

## Research Idea

### **Guest Labour: The New Normal in Glocal Perspective**

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**Abstract:** COVID-19, a variant of coronavirus, supposed to have originated from Wuhan, China, has engulfed the entire world during the past few months beginning with the end of 2019 and might well continue to play havoc in coming months, and maybe a few years to come. One of the most significant socio-economic impacts of the pandemic situation is related to the plight of the trans-national and intra-national guest labour, commonly known as the migrant labour. There is an urgent need to look at the issues affecting the life and livelihood of millions of guest labour around the world. The situation of the guest labour in India is discussed in terms of inter-province migration and reverse migration. This scenario is almost the replica of similar situations in a large number of countries across different continents. Migration is a fact of life, both national and international. Immediate positive and constructive action is needed to deal with the longstanding human catastrophe.

#### **Introduction**

The compelling factors contributing to guest labour<sup>2</sup> throughout the world include, among

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others: poverty, imbalance in economic development across regions, illiteracy, lack of proper education, training, skills, rural indebtedness, meagre access to institutional finance, absence of livelihood opportunities, and vagaries of natural and manmade disasters. In addition, there is the need for seasonal workers in agriculture and large farms during the harvesting months, prevailing mindsets of the rural and peri-urban youth to search for jobs in metros and urban centres, and the attraction of the so-called modern life style, even if it invariably ends in urban slums and utterly inhuman conditions. The 2011 Census indicates that in India, there were 54 million migrants who cross state borders. However, that has to be a huge underestimate.

The Census understands migration as a one-stop process. Neither the Census nor the National Sample Survey refer to recording short-term or systematic movements of labour force from one place to another (Sainath, 2020). About one-hundred-and-forty-millions of India's rural poor migrate seasonally to cities, industries, and farms in search of livelihood. They are usually engaged as casual labourer in construction, manufacturing, services, and farm sectors. They constitute the bulk of the unorganized, informal workforce, and are estimated to be at least 350 million that remains excluded from services and their genuine rights as workers and citizens, both in their native places, as well as in their places of work in urban, industrial, and even rural areas (Aajeevika Bureau, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> 'Guest labour' is a concept which is new to the social sciences discourse. It is coined by the author to emphasise on the seminal contribution by the labour force throughout the world. The so-called migrant labourers work in places other than their original habitation. They come to the place of work as guests; but prove to be the major chunk of the work force. The Covid-19 Pandemic has amply demonstrated this reality of the global socio-economic scenario.

## Background

There are perceptible gradations or levels of the guest labour in any given situation, such as, white collar, blue collar, skilled, semi-skilled, unskilled, menial workers<sup>3</sup>. A number of states or provinces are involved during the movement of the guest labour, like that of state of origin, transit states and destination states. This issue is at the centre of the mess relating to the pathetic situation of guest labour. Most of the guest labourers belong to different states and they are compelled to work outside their state of origin. They invariably belong to the unorganized sector, and all of them are engaged through some labour contractors, middlemen or intermediary agencies. Their wage, conditions of service, and application of rules and regulations for ensuring their safety, security, and wellbeing are generally problematic and are applied to the disadvantage of the guest labour.

It is but natural that work may be permanent or temporary. However, the minimum wage and benefits admissible to the guest labour must be at par with that given to the full time and permanent workers. The reasons are not difficult to ascertain. Both the categories of workers perform the tasks and responsibilities at par with each other. The guest labour would perform the routine responsibilities while confronting a number of socio-economic, psychological, emotional and other types of stigmas and challenges. Besides the minimum guaranteed ways and accompanying pecuniary benefits as provided by laws and terms of contract, the guest labour is also entitled to life and disability cover, health and maternity related provisions, housing, safe drinking water, electricity and decent living and working environments, most of which are absent and they carry symbolic value. Over and above, exploitation by the contractors or middlemen, as well as the apathy of the law

<sup>3</sup> For details see: <https://klcampbell.com/complete-collar-colors-understanding-consumer-personas/2020>.

enforcing authorities, add to the miseries of the guest labour. In fact, they belong to nowhere. They do not know who would come to their rescue.

