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OPINION

# COVID-19 Sets off Mass Migration in India

Richa Mukhra,[a] Kewal Krishan,[a] and Tanuj Kanchan[b]

[a]Department of Anthropology (UGC Centre of Advanced Study), Panjab University, Sector-14, Chandigarh, India
[b]Department of Forensic Medicine and Toxicology, All India Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India

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The communication discusses COVID-19 triggered reverse migration in India. India has witnessed the second largest mass migration in its history after the Partition of India in 1947, where more than 14 million people were displaced and migrated to India and Pakistan respectively, depending on their religious faiths. The opinion describes the trend of migration and related effects on the migrants as well as the nation at large. © 2020 IMSS. Published by Elsevier Inc.

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COVID-19 has caused a major havoc in the economic sector, globally. The worst-hit is the poor and developing countries. India ranks 49 in the poverty index. As per the 2011 Census, nearly 22 per cent of India's population is poor. As per the World Bank report of 2012, 1 in 5 Indians is poor, with 80% of the poor residing in rural areas (1). India is a vast country, and every year a substantial number of people migrate to larger cities of different states for seeking employment opportunities to earn bread and butter for their family. Reverse migration refers to movement of people from place of employment to their native places. Courtesy, COVID-19, the country is beholding the second largest mass migration in its history after the Partition of India in 1947, where more than 14 million people were displaced (2) and migrated to India and Pakistan respectively, depending on their religious faiths.

According to the Census of India (2011), Maharashtra State and Delhi saw the maximum number of flow of migrants from the states of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Odisha, West Bengal, Madhya Pradesh, Punjab and Assam with around 54.3 million migrating out of their origin state (3). With the world coming to a stand still due to lockdown as a measure to combat COVID-19, limited employment opportunities, impending fear of unknown future and financial crisis, thousands of underprivileged people and labourers started to march back to their native places and home states. The outflow of migrants to their respective states has been depicted in Figure 1. According to a report by World Bank, more than 40 million internal migrants have been affected due to COVID-19 and around 50,000–60,000 individuals migrated from urban to rural areas of origin in a period of few days. This internal migration of reverse nature is reported to be two and a half times that of an international relocation (4).

In the absence of transport facilities, during lockdown, the panic stricken labourers and their families including infants, pregnant women and the elderly walked thousands of kilometres barefoot without food and money to reach their native places. Many of these migrants were left stranded mid-way, facing starvation and misery, and some even died before they could reach their destination. The extent of this sudden reverse migration was such that, even the best of the efforts of the Government of India, could not match the crisis. The authorities have developed shelters and quarantine homes for the deprived migrants and are looking after 600,000 migrants and providing food to more than 2.2 million individuals (5) under *Free Ration Scheme* by Delhi Government and *One Nation One Ration Card Scheme* by the Central Government. Still millions of migrants are unreachable and are yet to receive aid by the Government.

These migrants are vulnerable to the SARS-CoV-2 infection and can ultimately become the reservoirs for the spread of the disease. Even the labour camps and quarantine shelter homes may raise the jeopardy of contamination amongst them. Handling the compromised mental health of the migrating workers is another challenge. Depressed by the misery around, and lack of future employment opportunities and financial support is likely to result in suicidal

Address reprint requests to: Kewal Krishan, PhD, FRAI, Dr. Associate Professor, Department of Anthropology, (UGC Centre of Advanced Study), Panjab University, Sector-14, Chandigarh, India; Phone: (+91) 9876048205; E-mail: gargkk@yahoo.com or kewalkrishan@pu.ac.in

