

Impact of COVID-19 on India's International Migration

MARCH 2021

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Executive Summary

COVID-19 is a global health emergency that has impacted all areas of human life, unlike anything that the world has seen after the two World Wars. It is a health calamity that has only been matched by the Spanish plague of 1918 in the extent of its spread and deaths reported. The ways in which the pandemic has impacted global mobility flows has led to contraction of economic activity. This has led to questions of employability, poverty and loss of income, decline in remittance flows, resettlement and rehabilitation, and reskilling the migrants for newer destination countries. As far as sectoral impact is concerned, some sectors have been more severely impacted than others. Sectors such as food and hospitality, retail and wholesale, tourism and transport and manufacturing have been more adversely affected than others (Migration and Development Brief 32, April 2020). Indian migrant workers abroad have also not remained untouched and have had to bear the brunt of enforced lockdowns, loss of employment and income, and lack of access to medical and appropriate housing facilities.

The Indian government committed to the safety and welfare of its citizens and in an effort to repatriate these migrant workers began the Vande Bharat Mission from May 7 2020. Under this Mission, Indians stranded abroad are being brought back in a phased manner. As on 6 August 2020, 9,79,436 repatriation requests were received by the MEA, out of which 6,64,096 have been repatriated from over 130 countries. Further, 1,07,107 have reached India through land crossings (MEA figures).

The top 5 countries from where repatriation has taken place are UAE, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (MEA figures). This coincides with the fact that around 65 per cent of Indian migrants- majority of which are blue-collar workers- are located in the GCC countries. Around 8.5 million Indian migrants were working in the GCC countries before the onset of the pandemic and it is the GCC countries that also top the list of repatriation to India under the Vande Bharat Mission. This return of the Indian migrants majorly from the

GCC countries is due to several factors. Majority of migrants work in the informal sector and were heavily impacted due to termination of contracts, salary cuts, amnesty schemes and depletion of savings when lockdown was imposed. This trend was most marked in labour intensive sectors such as construction, tourism, hospitality and oil and gas sectors. This explains the large number of returns that have taken place from GCC countries. Not only blue-collar workers but white-collar workers such as those working in banking sector and professionals in the IT sector have also returned due to expiration of contract in some cases, and flexibility offered by teleworking in others.

Once the process of return began, the questions surrounding rehabilitation and resettlement, employability and reskilling of migrants for newer job roles and markets gained prominence. It also brought in questions of how to cushion the blow for families reliant on migrant's income for survival given that global remittances were projected to decline sharply by about 20 percent in 2020 (World Bank estimates) and remittances to India in particular were projected to fall by about 23 percent in 2020 amounting to USD 64 billion (Migration and Development Brief 32). To deal with the situation, a slew of initiatives were introduced at both the central and state government level. The central government has launched various schemes that will benefit the migrants such as employment under Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (2005), easy loans under Mudra Yojana up to Rs 10 lakh to micro and small enterprise. State governments have also stepped in notwithstanding the challenges, States like Kerala, Bihar and Odisha governments have started the exercise of skill mapping and matching for returnee migrant workers in the quarantine centres. The state government of Madhya Pradesh has also launched the Rozgar Setu app, which enables migrant workers to register and find jobs in the fields related to their skills. Additionally, the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) in collaboration with Ministry of Civil Aviation and Ministry of External Affairs have launched the Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) to perform skill mapping of returnee migrants and facilitate matching of skills with corresponding job roles in new markets.

Apart from the reintegration of returnee migrants through recognition of existing skills and expertise, upskilling and reskilling of migrant workers in light of the changing nature of the labour market, and exploring emerging areas of opportunity have also gained new fervour.

