EFFECT OF LOCKDOWN ON THE UNORGANISED SECTOR WORKERS IN HYDERABAD, TELANGANA - A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The paper describes about the impacts of the lockdown imposed during the year 2020 owing to COVID-19 by the State of Telangana with specific reference to the facilities extended to the unorganized sector workers by the Union Government as well as State Government vis-à-vis the ground realities in implementing the schemes/welfare measures. Further, the problems faced by the workers vis-à-vis the practical problems faced by the Governments to implement the said schemes is also discussed. The paper also aims to suggest the remedial measures to improve the living conditions of the unorganized workers during the pandemic crisis.

I. INTRODUCTION:

SARS CoV-2 has created a world-wide turmoil and fright wherein the most advanced countries and their economies were pushed into a catastrophic state. All the eminent Scientists, medical Doctors including the intellectuals were left helpless. Hence, all the Government agencies, NGOs including general public joined hands to support respective governments in handling the crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown affected every individual of society adversely. Due to imposition of lockdown restrictions by the Government, the common man especially daily bread winners were forced to stay indoors, which made their life more miserable owing to their un-preparedness for their livelihood and due to indefinite timeline of the imposition of lockdown periods, in such a pandemic situation. In our country, the contributions made by the underprivileged labourers during the lockdown period by supporting to stay at a particular location to stop the spread of virus is commendable. On one call of the Prime Minister for total lockdown, the labourers were left standstill without even having proper place to stay. Within a few days of the lockdown, the employers also shut down their operations and dispensed the wages to be paid to them. Inspite of the Prime Minister’s appeal to all the employees, these incidents occurred. Employers claimed closure of factories/production units for non-payment of wages. This sector of unorganized labourers not only lost their wages (generally earned on daily basis) but also left with few resources to feed self and their families. The workers could not even contact their respective families in their native places to know about the well being of their other family members especially children. During the lockdown period, it is evident that many workers slept on footpaths without food with a hope to get rid of the lockdown restrictions. The sorrow and misery of the workers cannot be expressed in words. Irrespective of their native place/State, many labourers remained in cities they migrated, obeying the lockdown restrictions. Due to this, I sincerely feel that such workers should be identified and declared as COVID frontline warriors. But successive lockdowns exacerbated the uncertainty. Finally, the labourers lost all the hope and started to trudge to homes hundreds and thousands of kilometers away by road either by means of a bicycle or by walking. Women workers especially who were pregnant, small children and the senior citizens were among those seen walking on the roads to their native places, which is believed to be one of the most pitiable situation in the era of Independent India. Now, the question that arises that whether these labourers can be considered as corona warriors along with doctors, nurses, police, sanitary workers etc., who were performing their duties and duly compensated for their extra efforts. It is imperative to laud some organisations and individuals who donated voluntarily. Thus, in my view the underprivileged labourers are to be treated on par with the active corona warriors because despite their suffering they did not move in crowds till the time they could resist. For their sacrifice and suffering, war on corona virus could not be under control. The statistical reports reveal that there are more than 19 crore daily wage earners left in a dreadful state since the beginning of the lockdown and immediate steps are required to be taken to tackle the situation to boost their morale and self-esteem. Many
employees in private sector lost their jobs and small-time businessmen ran into huge losses. As the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus was lifted in a phased manner after a long gap of more than 70 days, many were able to recover gradually. However, certain sections of people, including micro and small business establishments, daily wage labourers, workers in unorganised sectors and private employees among others are still facing the consequences and carrying the burden incurred during last year. The term unorganised worker has been defined under the Code on Social Security, 2020 means a home-based worker, self-employed worker or a wage worker in the unorganised sector and includes a worker in the organised sector who is not covered by the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 or Chapters III to VII of the Code i.e. Employees Provident Fund, Employees' State Insurance Corporation, Gratuity, Maternity Benefit, Employee's Compensation. The National Sample Survey Organization which is under the aegis of Ministry of Statistics conducted a survey during the year 2017-18 with reference to the Labour Force ratio in India i.e. Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) Implementation which concluded that out of a total population of 47 crores workers engaged in both organized and unorganised sector; 9 crores are in the organized sector and the remaining 38 crores are in the unorganized sector. The workers in the unorganized sector constitute more than 81 per cent of the total employment in the country. But this number is expected to have gone up due to Covid-19 and lockdown thereon. It is also evident from the statistical records that a large sector of un-organized workers are engaged in occupations viz., beedi rolling, agarbatti making, papad making, tailoring and embroidery work and basically work from home. Further, there is one more sector in the said unorganized sector workers who work in the sites of their respective employers viz., street vendors, labeling and packing, leather workers, artisans, building construction workers, kiln workers, porters, coolies, cobbler, domestic workers, rickshaw pullers, agricultural workers, handloom workers and similar other occupations.