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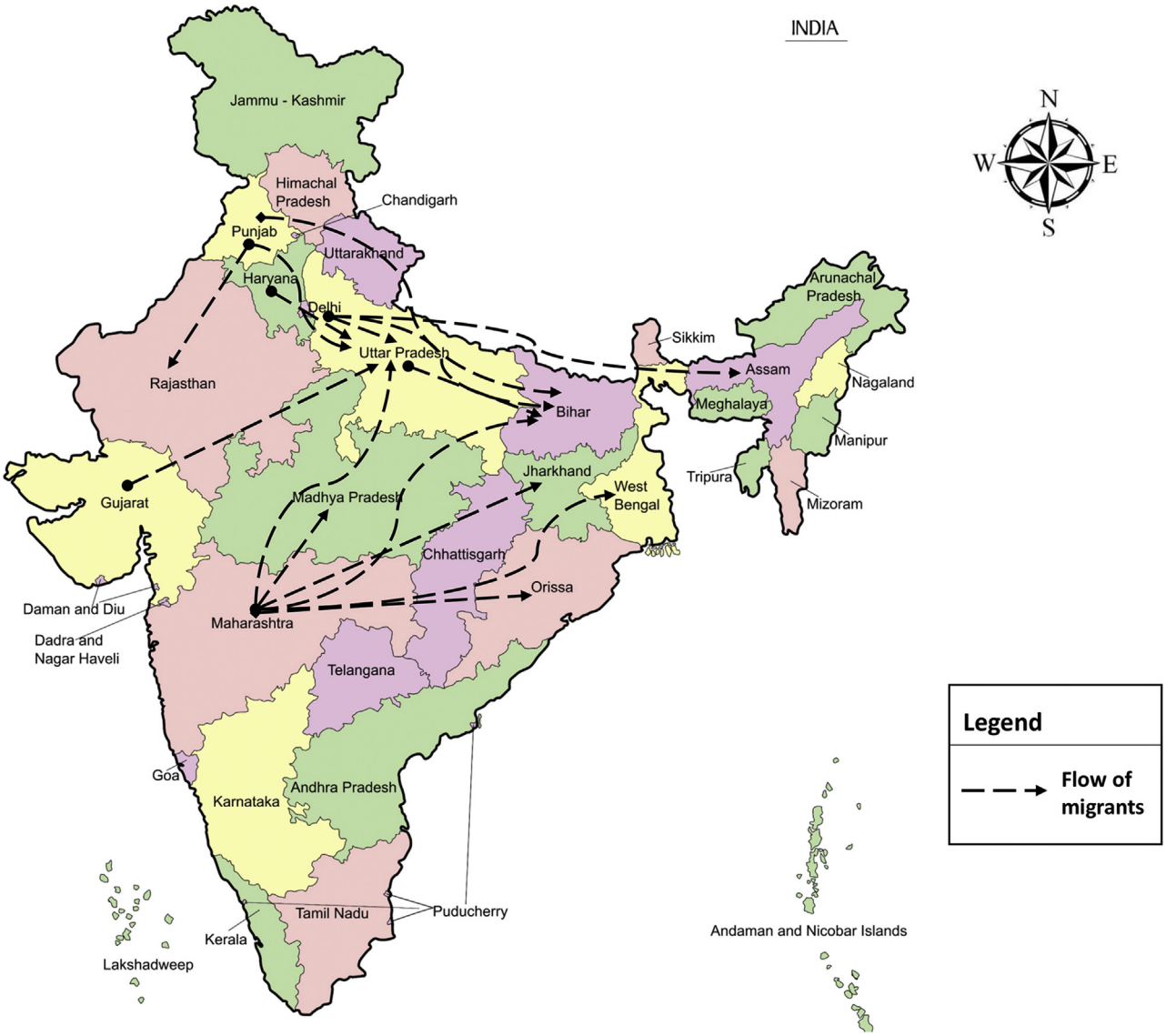


**Figure 1.** Map of India depicting the migration trends from one State to the other.

tendencies. On the other hand, the industries, is it agriculture, textile or construction, etc. are dependent on manpower. The lack of labour is likely to affect the productivity of various sectors leading to an economic slowdown. Thus, the reverse migration is likely to hit the economy of the nation as well.

It would not be incorrect to state that COVID-19 triggered massive reverse migration is likely to have far reaching implications for the migrants as well as the country, unless adequate and timely measures are taken to address this issue. First and foremost, the government needs to ensure that the distressed migrants get back to their homes safely. At the same time, quarantine strategies need to be devised to prevent this migration led spread of infection to the remotest places of India. The migrants should be assured of safety and financial security and motivated to get back to work at the earliest possible time. SARS-CoV-2 is here to stay, and hence, it is recommended to follow due safety measures to combat its threat, at least till the time vaccine is developed. Let's learn to face novel Corona virus effectively with what we have instead of running from it.

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## Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that the there is no conflict of interest and competing interests regarding this manuscript.

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