Sectors such as healthcare, information technology, logistics, Fintech have witnessed increase in demand. Besides, there is a demand for blue-collar workers such as plumbers and electricians in newer destination countries of Europe. Further recommendations on actionable policy interventions can be found as under:

Recommendations for policy interventions:

- Workers can be sent to development programmes; rural employment needs to be the focus and emphasis has to be on schemes like Providing Urban Amenities to Rural Areas (PURA).
- Private sector needs high-skilled workers.
- Workers need to be provided assistance and funds for entrepreneurship.
- A holistic plan is needed for employability with pan-India approach but implementation could be delegated to States in line with opportunities. Not all States may be well equipped to deal with new situation.
- State run recruiting agencies currently caters to bulk requirements; they should have a methodology to cater to domestic and individual requirement.
- Best Practices of other countries should be taken into account for e.g. Sri Lanka has compulsory training and certificate for Domestic Service Workers (DSWs) since 1996 through Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). Provide counselling, consultation and legal support abroad and formalization of employment relationships – institutional framework.
- Healthcare sector has seen increased demand. Systematic and centralized database of healthcare workers can help in development of strategies to reduce the demand and supply gap in the sector. There is a need to invest in education and allow people to look at nursing profession in an aspirational manner.
- There is a need to pursue Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) and bilateral agreements very aggressively. Existing agreements are not very effective. Priority should be given to the domestic market.
- Alternative learning systems such as online and distant learning are needed to impart reskilling and upskilling training to migrant workers.
- Vocational programs need to be introduced to certify skills of workers at entry level.

- Facilitation of placement opportunities for workers with adequate skill level and establishment of links and networks in upcoming new markets is needed.
- There is a need to conduct state and district wise analysis of skill gaps and establish migration support centres for counselling and registration of workers across all states.
- Importance should be given to vocational education and skilling initiatives as per market growth and future projections.
- There is a need for a conversation at the regional level for skilled migration as well as better protection of migrant workers, especially those working in sectors like construction.



1 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most significant global health calamity this century has faced. It has rapidly spread across the globe and has left in its wake enormous health, economic, environmental and social challenges. The necessary measures undertaken to tackle the crisis has brought every level of engagement and every segment of development to a near standstill. While the COVID-19 pandemic is not a migration- based issue per say, fears surrounding global movement and mobility have made it one. The measures taken as governments and societies grapple with the pandemic, have also created an unprecedented impact on the global economy that is heavily reliant on migration and the mobility of skills.

As the pandemic was spreading rapidly due to mobility of people, India also responded promptly by taking swift action to restrict all forms of physical mobility including travel restrictions and border shutdowns with exemptions in some essential sectors. The massive labour market disruptions caused by the pandemic affected workers at large but migrants were particularly affected. As countries looked to secure jobs for their domestic workforce amidst the economic slowdown triggered by the pandemic, migrant workers were the first category of workers that bore the brunt of layoffs. Amongst the hardest hit groups were Indian workers in the Gulf region who account for bulk of Indian migrant workers abroad. Around 8.5 million Indian workers live in the GCC countries, which is approximately 65% of the total NRI community from India. The US, UK and the Gulf region accounts for bulk of remittances sent to India, which stands at USD 83.1 billion according to World Bank figures (Migration and Development Brief 32, April 2020).

The restrictions on travel and mobility have created ripple effects on jobs. For instance, tourism, hospitality, food industry and aviation have been the hardest hit sectors. Not only that, but jobs that require intensive use of labour and are marked by

physical proximity such as in construction and retail have also been hit. ILO in its growth projections due to the impact of COVID-19 stated that if another COVID-19 wave hits in the second half of 2020, there would be global working hour loss of 14 percent which is approximately 400 million full time jobs (ILO Monitor 5, 2020). Further, in the first half of the year 2020, an estimated 5.4 percent of the global working hours that is equivalent to 155 million full-time jobs have already been lost. At the start of the year, global unemployment stood at 190 million and this trend has been exacerbated by the shocks due to COVID-19.¹