Initiatives taken by the Union Government to tackle the lockdown situation during 2020:

Union Government has announced various schemes to ease the distress of migrant labourers hit by the Covid-19 crisis and lockdown. “Food security” and “affordable housing” were significant among other welfare measures. After the Ministry of Home Affairs announced a 21-day lockdown to contain the spread of COVID-19 from March 25, 2020 to April 14, 2020, all state/UT governments were directed to make Intermittent arrangements viz., (i) For Food and shelter to all the identified migrant workers, (ii) quarantine facility for a period of 14 days to all the symptomatic workers (iii) Employers/Contractors were directed to pay wages to all the workers irrespective of extracting work from them, during the lockdown, and (iv) Owners of the residences were directed not to demand rent from workers (tenants) and students during the lockdown period. However, access to crucial social security schemes including the public distribution system for subsidized food grains were cut off to migrant workers.

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Effects of Lockdown imposed in the state of Telangana during the year 2020:

Since the hasty decision of the lockdown was announced, we witnessed the largest human exodus after the partition of the country which resulted in thousands of migrant workers in the un-organised sector who were
stranded on the streets without food, shelter and money. On one hand, the State supported the employers in all forms and on the other hand, the State always projected inhuman labour policies by rejecting the provision of basic social safety nets to millions of workers. Over the years, this scenario created a stigma on the ocean of workers living without basic minimum wages, freedom, dignity and security.

Along with other States of India, since the State of Telangana is also threatened with the spread of Covid-19, which has already been declared as a pandemic by World Health Organization, imposed containment measures to prevent and contain the spread of virus during the year 2020. Accordingly, the State Government by exercising the powers conferred under Section 2 of the “The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897” read with provisions of the Disaster Management Act, 2005 notified lockdown in the entire State of Telangana prescribing the following regulations and measures, which are pertaining to the Un-organised Sector viz., sealing of state borders, not permitting the public transport services, suspending the operation of all interstate bus and transport services including those by private operators, prohibiting the congregation of more than 5 persons in public places, to close all the shops, commercial establishments, offices, factories, workshops, go-downs etc.

As a remedial measure, the State Government of Telangana issued orders keeping in view of the hardships due to lockdown that all 87.59 lakhs food security cardholders in the state were provided with 12 kgs rice/person involving 3.58 lakh tonnes of rice at an expenditure of Rs 1103 Crores. Further, for all ration card holders, one time support of Rs.1500/- was extended in order to meet the expenditure on account of essential commodities viz., dal, vegetables etc., which levied a burden on public exchequer at an estimated cost of Rs.1314 Crores. It was also further ordered that all the Government as well as private establishments shall make full payments of wages/salaries to the workers/employees including those working under contract and outsourcing basis during the lockdown period inter-alia indicating that violations would be viewed seriously and will invite penal action under The Epidemics Disease Act 1897.

Some of the problems faced due to lockdown by the workers – with specific reference to Hyderabad, Telangana State:

1. The national lockdown ruined the livelihood of common man especially the population engaged in un-organized sector and their lives are yet to return to normalcy. Workers viz., security guards, drivers, domestic help were completely wiped out as offices were non functional. Fearing starvation and with no transport available, many of the migrant workers who were working in the industries of Telangana State, set out on foot, to reach their native places/States, inspite of pursuance by the local elected public representatives including senior officials to make them stay back.

