



“Infrastructural planning must be done for providing basic amenities to migrants who have stayed back in the cities and for addressing their socio economic and physical vulnerabilities.”

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Image Source: Migrant workers waiting for transportation on a cold winter day in the Russian Far East. Image by Nicolas J. Buchoud, all rights reserved ©.



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Infrastructure planning for interstate and intrastate mobility in India after the lockdown

Onslaught of the Pandemic in India rendered a large segment of the migrants jobless and homeless who got concentrated in slums and relief camps in and around a few large cities. They were provided shelter, basic infrastructure and other amenities by the central and state governments. The latter required them to register with the local authorities for arranging transport and other facilities for those who wanted to return back home as also for connecting them with entrepreneurs who needed employment.

For a large segment of migrants, Covid19 was a city affliction and an escape to their village was a sanctuary. Public awareness about the virus unfortunately was tinged with social media frenzy. Any person testing positive was seen as a leper by even the “educated people” and could, therefore, expect help from none. Unfortunately, safe and manageable protocol for interstate travel was missing for

those who wanted to return to take care of farm activities or for emotional healing from the dread of the disease. The situation, however, has changed in six months and many are returning back to the cities with the corona stigma becoming much less.

Planning infrastructure for an exit plan and containment strategy for different regions and districts of India on the face of increasing number of infections and fatalities, the numbers crossing 80,000 and 1400 respectively, is a real challenge. The impossibility of implementing social distancing norms in large cities is understandable. About 35 per cent of the households live in one room units and 40 per cent have to depend on community facilities for drinking water and toilets. Any restriction on the mobility of slum dwellers can only increase social proximity and density of interaction - people standing in queues or sitting in large groups. They live not in their houses but on the streets and common spaces. All these are responsible for an alarming rise of infection in slums and low income areas, the mega cities becoming the major hot spots.

Infrastructural planning must be done for providing basic amenities to migrants who have stayed back in the cities and for addressing their socio economic and physical vulnerabilities. Given the high disparity in income and employment opportunities across regions and rural/urban areas, only 15 to 20 per cent of the returnee migrants would stay back, despite the best efforts by their states to absorb

them. Given the pace of unlocking the economy, efforts are being made to bring them back. However, there are risks in putting them once again into the ghettos and congested localities and keeping them dependent on community services for survival. Massive investments are required to improve infrastructure and basic amenities including health-care, education, drinking water and sanitation for them and other segments of vulnerable population, to guarantee the basic human rights as envisaged under SDG as also to sustain the process of economic recovery without further health shocks.

There is a need simultaneously to put back the regional economies into full swing, besides linking them up with the metro based economy. The state level authorities can monitor the location and travel details of the returnee migrants through district level officers and village panchayats by giving them health certificates, attached to the Aadhar (identity) cards. Mobility within and across districts will have to be normalised for ensuring labour supply at places of demand - construction sites, mandis and district industrial centres.

Importantly, this is already taking place through individual initiatives but this has to be institutionalized and coordinated for ensuring adherence to the norms of seating capacity, social distancing, pricing etc. State buses and state subsidies for taking commuters and other persons will have to be planned since private operations may not be feasible in certain routes due to distancing norms. It would be unreal-

istic to hope that no new infections would occur but these would be few, less than if there is an influx of migrants to large cities, as witnessed in recent years.