With enforced lockdowns in destination countries, loss of wages, depletion of accumulated savings and lack of access to medical and appropriate housing facilities, the migrant workers were stranded. These factors led to requests for facilitating the safe repatriation of international migrants to India, which began in a phased manner from 7th of May 2020 under the ‘Vande Bharat Mission’. As on 6 August 2020, 9,79,436 repatriation requests were received by the MEA, out of which 6,64,096 have been repatriated. Further, 1,07,107 have reached India through land crossings. The repatriation of these migrant workers has brought about new complexities regarding resettlement and rehabilitation and also questions regarding their future employability as most work in informal jobs and lack social safety nets in case of job loss or illness. Further, the decline in remittances for families that are heavily reliant on the money have also impacted the lives of those at home. A rapid recovery will only be possible if all relevant stakeholders actively plan and collaborate on how to deal with the impact of COVID-19 and explore strategies that can cushion the blow.

In light of this scenario, this report looks at the impact of COVID-19 on India’s international migration in all its dimensions. The report analyses sectors and countries that have seen the presence of Indian migrants and the resultant impact due to the pandemic. It also focuses on major migration corridors India shares with the world and suggests some new areas of emerging opportunities with recommendations for future policy interventions.

¹ <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322>

2 Impact of COVID-19

At the start of the year, global unemployment stood at 190 million and this trend has been exacerbated by the shocks due to COVID-19.² The restrictions on travel and mobility have created ripple effects on jobs. For instance, food and hospitality, retail and wholesale, tourism and transport, and manufacturing have been some of the hardest hit sectors. Jobs that require intensive use of labour and are marked by physical proximity such as in construction and real estate are reeling under the impact. These sectors also employ a large number of blue-collar workers, and depending on the country context, these workers are facing drastic reduction in work hours, wage cuts and layoffs. According to the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the world economy was expected to contract by 3 percent in 2020 in the baseline scenario. There is also a substantial risk of continued economic recession continuing up to 2021 (IMF 2020).

This contraction of economic activity has led to the following repercussions on migrant workers:

- Loss of work and wages, particularly issue of unpaid wages.
- Rise in poverty and inequality.
- Fall in remittance transfers.
- Uneven demand in labour market; wherein certain sectors such as healthcare have witnessed increased demand, while oil & gas sectors have witnessed a downturn.
- Issue of return and rehabilitation.
- Reskilling and upskilling of workers.
- Exploration of new markets and opportunities.

² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322>

2.1 Sectoral Impact of COVID-19 on Indian Migrants - GCC Countries and Malaysia

Given the large number of Indians present in GCC Countries, majority of whom are blue-collared workers, the pandemic has brought into sharp focus the significance of the India-Gulf migration corridor. Over the years, the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries- Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and UAE have been the preferred destinations for Indian migrants for employment. The pull factors behind the trend have been employment opportunities, presence of an extended network of Indian migrant workers, geographical proximity in comparison to Europe or North America, financial benefits that accrue, linguistic compatibility and cultural affinity.

The table below indicates the top 10 countries from where Indian migrants were repatriated under the Vande Bharat Mission until August 4, 2020. It reiterates the predominance of GCC countries from where repatriations have taken place in bulk and top the list of destination countries as far as Indian migrant workers are concerned.

Table 1: Top 10 countries from where Indian migrants were repatriated (As on 4.08.2020)

SIN	Country	Total Arrived in India
1.	UAE	130093
2.	Qatar	58995
3.	Oman	49621
4.	Saudi Arabia	54713
5.	Kuwait	51302
6.	USA	32265
7.	United Kingdom	18640
8.	Bahrain	16267
9.	Singapore	9391
10.	Canada	7368

(Source: MEA Figures)

Table 2 restates the predominance of GCC countries and corroborates the fact that the top 5 countries from where repatriation has taken place are also top 5 destinations for emigrant workers in the ECR category.

