

Repatriation and Rehabilitation of International Migrants during Covid19: A Look at the Indian Response and the Way Ahead

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The paper attempts to understand the issues faced by Indian temporary labour migrants in the destination countries in the current health crisis and the Indian government responses to concerns, especially with regard to the issue of safe repatriation back to India. By analysing the responses of Indian governments in the previous crisis situations and the emigration policies of the country in general, the article explains the need to have a comprehensive migration management by giving importance to the protection and welfare of migrants along with a reintegration policy in the long run. In the short run, protection of labour migrants during the lockdown, emergency repatriation and rehabilitation of the returnees including the provision of free quarantine facilities should be the priorities of the national government. The paper further argues that a co-ordination between state and central governments is necessary to ensure the smooth reintegration of the returnees in the coming months.

(Keywords: International migration, Covid19, Repatriation, Reintegration of migrants, Indian migration policies, Gulf migration, labour migration)

Introduction

The spread of the highly infectious COVID- 19 disease all over the world, from its beginning in Wuhan, China in late December, has been quick and devastating. The spread of the virus has left Governments with few responses in how to tackle the various consequences of the virus- be it political, social or economic. Most countries have enforced a lockdown of their countries to varying degrees, with the most severe being the total lockdown of India, which has restricted life and travel to a large degree. The COVID-19 crisis is no longer just a health crisis. It threatens the health, livelihood and income of workers globally, which in turn has affected a very important section of the workforce globally- that of international migrant workers, especially from developing nations like India.

The increasing impact of the virus in major destinations countries, particularly the GCC countries, Europe and the United States, the limited mobility through air and the impact on economy and employment affects the international migrant workers to a great extent. While there have been major epidemics affected the world in the 21st century such as the SARS outbreak in 2002, the H1N1 outbreak in 2009, Ebola fever in 2014, Zika virus in 2016, none of these epidemics had attained the spread of the COVID- 19 outbreak. Currently major destination countries for Indian migrants such as the GCC countries, the United States and Italy have been adversely affected, which is a case that India is confronting for the first time. Among these workers, however, the most affected remain temporary workers who work in the GCC countries.

Living and working in less than adequate conditions, where social distancing and other precautionary measures are not possible, there has already been a high incidence of infection

already among the workforce.ⁱ These temporary migrant workers are particularly vulnerable to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis, which will constrain both their ability to access their places of work in destination countries and return to their families particularly the informal and casually-employed workers, all the while having no certainty of their stay in those countries. Moreover, their access to key public services such as health care is often limited.

It is in this light that the issue of repatriation of these workers back to India becomes all the more challenging and urgent. India, over the years has taken steps when the issue of repatriation has occurred in the past. However, as we can see those repatriation have taken in place in certain unique circumstances and which are completely different from the one it faces today.

Indian responses to crisis situations in the destination countries

India has a vast experience in the mass evacuation of its citizens from perilous positions abroad. India has in the past effected over 30 evacuations over the past fifty years, with quite a few notable ones, the most notable of those being the mass evacuation of Indians from Kuwait in 1990 during the Iraqi invasion on its soil and the subsequent Persian Gulf war. More recently, the Indian government had evacuated over 10,000 Indians and foreign nationals from Yemen in 2011 and in 2015, through an operation dubbed “Operation Raahat”. This decade itself has seen the Indian Government initiate mass evacuations from countries like Iraq, South Sudan and Libya. Through the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF), set up in 2009, the Ministry of External Affairs has estimated that over 90,000 people, both Indian and foreign nationals, have been evacuated in the past.ⁱⁱ

However, these evacuations have taken in place in conflict situations and natural disasters in individual countries, with a fewer number of Indian nationals – a task, while impressive but manageable given a functioning protocol measure.

The COVID 19 infection has thrown up a very different challenge to the repatriation of Indians from affected countries. For starters, this is the first time that countries with a significant number of Indian nationals have been affected, and that too all at the same time. To arrange the logistics needed to initiate a mass evacuation of all these Indians, almost simultaneously, would be a herculean task.

What makes these issues more complicated is the problem of transporting suspected infected cases from the destinations back to the home country. There need to be proper protocols in place to get people back, including taking of temperatures of all passengers from affected countries, maintaining social distancing during the flights and proper isolation and quarantine upon their arrival back in the country. India has successfully transported a number of citizens back to the country during the crisis starting with 324 people from Wuhan on February 1, 2020 which was mainly made up of students and working professionals stranded during the lockdown initiated in Wuhan. Since then there have flights in order to repatriate stranded Indians in Iran, Italy and other affected places in Europe. These nationals were then brought into India and isolated and quarantined for the mandatory period of two weeks all over the country.

