

# The Heart Of Resilience: The Impact Of The COVID-19 Lockdown On Migrant Youth In Mumbai

Vijay Ramdas Nair<sup>1\*</sup>, Prof. (Dr.) C.K. Singh<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Humanities, Chhatrapathi Shivaji Maharaj University, Panvel Maharashtra.  
nairvijaynair1@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup>Dean, Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Communication, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj University, Panvel, Navi Mumbai.  
Maharashtra, cks0655@gmail.com

## Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a defining crisis of the 21st century, affecting every facet of human life. Unlike the natural world, where animals roamed freely, millions of people found themselves confined, their mobility restricted. The spread of the virus was exacerbated by the very essence of human migration, as individuals sought work and better lives. In response, governments imposed nationwide lockdowns starting in March 2020, leaving many youth migrants in Mumbai in precarious situations. The lockdown shattered the livelihoods of countless young workers in sectors such as construction, retail, and hospitality, plunging them into joblessness, food insecurity, homelessness, and profound financial distress. This study delves into the multifaceted impacts of the pandemic on migrant youth in Mumbai, highlighting their experiences and reflections on government relief measures. It aims to shed light on the challenges faced by these young individuals during the pandemic and their journeys of reverse migration. The repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic on this vulnerable population are critical to understanding broader issues of public health, urban studies, migration, and social policy.

**Key Word:** COVID-19, Lockdown, Migrants Youth, Mumbai City.

## Introduction:

In December 2019, COVID-19 was first identified in Wuhan, China, caused by the novel corona virus SARS-CoV-2, and quickly escalated into a global pandemic. The World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on January 30, 2020, and subsequently labelled it a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The pandemic has had profound effects on health systems, economies, and societies worldwide (WHO, 2020).

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2020), the virus spreads primarily through respiratory droplets and contact with infected surfaces, leading to a range of symptoms from mild to severe respiratory illness. This can result in complications such as acute respiratory distress syndrome (ARDS) and even death. In response, countries implemented numerous measures, including lockdowns, social distancing, mask mandates, and extensive vaccination campaigns, to contain the spread of the virus and mitigate its impacts.

The COVID-19 pandemic severely affected India's economy, raising concerns about a recession and taking a heavy toll on young migrant labourers. Lockdown measures resulted in widespread job losses, forcing millions to return to their native homes. This disruption significantly impacted rural youth migrants, placing them at a critical juncture alongside government efforts. Many migrants experienced profound distress, feelings of abandonment, anxiety, and frustration.

Youth migration from rural India is primarily driven by unemployment, competitive labour markets, and better opportunities in urban centers. Rural youth, heavily dependent on seasonal agricultural work, often migrate in search of stable livelihoods. However, the displacement caused by the lockdown led to acute mental, economic, and emotional distress for these migrant workers.

This study focuses on examining the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on youth migrants living in Mumbai.

## Literature Review -

Ramesh and Agarwal (2020) examine drivers of internal migration in India, including distress, climate change, and socio-political conflicts, emphasizing COVID-19's role in accelerating youth migration. They argue that rapid urbanization and industrialization have intensified migration, while reduced government support and ineffective policy have increased migrant youth vulnerability.

Gupta (2021) analyzes youth migration trends, noting shifts pre- and post-economic reforms. Highlighting the influence of globalization, Gupta observes that rural youth are increasingly drawn to metro cities like Pune, Mumbai, and Chennai, with inter-state migration rising among lower socio-economic groups. Gupta calls for addressing policy gaps to meet emerging youth migration challenges, especially in light of COVID-19 impacts.

Vig, T (2021), has discussed the youth migrant's issues during COVID-19. Through the study the author has focused on the living conditions of migrant youth who come from rural areas and staying in metro cities like Mumbai, Pune, and Chennai etc. The author has also discussed the legal aspects and provisions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. The

author has concluded that there is a need to ensure that adequate measures should be taken to overcome the adverse impact of lockdown on the economic conditions of youth migrants.

Rajan and Bhagwat (2021), have examined how the pandemic affected the lives and livelihoods of youth migrants, especially migrant labours in metro cities. Through the study authors have critically discussed the government's response in providing relief packages and implementing relief measures to overcome the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Apart from this the authors have also critically discussed the inadequacy of legislation for youth migrant labours.

Rawal, A (2022), has explained about the corona virus or COVID-19 in his book. The author has discussed how India responded to COVID-19 and what was the plight of rural youth migrants in metro cities during the pandemic period. The author has focused on the socio-economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth migrants. The author has also discussed the government initiatives and policy recommendations regarding the measures against the COVID-19 pandemic. The author has pointed out that there was a failure of prior strategy concerned with youth migrants working in the informal sector. A plan to address livelihood options for daily wage earners was completely missing.

Chandramulla and Donda, (2021), have discussed the COVID-19 crisis, which has confronted unprecedented economic challenges for the youth migrated people and the government. The author has examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on youth migrants and remittances based on the reports published by national and international organisations. Through the study, authors have observed that migrant labourers working in the informal sector are more vulnerable to the crisis.