Table 2: Year wise distribution of Indian Migrants in GCC Countries

Country/Year	2018	2019	2020	Total
UAE	112059	76112	15167	203338
Saudi Arabia	72399	161103	40703	274205
Kuwait	57613	45712	8105	111430
Qatar	34471	31810	6990	73271
Oman	36037	28392	5313	69742
Bahrain	9142	9997	2280	21419
Total	321721	353126	78558	753405

(Source: Emigrate)

2.1.1 Oil and Gas Sector

Oil-rich Gulf economies are facing the double impact of disruptions in the oil and gas sector due to historic low prices in the sector as a result of price wars with neighbouring countries, and low demand of oil because of the COVID-19 pandemic. As per the latest Economic Intelligence Unit (EIU) report, Oman's GDP was expected to decrease by 6.5 percent in 2020, owing to the negative effects of COVID-19. Also, Oman's fiscal deficit was projected to reach approximately 19 per cent of GDP in 2020 compared to 9 per cent in 2019. Other countries like Bahrain are also expecting severe downturn in the oil and gas sector, which approximately generates more than 60 per cent of the GCC Countries government revenues.³

2.1.2 Construction Sector

Another sector that has been adversely impacted is the construction sector. While most sectors in the GCC have been asked to implement remote working policies, the construction sector, which hires the maximum expatriate workers, has been exempt

³ Based on Mission Inputs

from these restrictions. An analysis of job role data as provided by the eMigrate portal reveals that ‘labour’ is the most prominent category among those migrating to GCC countries followed by other job roles such as masons, carpenters, helpers and so on. Most of these workers are employed in the construction sector and are vulnerable due to their low wages and lack of access to social protection plans. The cramped housing conditions and lack of access to health care services carry a high risk of contagion making these workers one of the most severely affected group due to lockdown measures.

2.1.3 Tourism and Hospitality

The tourism and hospitality sector has also been severely impacted as many working in this sector have either faced job loss or salary cuts. International tourist arrivals dropped by 74 percent during 2020, according to the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO).⁴ This drop in tourist arrivals directly impacted those that depend on this sector for their survival. In response, countries like UAE are devising some measures to support jobs and incomes of those working in the sector. Utility payments have been temporarily reduced and additionally, all tourism licenses and fees have also been waived for six months (ILO Sectoral Brief May 2020).⁵ Unless travel restrictions are lifted, tourism picks up, hotels see occupancy, it is unlikely that these measures will impact or alleviate the condition of migrant workers.

Further, major events like the Emirate’s hosting of the 2020 World Expo, which was supposed to boost the economy have had to be postponed. Qatar, which plans to host the 2022 FIFA World cup has also had to cut part of its World Cup workforce due to the economic pressures of COVID-19.⁶ Further, Saudi Arabia is also expecting a sharp decline in visitors for the Hajj pilgrimage, which is an important source of tourism. Further, countries like Malaysia have also faced a severe blow to their tourism and related service industries. As a result, approximately 6,741 Indians have

⁴ <https://www.unwto.org/news/2020-worst-year-in-tourism-history-with-1-billion-fewer-international-arrivals>

⁵ https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_dialogue/---sector/documents/briefingnote/wcms_741468.pdf

⁶ <https://www.insidethegames.biz/articles/1096156/qatar-2022-cut-world-cup-workforce>

returned from Malaysia, which include blue-collar workers employed in sectors such as tourism, plantation, construction, restaurants and service industry.⁷

2.1.4 Professionals

Many of the professionals who have returned from the GCC countries also include engineers, bankers and sales executives. This return is also due to reasons in addition to COVID-19 as the countries are using the pandemic as the rationale to implement stricter visa regimes and border controls. Countries like Kuwait have passed stricter expat quota rules, which would cut the total number of migrant workers in the country by 40% and mandate that the number of Indians workers present in the country should not exceed 15% of the Kuwaiti population.⁸ These bills, which were approved with the National Assembly, are not uncommon procedures during crisis situations. Localization/Nationalization policies such as these were also witnessed during the global financial crisis or the Arab Spring etc. but they are undoubtedly pushing helpless migrants back to their countries of origin without their salaries and final financial settlements.