2. Unlike auto and taxi drivers, barbers etc. who received compensation from the government, people like domestic workers were exposed the heartlessness of their employers. While families on their own volition restricted the domestic workers not to work and stopped paying them as well.

3. Another sector which recorded huge damage to livelihood is garment sector where an approximate of 1.5 lakh women workers who were employed are yet to resume their jobs, after lifting the lockdown restrictions owing to reopening of several garment factories. Job loss among domestic workers, garment workers and construction workers has only led to an increase in domestic violence against women and children.

4. Similarly, street vendors also faced a peculiar problems since many of the customers shifted to online for buying the groceries during the lockdown drive and expecting steep discounts as habituated to getting deals online.

5. One sector that bucked the trend was the home delivery sector, which saw a boom and rise in demand for delivery partners on apps. On the contrary, many of the delivery workers complained of ‘undue work pressure’ and ‘lesser incentives’, which never matched to their hard work. Many workers who lost their jobs were unable to re-accommodate themselves in finding a suitable opening and still carrying the burden incurred during previous year.

Some of the Welfare measures taken up by the Government of Telangana during lockdown period:

To mitigate the hardships faced by the un-organised sector workers, the government of Telangana implemented various welfare measures, viz.,:

1. **Relief assistance** As a measure of social security, 12kg rice was provided to all food security cardholders, free of cost along with one-time support of Rs 500 to all the white ration card holders to buy essential groceries and vegetables.

2. **Factories**: The Government directed the management of factories to pay the wages to all workers during the lockdown period.
3. **Migrant Workers**: To provide 12 kg of rice or atta and one time of support of Rs 500 to all migrant workers residing in the state.

4. **Regulation of school fees**: The government ordered all private schools not to increase any fees during the academic year of 2020-21 and to collect the element of tuition fees on monthly basis.

5. **Deferment of collection of rent**: The government notified that house owners should defer the rent collection for three months. Further, the owners should collect the deferred amount in installments after three months.

6. **Telangana Aasara Pension**: Telangana government is providing **Telangana Aasara Pension Scheme** for the year 2021 for all the identified people suffering from a certain disease or inability to work, but in need of financial help but unable to work by taking the load for meeting the financial needs of their family members. Aasara means “support”.

**Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS):**

The Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGS) is one of the biggest poverty eradication and welfare programmes in India. MGNREGA guarantees 100 days of unskilled wage employment to a rural household in a financial year. Telangana is one of the leading states, not only in quantitative terms, but also for innovations in implementation of the programme. The program is implemented with the main objectives of (i) ensuring guaranteed employment of 100 days of unskilled manual work in a financial year to every household in rural areas based on demand, resulting in creation of productive assets of prescribed quality and durability; (ii) Strengthening the resources for livelihood of the poor; (iii) ensuring social inclusion; & (iv) Strengthening the system of Panchayat Raj for better administration of the villages.

| Table no. 2 |
| Approved Labour Budget [In Lakhs] | 1300 | 1550 | 1200 | 1300 | 1200 |
| Person/days Generated so far [In Lakhs] | 135.8 | 1578.1 | 1071.14 | 1177.29 | 1147.73 |
| % of Total LB | 10.45 | 101.81 | 89.26 | 90.56 | 95.64 |
| % as per Proportionate LB | 16.97 | | | | |
| SC person/days % as of total person days | 22.02 | 22.57 | 22.05 | 22.39 | 22.74 |
| ST person/days % as of total person days | 21.11 | 20.27 | 17.98 | 17.36 | 17.72 |
| Women Person/days out of Total (%) | 58.66 | 55.23 | 61.5 | 62.8 | 61.46 |
| Average days of employment provided per Household | 11.59 | 48.3 | 43.2 | 46.65 | 45.32 |
| Average Wage rate per day per person (Rs.) | 171.71 | 171 | 153.87 | 148.47 | 139.78 |
| Total No of HHs completed 100 Days of Wage Employment | 1 | 3,29,572 | 1,75,660 | 2,27,210 | 2,03,533 |
| Total Households Worked [In Lakhs] | 11.71 | 31.08 | 24.79 | 25.24 | 25.33 |
| Total Individuals Worked [In Lakhs] | 17.63 | 54.24 | 40.75 | 42.52 | 43.44 |
| Differently abled persons worked | 23004 | 59610 | 52684 | 57100 | 59069 |

**Telanganaku Haritha Haaram**: 2.6 lakh TKHH works including horticulture have been taken up with cost of Rs.461.4 crores. Works related to Land development of SC/ST/Small & Marginal farmers, Soil and Water conservation, Construction of Crematoriums, CC Roads construction, School toilets and Kitchen sheds construction, GP Buildings, AWCs etc. were taken up.