However, there are still scores of Indians stranded abroad, with a good number of temporary workers still stuck in unsanitary and dangerous conditions, with lack of access to proper precautionary measures as they live in tightly packed single room accommodations with very limited access to primary healthcare. Given the deteriorating condition of the GCC countries, they are at extreme risk of contracting the virus and being stranded in those countries. Unfortunately, in a statement given by the Central government to the Kerala High Court in response to a public interest litigation seeking to rescue stranded Indians in the UAE, it was said that a selective evacuation of Indians cannot be done given the present situation of the country as well as a lack of resources to handle their arrival.ⁱⁱⁱ For a population that provides so much towards their homes, this is a very disappointing response to say the least.

This crisis has put into stark reminder of the lack of policies to govern such situations. While the extent and ferocious spread of the disease has taken most governments worldwide by surprise and have caught them flatfooted, the experience of evacuation on part of the Indian government should have been met with certain protocols to evacuate stranded Indians during such a massive shock. It is imperative that a guiding protocol be envisaged for the future. There are countries that have acted on this which can show the way forward.

Responses from major countries of Origin during the covid19 outbreak

It was estimated by the ILO in 2017 that there were about 23 million migrants in the six Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, namely Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman, with the GCC itself accounting for around 10 percent of migrants worldwide. These countries host a number of foreign workers from many parts of the world, but especially from South and South East Asia. These migrants are particularly vulnerable due to their temporary nature of work and contracts, as well as the dependence on their sponsors through the “Kafala” system. This leaves them with no rights at the workplace and they are often housed and work in inhospitable conditions, something that is very well documented. Thus, it becomes crucial that during a crisis such as the COVID 19 crisis, that the governments of their countries of origin intervene and provide succour for the migrants.

Countries from South East Asia were the first to respond to the crisis with respect to their foreign workforce, especially Philippines, which is well-known for its pro-emigrant migration management. Philippines had barred the migrants from travelling to China, Hongkong and Macau in the initial stages of the outbreak. Consequently, the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA) announced a one-time financial assistance of 10000 Philippine pesos (Equivalent to 200 US dollars) towards the workers in the Gulf countries once those countries began reporting cases^{iv}. The Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) can avail the assistance at both countries of destination and at the Philippines. Apart from the financial assistance, the OFWs in the destination country receives ample support from the Philippine embassies in the Gulf. The embassy encouraged the undocumented workers to use the amnesty in the last month offered by Kuwaiti government and Philippines managed to bring back 1500 workers from Kuwait^v. Like all other countries, The Philippine government has implemented quarantine to curb the spread of the virus. However, the government is offering transportation facilities for the Filipino migrants to and from airports. These services for migrants are being offered apart

from the regular services such as hotline numbers for Covid19 assistance, labour camp visits etc offered by the embassies in the destination countries.

Among the other major countries of origin, the Sri Lanka Bureau of Foreign Employment (SLBFE) and embassies has also made decisive strides in offering assistance to the workers in Gulf countries. The measures taken include attending to all inquiries, clearing visa matters, renewal of employment contracts, facilitating entry into hospitals and quarantine centres, distribution of dry rations and cooked meals and facilitating assistance to COVID-19 positive patients on a daily basis. The embassy of UAE also provides to the expatriate community, protective masks, sanitizers and other requisites. The Sri Lankan government also created an exclusive portal, 'Contact Sri Lanka', for assisting the overseas Sri Lankan workers during the crisis and over 55000 migrants have already registered in the portal for assistance^{vi}. However, the government is yet respond to the repatriation requests from the migrants. Apart from Philippines, Pakistan is another country which launched special repatriation efforts for Pakistani migrants from UAE. Bangladeshi Missions in host countries such as United Arab Emirates (UAE), South Korea, and Saudi Arabia have released information and details on emergency support, hotline numbers and passport processing facility for migrant workers. Another major sending country to the Gulf region, Nepal, however, has fallen behind in the responding to the crisis. The high proportion of unskilled workers from Nepal in the total migrant population demands immediate responses from the government. However, the sudden closure of border coupled with the lockdowns in the host countries which led to loss of job made the Nepali migrant workers extremely vulnerable at their destinations.