⁷ Inputs by Mission

⁸ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/nri/visa-and-immigration/new-expat-bill-may-force-8-lakh-indians-to-leave-the-gulf-country/articleshow/76806198.cms?from=mdr>

3 Impact on Remittances

Remittances are an extremely important and stable source of private inflows to developing countries. Studies have shown that remittances alleviate poverty in lower and middle-income countries, improve health and nutrition, develop education and also help reduce child labour. The Indian migrants working abroad have continued to play a pivotal role in contributing to India's growth and development through remittances. India was the top recipient of global remittances, which amounted to a total of 83.1 billion dollars in the year 2019 (World Bank 2021).⁹

With the onset of COVID-19, global remittances were projected to decline sharply by about 20 percent in 2020 (Ibid). This projected fall is due to the contraction of economic activity resulting in loss of employment and income among migrants. Table 3 tabulates the decrease in remittance flows across all World Bank Group regions.

Table 3: Decrease in remittance flows across regions

SI N	Region	Decrease in percentage
1.	Europe and Central Asia	27.5
2.	Sub-Saharan Africa	23.1
3.	South Asia	22.1
4.	Middle East and North Africa	19.6
5.	Latin America and the Caribbean	19.3
6.	East Asia and the Pacific	13

(Source: World Bank Estimates)

Remittances to South Asia including India are projected to decline sharply by 22 percent (Ibid). Remittances to India in particular were projected to fall by about 23 percent in 2020, approximating 64 billion dollars (Migration and Development Brief 32)- a striking contrast with the growth of 5.5 percent that amounted to the whopping 83.1 billion dollars made in 2019 (op.cit). This decline is mainly due to the economic slowdown because of the depleting oil prices and the job losses across other sectors impacted by the pandemic. The implications of the double shock of depleting oil prices

⁹ <https://migrationdataportal.org/themes/remittances>



and the pandemic could be long, deep and pervasive. Further, even when economic slowdown has not led to job loss, in many industries, workers are working at a salary of 50 to 60 percent of their original remuneration. This has led to a shortfall in income resulting in proportionate decrease in savings that is often remitted back to home country or country of origin. As a result, remittance flows from countries where the Indian migrants work including the GCC countries, United States, United Kingdom and the EU Countries is expected to decline.

Reductions in remittance flows have a two-fold impact. Firstly, it decreases the income of recipient households and their ability to spend on food and immediate livelihood needs. Secondly, it adversely affects the capacities of the States, which receive bulk of remittance transfers to India to perform development work. For example, about 30 percent of Kerala's revenue comes from its international migrants who are mostly settled in the Gulf (Shekhar 2020)¹⁰, which accounts for approximately 14-15 billion USD that went into Kerala government coffers in 2019 (Ratha 2020).¹¹ Realizing this adverse outcome, the Kerala Government is working with the World Bank on the idea of 'diaspora bonds'. This initiative hopes to mobilize the savings of the non-resident Keralites who have savings in the banks in the Gulf earning negligible interest (Ibid.).

Further, as the economic fallout and remittance transfers are likely to vary from country to country, there are measures that could be taken to maximise the available resources to full potential. Issues in remittance channels such as the high cost of remittance transfers can be reduced given the impact of COVID-19 on the global economy and migration. Further, enhanced digitalization and automation in the area of international money transfers can help India tap the full potential of international money transfers.

¹⁰ <https://www.forbesindia.com/article/real-issue/covid19-international-migrants-take-long-road-home/60995/1>

¹¹ Dilip Ratha in an interview to The Print, 7 July 2020: <https://theprint.in/economy/keralas-14-15-bn-2019-remittances-could-see-2-bn-drop-this-year-world-bank-expert/455922/>

4 Areas of new opportunities

4.1 Health care sector

While a vast majority of sectors have been adversely affected, there are also sectors that have witnessed increased demand. For instance, access to medical and healthcare services have witnessed an unprecedented rise and has become a sector with immense potential for expansion and creation of new employment opportunities. The healthcare sector is witnessing an escalation in demand for health workers, nurses, lab technicians etc, both in the domestic and the international market. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has estimated a shortage of 18 million health workers in the world by the year 2030 and has highlighted the problems caused by inadequate supply of qualified health professionals and lack of health system preparedness.

