** million, which was about 29% of the total workforce. They were engaged mainly in the construction sector (about **forty** million), domestic work (about **twenty** million), the textile sector (about **eleven** million), brick manufacturing work (about **ten** million), agriculture, mining and quarrying, and the transportation sector ([IIPS, 2001](#)). Generally, such migrants belong to the youth category and stay in the destination for a period of only **two to twelve** months. Actually, they belong to the marginalized section of society. They have low but varying degrees of education and skills and varying profiles in terms of caste, religion, age, and other characteristics. But in reality, they are the rural food producers, city-makers, urban manufacturers, and service providers who nourish the nation, take care of the citizens in their homes, and look after its health and nutrition (Srivastava, R. 2011). The bargraph clearly indicates that, number of intra district migrant is always larger in our country followed by inter district and interstate migrant.

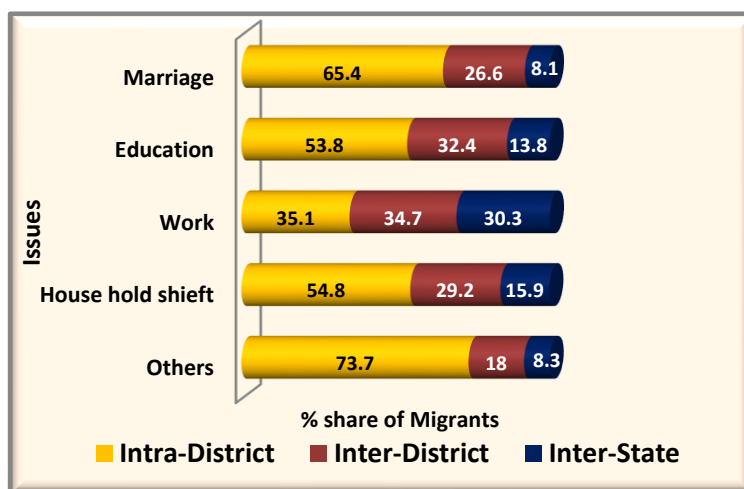


Fig-1: Category wise movement of internal migrants (Source-Census of India: 1991, 2001, 2011)

Issues Faced by Migrant Labours

The most vulnerable working groups in society are migrant laborers. They, in most cases, have no social security and no basic rights at the workplace (Government of India 2017b). They have low wages, late wages, financial shortages, and unreasonable rents in slums. They are often exploited by the agents because there are no enforceable agreements regarding the wages or working hours or other benefits and no commitments regarding regular provision of work. They have to go through a variety of problems like poor working conditions, long working hours, lack of safety equipment, forced labour, and so on. In many cases, they are absorbed into the labour market in less favorable ways than the local people. The migrants in the new places always feel weaker social networks as compared to non-migrants. All these make them acute difficulties in establishing claims and entitlements in their workplaces (Srivastava R., 2020). They have not enough living quarters and sanitation facilities, and, in most cases, they have to live in factory dormitories or shop pavements or in open areas in the city (Nair S. *et al.*, 2020). This further enhances their vulnerability and harassment by the police and other local authorities. The COVID-19 disease and associated lockdown added a new dimension to these problems.

One of the core issues of the migrants in the destination is proving their *identity*. In many cases they cannot produce valid and original address proof documents in new areas, and so they have to suffer from the lack of civic identity and civic citizenship. Also because of the lack of local identity, they are often deprived of the government-provided benefits like free *rations, health services, subsidized food, or fuel* in the destination area. The accompanying bar graph makes it evident that among the issues that migrants deal with, the majority experience unhealthy housing, which is followed by more work, lower pay, local disturbances, and so forth.

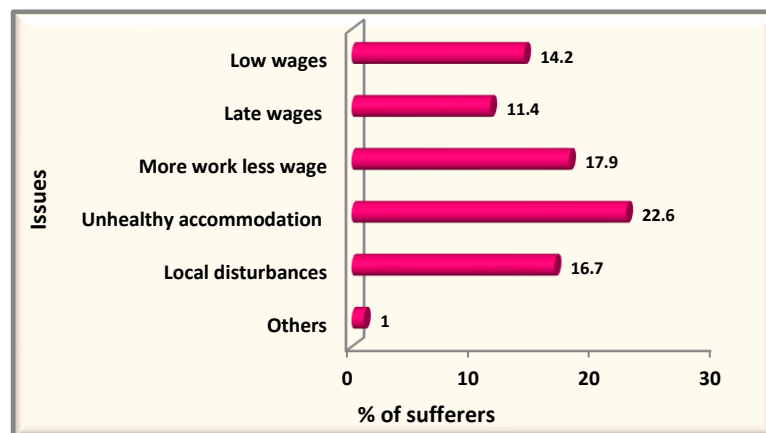


Fig-2: Problems faced by the migrant workers at their destination.