Apart than Philippines, all the major sending countries to the Gulf region responded late to the crisis. Even though a few embassies have provided supports systems, none of them were able to ensure initial healthcare access and other basic amnesties to the migrants in need, creating stress and panic among these workers, who were already extremely vulnerable to infection and suffered from a lack of support. This situation is also clearly seen for Indian migrants in the Gulf.

A look at India's responses to the crisis in the Gulf

On February 10th, 2020 the first Indian citizen in UAE diagnosed with Covid19 virus and on March 21st UAE reported the first death of an expat in Gulf countries^{vii}. Now more than 3300 Indian citizens have been diagnosed with Covid19 virus and 25 Indians have died. Out of the total, around 2,061 are in six GCC countries^{viii}. The three major interventions during this period by the government of India and its mission abroad are the following: In Mid-March Ministry of External Affairs set up a control room for the Indian citizens abroad. It was reported that the control room responded to the email queries of 18000 Indians abroad and attended 5000 phone calls in the past one month from across the Globe^{ix}. The report does not provide a country/region-wise figures. Considering the massive population of Indians, especially workers abroad, this numbers are not enough to deal with the concerns of the workers. Secondly, the Indian missions in Gulf countries have conducted video conferences with Indian community leaders and volunteers to co-ordinate the support services for the Indians in distress. All embassies now have hotline services, specifically for covid19 grievances and published various Health advisories in Indian languages in both online and offline. After almost three

weeks after the lockdown, the Indian missions begun data collection and efforts to provide quarantine and shelter facilities for the vulnerable population. The final crucial response from the government was the decision to send a rapid response team comprising of doctors and health professionals to Kuwait where around one million Indians are located^x. The country's response looks better compared to other major countries of origin. But why the approach of Indian missions and government to the Indian workers are being criticised heavily and an atmosphere of sheer panic has been created? A large number of requests for repatriation and appeal to the courts are being filed in the past two weeks.

The major criticisms were aimed at the delay in responding to the crisis and the inadequate measures taken by the Indian missions. The Indian missions in the gulf countries had more than one-month time since the first case was reported in UAE to prepare for the crisis. All the above-mentioned efforts have been carried out after Indian government announced the travel ban. The rapid increase in the number of Indian affected in the gulf countries along with the loss of job and difficulty in identifying quarantine facility for the workers in the labour camp made the Indian workers increasingly vulnerable. It is a fact that the Indian missions have restrictions to intervene in the existing systems in place in the host country. However, the embassies were failed to act as a co-ordinator and facilitator of the welfare activities done by various diaspora organisations at least in the month of March. By the time when Indian missions started active interventions, an unnecessary panic among the Indians, especially in UAE have already been created. It led to the request for massive repatriation which is a gigantic task. What are the reasons behind the delay in response by the Indian missions and the massive request for repatriation?

“India has traditionally provided piecemeal responses to the issues faced by Indian workers in the Gulf, reacting to individual crises as they happen”(Pethiyagoda 2017). The lack of a strong diplomatic foundation to the issues of migrant workers in the Gulf has to be seen in the light of the lack of policies on international labour migration from the country. The absence of long-term welfare and social security programs and strong bilateral or multilateral agreements with the destination countries has been a long-standing weakness of Indian policy in the GCC, which continues on till today (Gamlen 2006, Pethiyagoda 2017). This lack of policy was evident in the previous responses to the crisis situations in the destination countries. Even though the country and its governments have extensive experiences in conducting repatriation operations from the 1980s, the country is yet to institutionalise its best practices^{xi}. The Indian missions should develop a Standard Operating Procedure (SOPs) to deal with a crisis in the destination countries. It may or may not involve repatriation. The SOPs should be prepared by respecting the sovereignty and laws in the destination countries and it should make sure the involvement of non-government actors in the destination countries such as recognised diaspora organisations and philanthropists. The crisis has shown that it is high time that the Indian government should take more proactive measures to ensure the safety and welfare of workers through strong diplomatic ties and more tangible policy measures with the Gulf countries. It cannot wait for migrants to be left stranded with no recourse after every crisis or shock.

In the current context, the extensive demand for a mass repatriation is impossible, as the central government and other state governments suggest only a repatriation of the most vulnerable

population is possible. The sheer panic and uncertainty created among the Indian workers resulted in the huge push for repatriation. The Indian missions with a clear-cut strategy could reduce the panic among the workers, especially by providing quarantine facilities and awareness. The government can work out a proper repatriation plan for the extremely vulnerable such as the elderly, pregnant women, migrants with serious health conditions and the elderly on visit visas, on a priority basis. However, even this would require meticulous planning and coordination among the Indian missions in these countries, the Central government and the State governments to make this happen. The government of Kerala announced its willingness to provide quarantine for the repatriated workers^{xii}, and the national government is able to convince the other state governments also to provide quarantine facility along with proper testing centres, then government can plan for a repatriation strategy. However, once the travel bans are lifted, a large-scale return of Indian workers can be expected due to the looming economic crisis in the Gulf countries, perhaps setting the stage for a second wave of infections. Thus, it is imperative that the central and state governments have short-run and long-run strategies to manage the return of Indian workers from abroad.