Correspondingly, India is also witnessing a shortage of healthcare professionals due to the pandemic but it continues to be a leading country of origin for physicians who are living and working abroad. Around 69,000 Indian-trained physicians worked in the United States, United Kingdom, Canada and Australia in the year 2017. Further, more than 15,000 doctors in the UK National Health Services (NHS) received their primary medical qualifications in India (as per 2017 figures) and Indians represented the top non-British nationality for NHS staff as of early 2019. Similarly, a vast majority of healthcare workers in the GCC countries are expatriates and Indians constitute a significant share of this expatriate workforce. Therefore, with over 30,000 doctors graduating every year, this sector presents an area of tremendous opportunity for India.

In the case of nurses, WHO figures estimated that Gulf countries received more Indian nurses than the UK and US. It was estimated that around 67% of migrant nurses from India were opting to go to the Gulf countries (Sethi 2020)¹² and this pattern may only witness an upsurge in demand. The majority of migrant nurses also belong to the state of Kerala, which is already in the process to train and export nurses

¹² Meera Sethi in a Panel Discussion on 'Mapping India's Need vs. Foreign Demand: Case of Healthcare Sector' organized by ICM on 28 May 2020.

and paramedics to boost remittances after COVID-19.¹³ Therefore, migration in the healthcare sector can be of immense potential to India after taking into account domestic requirements.

4.2 Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector

The ICT sector is heavily reliant on the availability of highly skilled labour. Indians migrate as Intra Corporate Transferees to the US, UK and Europe and their talent in this sector is globally recognized. Though this sector also witnessed a significant slowdown in growth during this pandemic, due to its amenability to switch to alternate mechanisms such as teleworking and continued pace of work, it is expected that this sector will bounce back. Globally, as more and more firms are resorting to teleworking, there has been an exponential demand for IT services and application such as Cisco WebEx, Microsoft Team due to the use of online medium for delivery of services across a range of sectors.

Technology-based services were already a focal point of long-term development plans in the pre-COVID period across sectors and this trend is expected to continue. India also continues to focus on the specialization of its labour force and its investments in the training of ICT specialists. This investment has also yielded results. For instance, in Germany, a quarter of all Blue Cards¹⁴ were given to Indian migrants, followed by the Chinese, Russians and Turks in the year 2019.¹⁵

¹³ <https://theprint.in/health/kerala-to-train-export-nurses-paramedics-to-boost-remittances-after-covid/473479/>

¹⁴ Blue Card is a scheme for High Skilled Workers from Non-EU member countries or Third Country Nationals (TCN)

¹⁵ <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/26251/eu-blue-card-immigration-of-highly-skilled-workers-to-germany-reaches-new-high-in-2019>

5 Returnee, Rehabilitation and Reintegration

The migration policy framework in India is marked by a two-fold approach- firstly, in facilitating the safe and legal migration and secondly, safeguarding the welfare of overseas Indians. With the onset of COVID-19, Indian migrant workers across the globe were immensely impacted. It led to requests for facilitating the safe repatriation of these migrants to India. Cognizant of the needs of its citizens stranded abroad, Government of India started the Vande Bharat Mission from 7 May onwards that started the process of evacuation in a phased manner.¹⁶

This return migration necessitated the need for measures for rehabilitation and resettlement of returnee migrant workers. The idea being that the return of migrants must be seen as an opportunity to leverage the skills of returnee migrant workers as Indian migrants occupy jobs at a variety of skill levels across various sectors and can prove to be a valuable asset in the Indian job market as well. Further, it is an opportunity to reskill and upskill our workforce for new jobs and new destinations.

