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Turning 'Threats' into 'Opportunities': Tackling the Labour Crisis during a Pandemic in Last-Remaining Naxal Hotbeds

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the world in the most diverse and unprecedented manner—hitting all spectrums of national and international security. India has been no exception. While India's economic security has been one of its first victims, internal security risks emerging out of this are still unravelling. One of the most concerning among these has been the labour crisis emerging out of the economic standstill during the pandemic—which includes widespread return of migrant workers to their home states. There has been conflicting data regarding the same for varied reasons but the number of these returnees is largely estimated to be somewhere between two and three crores.¹ A fact worth considering here is that, a significant number of these returnees belong to critically Left-Wing Extremism inflicted states—particularly Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, and Madhya Pradesh.

The Extremists—senior members as well as overground workers—have had a history of exploitation of socio-economic crisis, and that threat remains hanging during this pandemic too. Unlike other states, this crisis poses additional threats to the internal security



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Key Points

- The halted economic activity in India, following the pandemic, has resulted in nationwide labour crisis.
- Return of migrant labourers to home-states, especially in Naxal-affected zones, is a serious national security threat.
- Local news reports testify attempts of the Naxalites to lure unemployed returnee workers, in order to rejuvenate their trembling cadre strength.
- Appropriate and timely action over this crisis could help bridge the existing gap between the government and the local people in Naxal-affected areas—thus turning a potential national security threat into an apt opportunity.

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situations of these states in question, and thereafter the country at large. Both the Centre and the respective states have taken stock of the issue at hand, but given the fragile security situations in these areas, the challenges continue to look them in the eye.

Through this paper, the author attempts to look at the threats this widespread labour crisis bears on the security situations in the LWE affected states. Having studied the government—Centre and State—initiatives in this regard, the author tries to identify the shortfalls in the proposed initiatives, thereby proposing certain policy recommendations for converting this apparent ‘threat’ into an ‘opportunity’ by winning the hearts & minds of the people and bridging the existing socio-economic gaps.

Continuing Maoist Attempts

Reports had emerged as early as April this year that a massive recruitment drive had been initiated by the Maoists in Madhya Pradesh’s Balaghat, Mandla, and Dindori districts. It was reported that massive campaigning for mobilisation of returnee labourers in remote areas of the state had begun. Amidst this, a Hawk Force jawan had been shot at, further confirming the reported developments.² In the neighbouring Chhattisgarh’s Bastar district, despite the unilateral ceasefire announced by the Malkangiri-Koraput-Visakha Divisional Committee (MKVDC) on April 5, 2020, the developments noticed on ground have been quite alarming. An auxiliary constable was even killed in Chhattisgarh’s Bijapur district while following this so-called ceasefire.³ Moreover, the presence of Maoists in Dantewada has reportedly expanded since March-end. Interaction and engagement with the local villagers had reportedly intensified as early as April this year.⁴

To look at these developments, in different parts of the country, as a trend, it must be acknowledged that this is not a novel move by the Maoists. It has historically been their modus operandi to exploit the existing local grievances—that in this case, lies with the labour crisis generated by this pandemic. Moreover, the limits posed by the pandemic in deployment and management of the situation by the security forces have further added to their advantage.

Continued intelligence about such developments has only kept experts opining that it has indeed offered bright chances of mobilisation of the locals, thereby rejuvenating recruitment.⁵

The Labour Crisis: Migrants As Well As Local Workers

Migrant labourers have been returning to their home-states since late March. Left with no option, because of loss of means of livelihood in their previous states of employment, this mass return of migrants is being conjectured as very difficult to overturn, at least till later this year. Measures of re-employment, financial support, and rehabilitation have been initiated by the respective governments but a set of serious issues continue to create uncertainty for many.

According to the Chief Minister of Chhattisgarh, over 5 lakh migrant workers had returned to the state as of mid-June and the numbers are expected to grow for some time.⁶ With these workers returning, the unemployment crisis in the state is expected to get aggravated by two means. First, through the returnees who would require employment. Second, with more hands to work—relatives who have returned as well as children not going to school due to the lockdown—landowners are expected to cut employment for their existing workers, unlike before the pandemic, thereby further aggravating the labour crisis.⁷

But, this is just one part of the story. Over 70 per cent workforce of Chhattisgarh’s industries comprised skilled labour from UP and Bihar—who, too, have returned home.⁸ In the absence of skilled labour, industries shall be forced to employ the unskilled local workers that could bear two-fold results. One, it would reduce the industrial productivity. Two, it would offer an opportune time for exploitation of labour by private industrial players which will be in a desperate need of employment. A third major issue lies with the registration of the returnee workers with the state—which is important not only for the containment of the spread of COVID-19, but also disbursement of government benefits to the workers. It must be noted that over 40,000 of returnee workers were unaccounted with the state authorities as of mid-June.⁹