### Objectives:

1. To study the socio-economic impact of lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic on the youth migrants.
2. To understand the various challenges and problems faced by youth migrants during the pandemic period.
3. To explore the opinions of the youth migrants about the accessibility and efficacy of social utility safety nets and government relief measures.
4. To study the awareness amongst youth migrants regarding various government measures and safety nets.

### Research Methodology:

This exploratory study used a survey method to collect primary data from youth migrants aged 18-29 years of age in Mumbai. Partnering with NGOs supporting migrants, data was gathered through questionnaires and FGDs. A simple random sampling method has been used for selection of 120 respondents, and analysis completed by using simple percentage methods.

### Results and Discussion:

**Table-1 Major socio-economic impacts of lockdown**

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	Restrictions on mobility	14	12
2	Social distancing	12	10
3	Stigmatisation	10	8
4	Loss of job	20	17
5	Increase in debts	16	13
6	Reverse Migration - Joint education programme	6	5
7	All the above	42	35

Source: *Field Study Data*

Table No. 1 shows COVID-19 lockdown had severe socio-economic impacts on youth migrants. A majority, 17%, lost jobs as organizations closed, and 13% faced increased debts. Additionally, 12% reported financial losses due to mobility restrictions. 10% reported social distancing hampered daily activities, and 8% experienced social stigma tied to COVID-19, affecting their status. Many were forced to borrow at high-interest rates, and 5% cited reverse migration as a major issue, with many returning involuntarily to their villages. Overall, 35% of respondents endured a combination of job loss, debt, restricted mobility, social distancing, stigma, and reverse migration during the pandemic. In one FGD it was reported that

“After COVID-19 their salary was reduced by the owner”

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*“After COVID, the employers have reduced our salary, and now they make us work more with fewer people. Because after COVID, people are available to work for lower salaries.”*

So they are not happy with working conditions.

Sources FGD Summary

**Table-2 Major challenges faced by youth migrants during the pandemic period**

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	Economic Challenges	28	23
2	Social Challenges	24	20
3	Mobility Challenges	18	15
4	Health-related challenges	12	10
5	All the above	38	32

Source: Field Study Data

Table No. 2 shows 23% respondents said they have faced economic challenges during the lockdown period because of low income and being retrenched by the employer or non-payment of wages during the lockdown period. 20% of the respondents have faced social problems or issues during the lockdown period. These problems were reverse migration, stigmatisation, mobility, restrictions, and discrimination. They were viewed as the spreaders of the virus in the destination during their reverse migration. 15% respondents stated that they faced mobility challenges. They faced several problems while attempting to return to their native places, such as police brutality, grievous injuries etc. 10% of the respondents have reported that they faced health-related problems or issues during the lockdown period, and 32% of respondents have stated that they faced all the above stated challenges and difficulties.

The government announced many relief measures and safety nets to mitigate the plight of migrants during the lockdown period. The majority of the measures were merged with the existing welfare programmes like the supply of additional food grains, cash transfer through Jan DhanYojna, free gas supply through the Ujwala Scheme etc. The reach of these measures depended on the migrant's access to entitlements and social safety nets like ration card, Jan-Dhan bank accounts etc. The following table describes the accessibility to these measures and Safety Nets provided by the government.

**Table-3 Accessibility to social safety nets and Relief measures**

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	Easily accessible	56	47
2	Inaccessible	64	53

Source: Field Study Data

Table No.3 shows mixed opinions on the accessibility of social safety nets and relief measures during the lockdown. Majority 53% responded negatively that all the relief measures taken by the government were easily Inaccessible, whereas 47% of respondent reported accessible. Key issues affecting migrants included the lack of ration cards and Jan Dhan accounts, which hindered access to essential support. Some migrants reported not receiving entitled free or subsidized food grains despite having ration cards.

Assessing awareness of these relief measures among youth migrants is a primary objective of this research. The table below outlines government-provided relief measures during the lockdown and youth migrants' awareness of them.

**Table-4 Awareness about the government's relief measures amongst youth migrants**

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan (Rural Public Employment Programme)	11	9
2	Free food and shelter	15	13
3	Special transportation facility	13	10
4	No awareness of any measures	2	2
5	Having awareness of all the above measures	79	66

Source: Field Study Data

Table No. 4 shows only 9% of respondents reported awareness of the *Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan*, a government initiative under the rural public employment program. Furthermore, 13% of participants were aware of provisions for free food supply and shelter organized by the government and various non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, 10% of respondents were informed about the special transportation arrangements, including *Shramik* trains to states such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal, as well as inter-state bus services facilitated by the government.

Only 2% of respondents indicated a complete lack of awareness of government relief measures implemented during the lockdown period, citing reasons such as limited access to information and insufficient knowledge of digital technology for booking tickets or reserving seats. This lack of digital literacy created barriers to accessing timely information on *Shramik* trains and buses, as updates were disseminated through electronic media, which these individuals were unable to access due to their unfamiliarity with digital platforms.