The research question sought to be answered in this write-up is: *Is there an instantaneous need to look into the plight of the guest labour around the world, and to search for a comprehensive universal and acceptable solution framework with national or local specificities that has evaded the global society for Centuries?*

The bulk of the guest labour suffer primarily due to a number of contributing and interacting factors. They are compelled to leave their home state. They have to migrate to other areas and states. They are unaware of the provisions of law and rules that could protect their basic minimum entitlements, privileges, and rights. In addition, they are not aware of any kind of abrupt termination of their work contract, which is normally done as a one-sided or unilateral action. There is hardly any coordination among different governments, agencies, officials, functionaries, contractors, work providers vis-a-vis the guest labour which in turn contributes to utter confusion and an unjust work environment for the guest labour. On the top of it, there is a near absence of old age, post-work personal and social security provisions for the guest labour.

The COVID-19 pandemic situation has impacted the global socioeconomic, political, and health scenario in a hitherto unprecedented scale. The guest labour situation has faced its worst ever phase worldwide, including: interstate and intrastate forced migration (as a direct fallout of lockdown), shut down and near-total stand still position in all segments of economy, including that of agriculture, industry, mines and minerals, manufacturing, processing, service sector, travel and tourism, hospitality field, fast moving consumer goods, supply chain operations transport and communication, education and print media.

The pandemic situation has exposed another very significant aspect of the life and work of the guest labour that they are indispensable actors in the myriad sectors of the economy. Nevertheless, the moment blanket lockdown was imposed, millions of these helpless workers and their families were left in the lurch by all concerned including the states, big farm owners, or factory owners. They were forced to live virtually without remuneration, food, basic necessities of life and even many of them started their long and uncertain journey home ward by walking. A number of them lost their lives due to food, water and illness and injuries.

Those who could reach their native places including those who could be provided with some kind of transport arrangements landed in COVID quarantine centres. After a few days, the guest labourers who have also been branded as the unwanted guests in their respective native places witnessed the stark realities that the reasons for which they had to leave their home land in the first instance continue to be the same, and in certain cases worse than ever before. They do not have any livelihood opportunity; basic facilities for a decent living are absent. In addition, they have completely become unwanted and uninvited intruders in their own homeland.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the call was life first and livelihood next, but six months down the line, it has become clear that both life and livelihood stand on equal footing. In spite of the unfortunate and unprecedented global pandemic, the entire economy cannot remain stand still for an indefinite time. Life must go on irrespective of the threat of the pandemic. Economy has to open up by following the standard operating procedures including social distancing, use of mask and application of the sanitizer. The factories, for instance, would have to work with minimum of workers and in shifts for a fraction of the capacity depending upon all the contributing

factors. The guest labour are the worst victims all the time, be it pre-pandemic or post-pandemic or the 'new normal' in the future. Their status as migrants became all the more precarious and undermined. At the beginning, they were treated as outsiders at their respective places of work in some distant land. During the pandemic, they lost that identity also and belonged to nowhere. In the post-pandemic situation and the new normal scenario, they are branded as unwanted and unwelcome guests back home.

At all levels of the economy that is local, state, national, international, place of origin, transit and destinations, there is hardly comprehensive and accurate data and information regarding the guest labour. Even though there are provisions in the Constitution (Part III and Part IV, 1950) and many of the statutes (1979 Act), most of the basic issues such as personal data, credentials, skill, health condition, payment of wage and other dues, sudden withering away and demise of the guest labour suffer from acute under reporting, misinformation and inadequate documentation. This is true of the normal circumstance or pre-pandemic scenario. The entire issue has become more complicated and volatile in the post-pandemic and new normal situation, a time the guest labour faces the worst ever crisis of life in centuries.