Short-run and Long-run strategies to manage the crisis

In the short-run, the most immediate effort should be the repatriation of migrants who are vulnerable. The government should facilitate the repatriation of migrant workers who lost their jobs, elderly and migrants suffer from various health conditions. A priority list can be prepared with the help of diaspora organisations and Indian missions. It is important to announce financial aid for the state government to support the quarantine facilities for the repatriated migrants. In the destination countries, the major focus should be given to avoid panic among the workers. The Indian missions should formulate a group of volunteers to provide counselling and distribute pamphlets with occupational safety and health advisories to help the migrants to escape from the stigma. The government already started distributing the medicines to the workers through embassy. The high cost of essential medicines at destinations usually lead to migrants carrying medicines from India. The travel ban has affected the availability of low-cost medicines for Indians, especially in the Gulf. The government should provide the medicines to the Gulf country until the travel bans lift. Kuwait and Bahrain have already announced amnesty schemes for workers. A co-ordination committee of Indian community workers, Civil society and Indian embassy officials should be formed to facilitate the amnesty. Most importantly, the government should publicise the existing amount in the Indian Community Welfare Fund (ICWF) for the Gulf countries and release the fund for all above-mentioned short-term strategies.

In the long-run the most important concern will be the large-scale return of international migrants. In the current context, the national government has explicitly mentioned that the reintegration and rehabilitation is a responsibility of the state government. Considering the scale of return state governments cannot alone manage the reintegration. Among the major origin states in India, only Kerala has implemented reintegration programs. However, all those schemes are one-time assistance programs and not sustainable (Rajan and Akhil 2019). Thus, the national government in association with the state governments should formulate and facilitate reintegration strategies. The Indian government does not recognise undocumented

workers and they do not receive any assistance upon return. However, many undocumented migrant workers are expected to return in the coming months, especially women workers, as they are among the most vulnerable in society. The government should include them in the long-run reintegration strategies. Another important aspect is the development of Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) during crises such as pandemic, natural disaster, civil wars in the destination countries. Most importantly, the country should be ready to give away its historical reluctance in formulating explicit labour migration policy and develop a migration policies/programs based on a revised version of the Emigration Draft Bill, 2019.

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ⁱ Kuwait and Dubai have already reported a high rate of infection among the Indian workers there and many Indian dominated neighbourhoods have been sealed and quarantined, according to migration experts S. Irudaya Rajan and Ginu Zacharia Oommen. See: "Indian labourers in GCC countries are in dire need of help, say experts", published in the Hindu on April 10, 2020. Accessed on

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ⁱⁱ See: "90K Indians evacuated from war zones, natural disasters abroad in last few years", published in the Economic Times on January 20, 2018. Accessed at:

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ⁱⁱⁱ See: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/evacuation-of-stranded-indians-not-feasible-centre-tells-hc/article31368166.ece>

^{iv} <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1097814>

^v <https://www.gulf-insider.com/1500-filipinos-and-900-turks-leave-kuwait/>

^{vi} The portal jointly created by the Ministry of Foreign Relations and the Information & Communication Technology Agency of Sri Lanka (ICTA) for the benefit of Overseas Sri Lankans, was launched on Thursday (26 March 2020). It can be accessed at www.contactsrilanka.mfa.gov.lk

^{vii} <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/indian-expat-infected-with-coronavirus-in-uae/articleshow/74077983.cms?from=mdr>

^{viii} <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-3336-indians-infected-by-coronavirus-in-53-countries-say-govt-sources/article31357569.ece>

^{ix} <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-3336-indians-infected-by-coronavirus-in-53-countries-say-govt-sources/article31357569.ece>

^x <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/rapid-response-team-from-india-reaches-kuwait-to-combat-covid-19-1.1586619932751>

^{xi} <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/Getting-back-home-safely/article17263964.ece>

xii <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/coronavirus-pandemic/coronavirus-pandemic-kerala-allocates-up-to-250000-rooms-to-quarantine-expats>