Different states have responded to this in different ways depending on their capacity and experience to deal with the solution. Kerala, with a long history of emigrants and the presence of an experienced recruiter such as Norka Roots, has been active in establishing measures for the returnees. Norka Roots reports that around 5,52,683 overseas Keralites expressed their desire to return to Kerala via their registration portal soon after they launched the initiative. As on 2 August 2020 around 2,61,214 had been successfully repatriated through the Vande Bharat Mission and private chartered flights from various parts of the world. The table below shows the country wise returnee data for the state of Kerala.

¹⁶ Refer to table 1 for data on returnees from destination countries.

Table 4: Country-wise returnee numbers for Kerala

Sl N	Name of Country	No. of Returnees
1.	UAE	1,27,092
2.	Saudi Arabia	39,643
3.	Bahrain	11,667
4.	Kuwait	15,410
5.	Oman	24,924
6.	Qatar	27,501
7.	Others	14,977
Total		2,61,214

(Source: Norka Roots)

Kerala experience shows that returnee rehabilitation can also be developed in an improved manner if the returnees are classified into various categories. The state has already adopted strategies to classify the returnee migrants into two major categories- those willing to re-migrate and those who are planning to settle down. They have further proposed rehabilitation schemes with the following objectives:

- Entrepreneurship Hand-holding
- Loan Assistance
- Margin money scheme
- Equity participation
- Seed funding for start-ups
- Mentoring

Further, recommendations were also proposed during the Virtual Panel Discussion organized by India Centre for Migration on ‘Managing Returnees from GCC: Migration and Employability’ for a coherent and streamlined approach on collecting data on returnees that would help to facilitate appropriate programmes for reintegration, rehabilitation and resettlement of migrant workers. This data would also be essential in devising a roadmap for using the talent pool that the returnees constitute.

Role of government schemes is also crucial in facilitating the appropriate programmes. Central Government schemes such as Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme (PMEGP), Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS), Pt. Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana (DDU-GKY), Deen Dayal Antodaya Yojana- National Urban Livelihoods Mission, Make in India initiatives can be utilized to absorb the returnee labour force. State government schemes can also help- like the Chief Minister's Employment Generation Programme for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises of the Maharashtra Government promotes setting up of new self-employment ventures/projects/micro enterprises and subsidy is provided for projects in business sector and services sector.

6 Reskilling and Up-skilling for Remigration

Skilling plays an important role in migration for work as the skill level of an individual determines the accessibility to the labour market and remuneration, working conditions, extent of knowledge transfer, and the successful reintegration upon return. The changing circumstances in the labour market due to the pandemic have resulted in the demand for realignment in the skilling ecosystem. While sectors such as oil and gas, construction, tourism and hospitality have been adversely impacted (refer to section 2.1 of the report), healthcare, IT, telecommunication and digital work are positioned to benefit (refer to section 4 of the report). As a result, it is crucial to develop programmes strategically aimed at not only reintegration of returnee migrants through recognition of existing skills and expertise but also in upskilling and reskilling of migrant workers in light of the changing nature of the labour market and the new areas of opportunity that have emerged.

State governments like Kerala, Bihar and Odisha have started the exercise of skill mapping and matching for returnee migrant workers in the quarantine centres. The State government of Madhya Pradesh has also launched the RozgarSetu app, which enables migrant workers to register and find jobs in the fields related to their skills. Apart from this, the government of Kerala is also working towards identifying the gap between several vacancies that require new skills and matching it with the skill sets of returnee migrants to be placed in those positions. Further, they have also proposed training programmes aimed at acquiring linguistic skills, domain-specific skills and soft skills to meet the challenges in the overseas employment market. Additionally, the Kerala government has also proposed for a tailor-made web portal for national skill mapping.¹⁷ The data collected can be further used as the primary source for creating a pool of returnee migrants who aspire to pursue opportunities in the overseas job market.