(Source-<https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/internal-migration>)

Vulnerability of the Migrant Workers during Lockdown

India is one of the worst COVID-19 disease-affected countries in the world, and so it experiences a prolonged economic deceleration during the pandemic. The long-term nationwide lockdown has adversely impacted all the sectors of the economy of the country, jeopardizing the livelihood of the people. All the migrant workers and a large number of informal sector employees become jobless. A study shows that more than **one hundred and forty** million workers have lost their jobs across the country during the lockdown (CMIE 2020). This made the country's unemployment rate (24.95%) graph suddenly attain its peak in April 2020, which is cleared by the following figure.

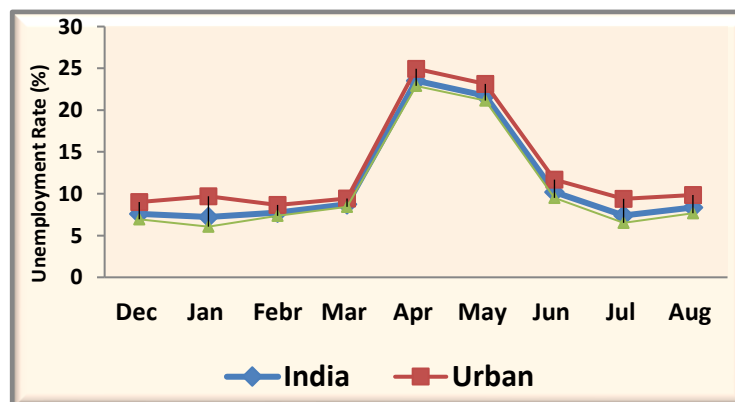


Fig-3: Rate of unemployment in India from Dec 2019 to Aug 2020. (Source- CMIE Pvt. Ltd)

The state of lockdown caused widespread *panic* among migrant workers. They did not know how long the lockdown would stay. They were *trapped* in sealed cities with empty pockets and so were at a great risk of falling deeper into. In this situation, they had no alternatives but to deal with the loss of their meager savings, food shortage, and uncertainty about their future. This situation of uncertainty, starvation, and eagerness to reach their home triggered the movement of thousands of migrant labourers to their homes. The panic created by fake news regarding the nature and duration of the lockdown added a new dimension to the exodus (Chatterjee M., 2020). Keeping these in mind, a large number of migrant workers started the journey towards their home (Sharma, S., & Khanna, S. 2020). But, due to the suspension of the public transport system,

thousands of migrant workers, some with their families and children, found *walking or bicycling* hundreds of kilometers along the roads (Slater, Joanna, Masih, Niha 2020). They slept near tracks, railway stations, or adjoining villages.

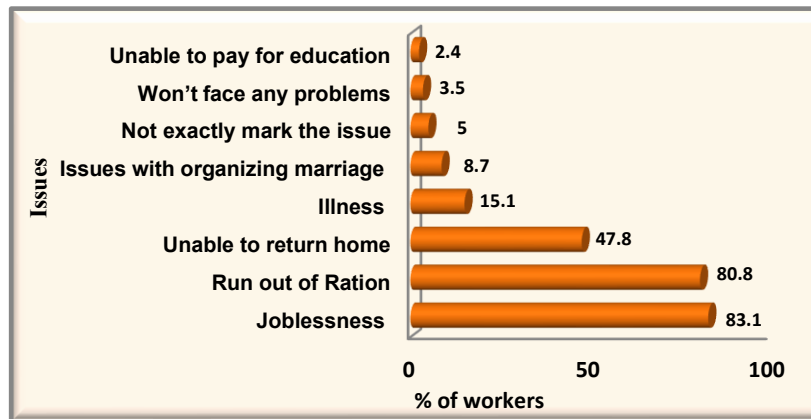


Fig-4: Problems faced by migrant workers during lockdown (Source- JanSaahas Survey 2020).

The bar graph clearly indicates that the majority of the migrant workers suffer during the pandemic from joblessness. A larger number also ran out from the rationing system, followed by problems like uncertainty of returning home, illness, and so on.