The present study explored the extent of efficacy and utility of the government-provided relief measures through the opinions expressed by the respondents.

**Table No. 5 The extent of efficacy and utility of government's relief measures**

S. No.	Particulars	Frequency	Percentage
1	To great extent	64	53
2	To some extent	34	28
3	Not at all	22	19

Source: *Field Study Data*

Table No. 5 Shows 53% of respondents reported that all the relief measures provided by the government proved efficacious and useful for the underprivileged migrant people during the lockdown period. 31% of respondents stated that all the measures were efficacious and valuable to some extent, and in the opinion of 19% of respondents these measures were not effectual and not prove useful to the migrant people due to many obstacles in obtaining them.

### Findings:

- 1) Socio-Economic Challenges:** Youth migrants encountered multiple socio-economic challenges during the COVID-19 lockdown, with financial difficulties being among the most prominent. Major economic hardships included job losses and escalating debts, which significantly impacted their well-being.
- 2) Working Conditions:** The majority of respondents reported substantial economic and social challenges amid the pandemic, including job loss, stigmatization due to reverse migration, and increased debt. Low-income migrant youth were particularly affected, experiencing widespread retrenchment, wage delays, and unpaid salaries in their destination cities, which compelled many to return to their native regions. Additionally, the post-pandemic reduction in wages led to notable dissatisfaction among workers.
- 3) Government Support:** Respondents acknowledged receiving governmental support during COVID-19, primarily in the form of food and grain distribution. However, some participants expressed dissatisfaction with the quality and taste of food provided under these government schemes for construction workers.
- 4) Social Safety Net and Accessibility:** Government relief measures and social safety nets were observed to be inadequately accessible, causing distress among migrant populations and exacerbating hardships during the lockdown. Notably, youth migrant laborers from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal faced severe difficulties due to limited access to Jan-Dhan accounts and ration cards in their destination states.
- 5) Awareness of Government Relief Measures:** The majority of respondents were aware of government initiatives, such as the *Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan* (a rural public employment program), free food, shelter provisions, and special transportation services. However, a minority remained uninformed, hindered by a lack of reliable information sources during the lockdown period.
- 6) Effectiveness of Relief Measures:** The government's relief and safety net programs were generally perceived as effective by participants, proving beneficial to a large extent. However, efficacy varied by region, with certain areas facing local administrative challenges that limited the programs' effectiveness.
- 7) Support from NGOs:** The Udaan Trust emerged as a key NGO providing health-related assistance to migrant communities, focusing on HIV/AIDS awareness and medical support.
- 8) Experience During COVID-19:** Approximately 80% of respondents remained in Mumbai due to transportation constraints during the pandemic. While none contracted COVID-19, they faced prolonged financial instability due to income loss for an estimated 4-5 months, leading many to rely on savings or loans for basic sustenance.
- 9) Mental Health and Healthcare Access:** The stress from prolonged income insecurity exacerbated mental health issues among youth migrants, manifesting as anxiety, depression, and hopelessness. Furthermore, restricted healthcare access during the lockdown worsened physical health outcomes, as preventive and curative services, including COVID-19 treatment, were difficult to obtain.

**10) Living Conditions and Vulnerability:** Overcrowded, poorly ventilated living conditions in urban areas increased the migrants' vulnerability to COVID-19 transmission. Additionally, their limited social support networks heightened isolation, impeding their ability to cope with the lockdown's psychological and social effects.

### Conclusion:

This study offers a detailed examination of the contemporary challenges faced by youth migrants during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly focusing on socio-economic impacts and systemic exclusion from governmental relief and safety nets. Findings indicate that many migrants experienced inadequate support due to their 'neither here, nor there' status, revealing the lack of preparation preceding the nationwide lockdown. Consequently, rural youth migrants endured heightened discrimination and neglect, leading to significant declines in their health and well-being. These individuals form a vital component of the economy, underscoring the need for resilient urban-rural dynamics.

Experts have expressed opinions that insufficient public investment in redistributive initiatives and poor policy implementation as primary factors contributing to the inadequate protection of migrant's trend that has intensified in recent years in India. Notably, the pandemic exacerbated these vulnerabilities, with several experts highlighting the need for improved government interventions to address migration challenges and return migration during the COVID-19 period. The research suggests that implementing health insurance for youth migrants could enhance both migrant well-being and government welfare outcomes.

In conclusion, the COVID-19 crisis underscored pre-existing vulnerabilities among youth migrants in Mumbai, reinforcing the imperative for a holistic urban health and social policy framework that prioritizes this population's resilience in future crises. Identifying effective pathways forward, this study emphasizes the necessity for targeted interventions in post-pandemic urban recovery plans. Such plans should include comprehensive social safety nets, mental health services, and accessible healthcare. Moreover, policy reforms to enhance labor rights and housing conditions for migrants could play a crucial role in alleviating the long-term consequences of similar crises in the future.

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