A step in this direction has already been made by the Skilled Workers Arrival Database for Employment Support (SWADES) launched by the National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) in collaboration with Ministry of Civil Aviation

¹⁷ Based on inputs received from Norka Roots

and Ministry of External Affairs to do a skill mapping of returnee migrants and facilitate matching of skills with corresponding job roles in new markets. In the month of June 2020, merely a couple of weeks after its launch, the portal had registered around 15,634 returning migrants out of which 59 percent had lost their jobs. 82 percent of the returnees were migrant workers from the GCC countries (NDSC figures). Further, the SWADES initiative is also performing a state-wise and district-wise skill analysis of returnees.

Skilled migrants can be the drivers of economic growth and benefit both origin as well as destination countries. Skilling can also support meaningful integration in the overseas labour market and enhance the wages of migrant workers and their working conditions. Issues such as skill recognition, equivalence and certification play important roles that need further cognizance. Additionally, reskilling and upskilling should also be positioned to impart training in sectors that are likely to grow manifold due to the impact of COVID-19 on labour intensive sectors.

7 Conclusion

The pandemic has disrupted international labour migration flows as most countries have imposed temporary travel restrictions to contain the spread of COVID-19. This situation has given rise to both challenges and opportunities. Challenges have mostly pertained to the question of return, reintegration, question of employability, loss of wages and savings, and lack of demand due to sluggish economic activity in existing labour markets. Opportunities have also arisen from these challenges. These challenges have driven a reassessment of data collection strategies, the need to devise new plans for skill mapping, exploring alternate avenues for skilling of migrants, leveraging on the knowledge base of migrants and a look-out for opportunities in the new destination countries.

On the one hand, markets in GCC countries have been adversely affected especially in construction, oil and gas, retail and tourism sectors leading to a large number of returnees. On the other hand, there are plans afoot by both Central and State governments to deal with the situation. This has also revealed opportunities in sectors such as healthcare, ICT, telecommunication and digital work in general, which are positioned to benefit. The emergence of opportunities has also brought focus on the role of 'skilling' to cater to better jobs and newer destinations, revealing the necessity to develop programmes for strategically upskilling and reskilling of migrant workers. Going ahead, some recommendations for policy interventions are listed in the section below.



8 Recommendations for Policy Interventions

- Workers can be sent to development programmes; rural employment needs to be the focus and emphasis has to be on schemes like Providing Urban Amenities to Rural Areas (PURA).
- Private sector needs high-skilled workers.
- Workers need to be provided assistance and funds for entrepreneurship.
- A holistic plan is needed for employability with pan-India approach but implementation could be delegated to states in line with opportunities. Not all states may be well equipped to deal with new situation.
- State run recruiting agencies currently caters to bulk requirements; they should have a methodology to cater to domestic and individual requirement.
- Best Practices of other countries should be taken into account for e.g. Sri Lanka has compulsory training and certificate for Domestic Service Workers (DSWs) since 1996 through Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE). There is a need to provide counselling, consultation and legal support abroad and formalization of employment relationships – institutional framework.
- Healthcare sector has seen increased demand. Systematic and centralized database of healthcare workers can help in development of strategies to reduce the demand and supply gap in the sector. There is a need to invest in education and allow people to look at nursing profession in an aspirational manner.
- There is a need to pursue Mutual Recognition Agreements (MRAs) and bilateral agreements very aggressively. Existing agreements are not very effective. Priority should be given to the domestic market.
- Alternative learning systems such as online and distance learning are needed to impart reskilling and upskilling training to migrant workers.
- Vocational programs need to be introduced to certify skills of workers at entry level.
- Facilitation of placement opportunities for workers with adequate skill level and establishment of links and networks in upcoming new markets is needed.

- There is a need to conduct state and district wise analysis of skill gaps and establish migration support centres for counselling and registration of workers across all states.
- Importance should be given to vocational education and skilling initiatives as per market growth and future projections.
- There is a need for a conversation at the regional level for skilled migration as well as better protection of migrant workers, especially those working in sectors like construction.



The India Centre for Migration (ICM) is a research think-tank of the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA) on all matters related to international migration and mobility.

Apart from academic research, ICM has been involved in undertaking various activities and programs at the ground level for the benefit of migrant workers.



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