From a survey conducted by *Jan Saahas* with **three thousand one hundred and ninety five** migrant workers across Northern-central India from March 27 to March 29, it has been found that 80% of the migrant workers feared the shortage of food and joblessness during the lockdown period, 94% of them got below minimum wage, and 49% of them got no ration in spite of having their **Aadhar Card and bank account** in most cases with them (Jan Saahas Survey 2020). It was difficult enough for most of them to avail themselves of the benefit of the relief package and free ration declared by the **central** government. The study also shows that more than 60% of the workers did not know about the emergency relief measures, and 37% of them did not know how to access the package provided by the Central and State Governments (Ibid.).

During their journey, many of them were *arrested* for violating the lockdown principles imposed accordingly by the local government. Some of them *died* in *accidents* or *exhaustion* (Elsa E., 2020). It is reported that around **three hundred** deaths occurred while traveling back home (Mohanty D., 2020). According to the report made by the NGO *Save Life Foundation*, **one hundred and ninety-eight** migrant workers *died* in road accidents as of June 2, 2020 (Dutta A., 2020). During their journey on *SHRAMIK SPECIAL* trains, they also face hardship in different ways. There was no sufficient food or drinking water or hygienic toilet facilities or social distancing in the trains. All these called death for a number of migrant workers in the trains (Srivastava P., 2020). Also, after returning home, the migrants in many cases were treated with either *fear* or a "*class bias*" in their hometowns and villages. The local people treated them as a '*corona carrier*.' In many cases they faced assault and harassment by the people of their native areas (Kumar, C., & Mohanty, D., 2020). The *women and children* were the most vulnerable section among the migrants, especially from the exploitation and violation point of view (Bhatt 2009). A number of cases of *sexual assaults* had been reported in different parts of the country during that time (Madaik 2020).

The Mitigation: The Government actions

To lessen the vulnerability of the migrant workers and millions of others, the **Government** of India as well as different state governments adopted a number of crucial measures from time to time during the lockdown (Press Information Bureau, 2020b). These include –

Free Food Distribution

The Government of India's Ministry of Health and Family Welfare instructed state governments to set up relief camps with provisions for food, sanitary facilities, and medical care by April 1, 2020. The finance minister on May, 14 announced that under the second tranche of the *AATMA NIRBHAR BHARAT ABHIJAN*, free food grains would be provided to **eighty** million migrant workers and their families without ration cards.

who do not have a ration card. Around 7.5 million people, mainly migrants, were being provided food across the country in food camps run by the **non-governmental organizations**. Different state governments also provided free food to the hungry workers.

Setting up of Relief Camps

The Home Ministry on March 28, 2020, authorized the states to use their National Disaster Response Fund (NDRF) to provide accommodation for traveling migrants by setting up relief camps with medical facilities at different points along the highways. Up to April 12, 2020, **thirty-seven thousand nine hundred and seventy-eight** relief camps had been set up across the country to house lakhs of migrants. In Delhi, the number of camps was over **five hundred** (Mathur A., 2020). The Kerala government, in many cases, provided recharge facilities for phones as well as other medical essentials like masks, sanitizers, and medicines for the migrant workers in the camps. 3. On March 29, 2020, the central government ordered landlords to refrain from collecting rent from migrant workers.

Transport Arrangements

The most important problem faced by the return migrants during the lockdown was the lack of any means of transportation. To alleviate the situation, Indian Railways launched *SRAMIK SPECIAL trains* on and from May 1, 2020. Between May 1 and June 3, **four thousand one hundred and ninety-seven** trains were operated for transporting more than 5.8 million migrants. To take them back to their state for free, the Uttar Pradesh government arranged buses from Delhi's Anand Vihar Bus Station in late March. Up to the 4th week of March, about **forty** lakh migrants had traveled to their homes by bus (Jha, S., 29 March 2020).

Arrangement of Quarantine Centers

All the state governments opened thousands of quarantine centers to house the returned migrants and imposed strict measures for them to follow. Some states imposed mandatory institutional quarantine (Singh, S., & Sheriff, M., 2020). For counselling the migrant workers, the Bihar State Health Society (BSHS) started a mental health program as '*UMMEED*' in the isolation centers (Sopam R., 2020). In Karnataka, around **twenty-one thousand** migrant workers had been counselled. Twenty-one states are currently operating mental health counselling help lines (The Hindu 2020).