**II. CONCLUSION:**

The employees in unorganized sector are badly affected without proper social security in practical sense. The employees working in this sector is much more than the organized sector. The Government is on the right way by increasing the allocation of funds for the development of this sector, but the statistics and incidents detailed above disclose that there is much more scope to cater to the needs of the unorganized sector for mitigating the
issues viz., low wages, health issues and to improve labour safety and welfare. The Economic Survey conducted during the year 2021 also flagged the lack of data on migrant workers, stating that it was difficult to tell how many inter-State migrants had lost their jobs and accommodation during the pandemic. During the period of COVID-19 induced lockdown, gig economy’s role was evident with significant growth in retail business both online and offline. The lockdown period witnessed that employers encouraged the employees to ‘Work from home’ thus cut down the incidental costs on total number of engaged labourers and rather engaged freelancers/outsourced the tasks to reduce overhead costs on account of hiring skilled services. As per Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) conducted during January-March, 2020, a significant proportion of migrants were impacted by the lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic exposed the vulnerability of urban based unorganized workers who account for 11.2% of urban workforce. The study also revealed that about 63.19 lakh migrant workers travelled through Special trains arranged by Ministry of Railways during the period May-August 2020. However, this study was carried out based on the limited data available on inter-state migration and statistics pertaining to employment in informal sectors. Hence, the exact number of migrants who were adversely affected by losing their jobs, accommodation etc. during the pandemic and returned to their respective States could not be figured out.

III. SUGGESTIONS:

a) All the labourers in the unorganized sectors should be included in the list of corona warriors in their respective state on par with doctors, nurses and others.

b) All daily wagers and workers who lost their earnings during lockdown may be adequately compensated by the respective State Governments.

c) Not only in compliance with fundamental rights guaranteed by Constitution of India but also by recognizing the importance of life of every Indian citizen, who are contributing to development of the nations GDP, government may consider compensating those who lost their lives during these extremely difficult times.

d) Government should ensure improvement of living conditions of labourers; to ensure proper training for their career progression, to be enforced by each of the employer.

e) This unorganized sector should be given the status of organized sector for better working and living conditions.

f) As per the statistics, 19 crores labourers in the unorganized sectors have only minimum/basic education. Hence, a programme where the labourers as well as their children are educated needs to be prioritized.

g) The private sector is witnessing inequality of wages between the labourers. This disparity should be eliminated. At least minimum salary should be guaranteed to labourers in the unorganized sectors so that they can manage a reasonable living.

h) While lauding the government’s programme of providing free food grain for 80 crore poor people, it is important that their day-to-day problems are to get focused attention.

i) The State Government must ensure income support to families of labourers in the unorganized sectors so that they are able to sustain themselves by including cash transfers, food or in-kind distributions.

j) Special measures to be designed for women workers for ensuring proper nutrition and care during their confinement/ maternity periods.

k) Increased investment in education and vocational training for women is imperative as it can lead to higher female labour force participation in the formal sector in the long run.

l) The un-organised sector workers are required to be registered and issued with a unique identity card inter-alia indicating their ESI and EPF numbers in the same card so as to enable them to deposit their contributions (both employers/contractors and self, i.e. worker);

m) The card should also indicate the details of the grievance officer, in case, if they want to contact;
n) Well-developed database of each of the un-organised worker has to be developed and maintained for effectively delivering the benefits of the schemes devised by the respective State and Union Governments.

o) Violation of statutes w.r.t. Minimum wages, hours of work etc. has to be viewed seriously and penal provisions on the part of contractor employers have to be strictly implemented.

REFERENCES
3.  Code on Social Security, 2020