According to Jharkhand's Labour, Planning and Training Department, around 6.61 lakh migrant labourers were reported stranded during the lockdown in 14,948 locations across the country.¹⁰ Over 5 lakh migrant workers have returned to the state as of mid-June. Efforts to ensure rehabilitation are being undertaken, but with the state's unemployment level at 47.1 per cent¹¹ already, economists believe that this shall be a mammoth task for the state government. The challenges are not very dissimilar from those felt in its neighbouring Chhattisgarh.¹²

Initiatives So Far

Despite this, initiatives by respective governments, with some individual shortfalls of their own, must be acknowledged. In Jharkhand, registration of the returnee workers followed by their skill mapping has been a positive initiative in the direction of ensuring their rehabilitation. Over 2.5 lakh of the approximately 5 lakh returnees have been mapped according to their skills in Jharkhand as of late June. Three ambitious schemes – an afforestation programme, development of agro-water units, and infrastructural development for encouraging sports in the state – has been proposed to ensure employment generation amidst the labour crisis.¹³ All of this is expected to work in convergence with the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

In Chhattisgarh, too, most of the hopes of providing employment are being largely pinned on expanding the capacity of employment generation through MNRGA. In Madhya Pradesh, as per the claims of the state government, the registration of all returnees has been completed, as of June 10. Over 7 lakh migrant labourers, along with over 5,000 employers has been registered through the state's Rozgar Setu Portal and adequate employment as per skills is expected to be offered. Further, Rozgar Melas are proposed to be organised across the state in the following months to enhance opportunities.¹⁴

Amidst this, the Centre announced the Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyaan on June 20, 2020. The aim of the scheme is to work in a mission-mode covering 116 districts – each with 25,000 returnee labourers or

more – from across the country. It aims at generating employment through dual motive of infrastructural development of rural areas along with tackling unemployment, and will be coordinated by over 12 Union Ministries. But, among the critically Naxal-affected states, only Jharkhand and Madhya Pradesh have been covered under the scheme.¹⁵ Another Shramik Setu portal and App is expected to become functional by end-July 2020 and is aimed at ensuring percolation of information as well as benefits to the unorganised labourers in the country.¹⁶

What Lies Ahead: Turning 'Threats' into 'Opportunities'

Amidst all the initiatives taken by the respective governments so far, both at the Centre and at the State levels, certain fundamental challenges remain, especially with regard to the security consequences of the crisis at hand. A couple of things that merit the attention of policymakers immediately can be listed as follows:

- **Door-to-door registration** of unemployed workers (migrants or otherwise) must be ensured. Polio vaccination drives in India have successfully employed government teachers and similar employees in the past. With schools not functioning due to the pandemic, engaging this section could prove beneficial.
- A national dashboard for tracking the movement of migrant labourers had been prepared lately. Additionally, states have been skill mapping their labour community. This data needs to be collated as a **National Dashboard of Labour Skill** to formulate employment opportunities at the national level, even as the pandemic resides. However feasible, this data needs to be made accessible to the respective employer associations for directly connecting them with prospective employees.
- **Government sponsored employment fairs bringing the employees and employers at the same platform**, such as proposed by the Madhya Pradesh government, should be replicated by each of these states.

- **Excessive dependence on MNREGA for employment is not feasible.** Diversification of opportunities is necessary – food security is one of them. Each of these mentioned states are agricultural states. With the Essential Commodities Act amended, awareness regarding this needs to spread among farmers to incentivise a significant number of unemployed workers to take up farming. As the harvest season approaches around November, authorities need to draw out specific plans so as to percolate the benefits of this amendment. Profitable prospects of inter-state trade need to be examined.
- **Security of large-scale projects** shall be a major issue, and needs to be proactively managed. The Maoist supply chains have been hurt amidst the lockdown by the pandemic which can significantly shoot up instances of extortion, as well as sabotage. All major infrastructural projects planned under

the Central/State schemes need to be carefully guarded.

- Reports of Maoists approaching and influencing migrant workers have surfaced in volumes. Since, the desperation of the Maoists is obvious, this opportunity could also be used by the **Security Forces to act in aggression**, apart from guarding various projects.

Conclusion

Carefully making sure that these fundamental issues are taken timely cognisance of, this situation could be turned into an opportunity to further crumble the struggling Naxal-existence. This pandemic has indeed offered an opportune time to bridge the existing gaps between the locals and the respective governments. But what must not be forgotten is that, failing to do so holds significant potential to reverse the declining curve of the Naxal-influence in these sensitive areas.

Notes

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13. The three schemes include the Birsa Harit Gram Yojana (BHGy), Neelambar Pitambar Jal Samridhi Yojana (NPJSy), and the Veer Sahid Poto Ho Khel Vikas Scheme (VSPHKVS).
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