Financial Assistance

During lockdown, the Government of India allotted a bulky amount of money for the poor, including migrants, farmers, tiny businesses, and street vendors (Press Information Bureau, 2020b). On March 26, a

spending plan of Rs 22.6 billion was announced mainly to ensure food security and direct cash transfer to them (Srivastava, S. 2020). Again, on April 3, 2020, Rs 11 billion was released for the states and UTs under the National Disaster Relief Fund (NDRF) for the arrangement of their food and shelter (MOHA, GOI, 2020, April 3). Daily wages under the Mahatma Gandhi *National Rural Employment Guarantee Act* (MGNREGA) scheme were increased from Rs 182 to 202 from April 1, 2020. The PM CARES Fund allocated Rs 1000 crores to migrant workers on May 13 (Sharma, A. *et al.*2020). 2. On May 14, an additional Rs 35 billion was allocated for free food grains for 80 million migrant workers. For facilitating the street vendors, the allocation was INR 500 billion (Press Information Bureau 2020b). A rural public works scheme, *GARIB KALYAN ROJGAR ABHIYAAN*, was launched on June 20, 2020, for 116 districts in 6 states to help the migrant workers, for which Rs 50000 crores was allotted. To help 91.3 million farmers countrywide by direct cash transfer, the PM KISAN scheme was introduced. Some state governments, like Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, etc., also announced a one-time direct cash transfer for returning migrant workers.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

India is a vast country with a huge population base. More than 65% of its populace lives in villages. It has diverse people, different cultures, and a mixed type of economy, although the lion's share of its population is engaged in agriculture and related activities. Small holdings, low productivity, traditional farming, mass poverty, low levels of literacy and income, high rates of unemployment, poor nutrition, and health status, etc., are the main features of the rural population in this country. There are huge numbers of marginal, poor, and distressed people living in every corner of the country. They live hand to mouth. They have no work in their hands for a large part of the year. Keeping in mind this socio-economic scenario, different *long-term* measures can be adopted to ensure the rights of the *basic needs* like food, shelter, and health for them, including the migrant workers. But for this, what is to be done first is to prepare a *comprehensive database* for migrant and other unorganized sector workers, which is essential for the formulation of any economic plans. In a country like India with millions of migrant and informal workers, there is no such authentic database. This situation had adversely affected the policies adopted for helping the workers during lockdown. The following measures may be taken to have a firm economic base in the countryside areas, which will bring down the flow of migrants elsewhere.

1. Implementation of a *standard and equal wage rate* policy for equal work for daily workers across the country. It has been found that there are great variations in the wage rate of workers of the same category in different states. In this situation, the states with high wage rates attract the workers from the states paying low wages. It causes migration. This should be abolished. More work opportunities must be created by initiating different government schemes in the *net out-migrant and densely populated* states.