This situation has also exposed the extremely uneven and imbalanced ratio between the so-called formal and informal workforce in any society. Precisely, it points out that by branding the majority of informal workers, including the guest labour, as the workers out of job security, wage guarantee, welfare policies, the employers, job providers and authorities wash their hands off the basic privileges, rights and dues while extracting maximum possible output from these workers. There is a constant process of interaction including that of intermittent clashes, frictions, negotiations, conciliations and eventual assimilation of the guest

labour population vis a vis the local people in general and the local labour population in particular belonging to the destination states. It is because of the inevitable give-and-take relationship that necessitates coexistence of the guest labour and the local populace. They need each other for the accomplishment of purely economic objectives while compromising their socio-cultural and psychological peculiarities.

The guest labour scenario has undergone some positive changes. Due to the expansion of efforts for literacy and education, more and more educated members of the guest labour are seen in different segments of economy. Another corroborating factor is that the level of awareness among the educated unemployed youth regarding livelihood opportunities in other states propels them to leave their homes and search for jobs. The expansion of road transport, railways and even air connectivity has boosted speedy movement of guest labour from one state to the other. The phenomenal increase in internet connectivity and digital revolution arising out of the unprecedented growth of competing telecom service providers coupled with availability of the low-cost smart mobile handsets have facilitated communication and bridged the gap between the guest labour and their near and dear ones back home.

The Lok Sabha, the lower house of the Parliament of India, passed three labour codes such as code on industrial relations, social security, occupational safety and health, on September 22, 2020 that offer a mixed bag of provisions for the working population including the guest labour. These include greater flexibility in hiring and retrenchment by the enterprises and job providers; less scope for organised protest; and expansion of the social security cover for the informal workers. It is reported that these codes have taken into consideration the interests of the guest labour or the migrant workers, gig economy workers and workers in the unorganised sectors. When

implemented, these codes would expect that both the national government and the provincial government would create databases on the guest labour or the migrant workers. They will be offered benefits such as nationwide portability of the public distribution system and construction cess benefits.

All the member states of the United Nations who are committed to the implementation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are expected to facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration. This is equally applicable to the guest labour within the boundary of any member state as migration is both international and intra-national at any given point of time in order to accomplish the stated objectives of the UN SDG, 2030.

There was an intergovernmental conference at Marrakech, Morocco during 10-11 December 2018 in which the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly & Regular Migration was arrived at. The participating states could agree to protect life and to help each other in searching for the missing migrants. This provision inter-alia is expected to guide the participating states to apply it for the inter-state guest labour within their respective national economies.

Another SDG target emphasises the need for availability of high quality, timely, and reliable data in terms of age, gender, race, ethnicity, migratory status, and income. It is intriguing that guest labour manages the bulk of the burden of the economy, not only in a particular area, but also all over the globe and still they have to get such a rough dealing day in and day out. It is a known fact that the international guest labour sends huge remittances to their country of origin out of their savings which is added to the GDP of the countries. This aspect is equally true of the guest labour migrating from one state to the other within

a nation state and they too contribute to the income of their state of domicile.

### Conclusion

The guest labour needs to be recognised as indispensable, legitimate, and legal part of the work force at all levels of economy. Just by creating international, national, or local institutions, including civil society organisations, or advocacy platforms, the issues, problems, and plight of the guest labour would not vanish. There may be some global or universal guidelines or suggestions. The nation states should draft, adopt, implement, and monitor comprehensive strategies, policies, and concrete programmes in tune with their respective domestic economies and the interacting factors and resources.

The provincial and local governments need to implement these plans of action in letter and spirit. It is high time that the majority of the guest labour, or the so called 'unorganised and informal labour force' is treated at par with the minority organised and formal work force by the governments, corporates, other service providers throughout the world. This includes provision of monetary compensation, service benefits, social benefits, health and sanitation facilities, children's education, old age benefits, and gender parity. The present paper contributes to comparative public administration in the event of its main ideas being discussed and implemented across nation states. An uncanny parallel may be drawn with that of a perceptible gap of fifty years between the adoption of Universal Human Rights (UNGA, 1948) and Universal Human Duties (Valencia, 1998). The only difference is that the guest workers have been suffering during past so many centuries. It is the right of the guest labour to work and to lead a decent life. It is the earnest duty of the glocal (Robertson, 2012) community to provide them with their legitimate dues and dignity.

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