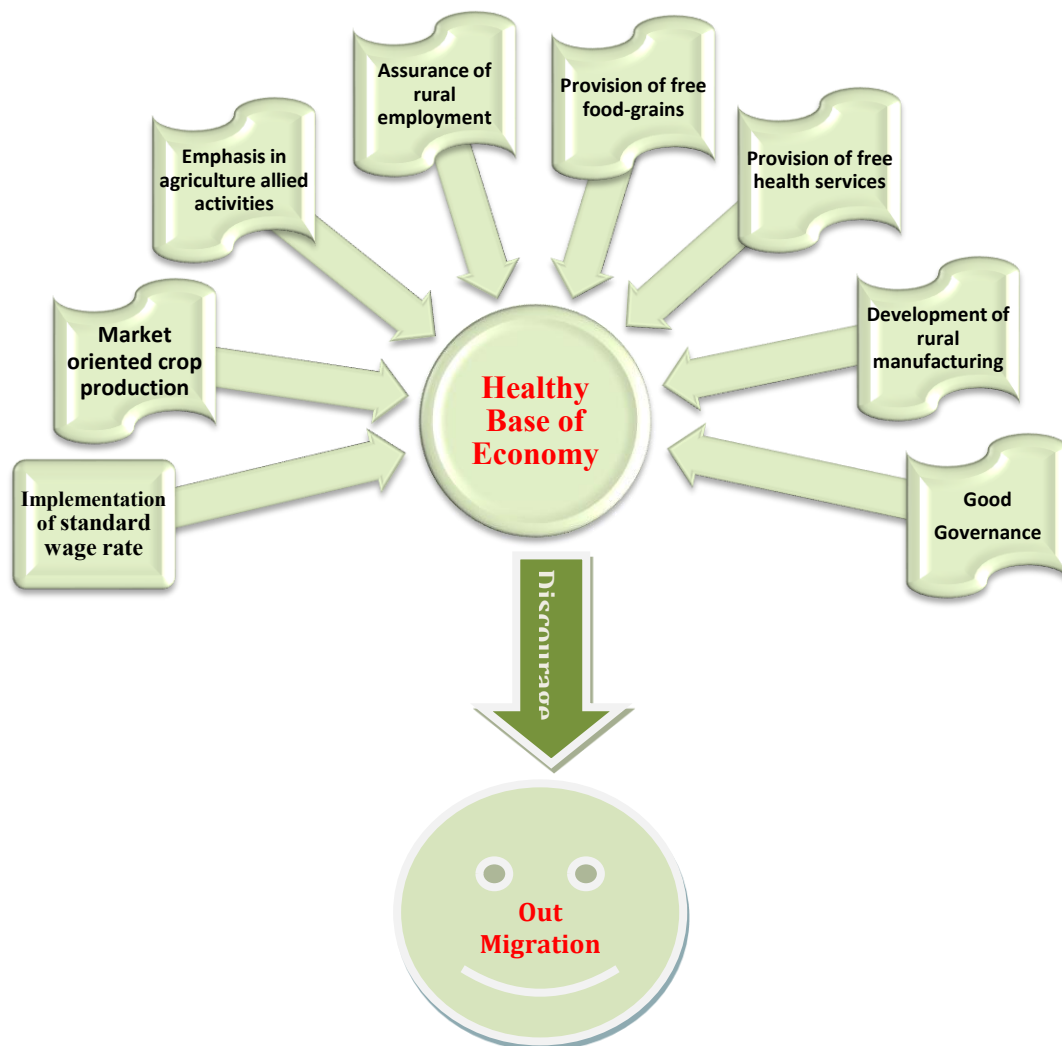


Fig-5: Potential strategies for making healthy economic foundation and less out-migration.

2. Motivation of the farmers to adopt *market-oriented crop production* instead of traditional farming. These highly demanded crops will ensure and increase the earnings of the farmers. But for this, the government should provide irrigation, fertilizers, and farm implements for the small and marginal farmers. Increase of profits will encourage the farmers to engross themselves in agricultural activities, which in turn will reduce the number of out-migrants. Farmers in different states in India are forced to sell the crops after harvesting due to a shortage of cash in their hands or for maintaining farm operations. To stop such *need, sell* the Direct Benefit Transfer (DBT) scheme; PM KISAN may be more popularized and extended countrywide. There must be a standard *supportive price* for each crop across the country. The middleman system in vegetable marketing needs to be eliminated.
3. *Encouragement of the rural youth for the participation in agriculture allied activities* like dairy farming, poultry farming, apiculture, horticulture, sericulture, mushroom cultivation, floriculture, and fisheries instead of traditional farming. This will pledge the earnings of the people, which may discourage them from moving elsewhere in search of jobs. The rural youth may be trained for this purpose.

4. Provision *and assurance of rural employment* for at least **two hundred** days for the people living below the poverty line (BPL) by expanding the MGNREGA scheme or by increasing government spending on local public works. At present, the *100 DAYS WORK project* is running under this scheme in which poor people in the country have the opportunity of getting **one hundred** days' work in a calendar year. But in reality, they are employed only for 50-70 days per year. Also, it is influenced by local political parties. Along with this, all the homeless should be provided with adequate houses. *The PRADHAN MANTRI AWAAS YOJANA (GRAMIN)* scheme may be extended for this program.
5. Assurance of *getting free food grains* through the Public Distribution System (PDS) for the vulnerable section of society, including the migrant workers anywhere in the country, by adopting the *One Nation, One Ration Card policy*. More and more care must be taken in making divisions of *social classes* like APL (Above Poverty Line) and BPL.
6. Provision of *free health services* for the poorer section of the society, especially in remote villages, by extending the infrastructure of the rural health sub-centers. In most cases, there are not at all modern health facilities in rural India. A larger number of doctors and nurses should be provided there for 24-hour services along with free medicines, ambulance service, etc.
7. Encouragement *for the development of rural manufacturing* like handicrafts, small-scale industry, rural crafts, cottage industries, and other allied economic activities in the rural areas. Due to lack of funds and marketing facilities, this type of production in India is always neglected. The government should take initiatives to provide financial support and marketing for the products. The stakeholders should be provided a loan with *the easiest mode of recovery and subsidy facility*. lockdown, direct cash may be transferred to them to carry on the business.
8. Implementation of *good governance* with an accurate idea of the extent of the problem. Depending on the geographical situation, availability of local resources, quality and efficiency of local people, and the density of the population, a proper development plan should be adopted. Proper implementation of all these strategies will build a *solid economic base* in rural India, which in turn will stop the movement of the rural youths to other areas.

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