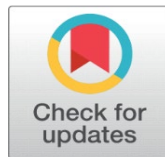
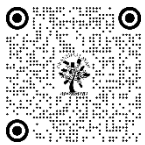


THE UNSEEN STRUGGLE: A STUDY OF THE PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY MIGRANT WORKERS DURING THE PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The pandemic situation advocated groundbreaking challenges, especially for migrant workers employed in brick kilns, a group already facing precarious working conditions. This study examines the diverse struggles encountered by these workers during the pandemic, including economic difficulties, health risks, and emotional distress. The research highlights how the loss of income, food shortages, and the closure of local markets forced workers into debt, borrowing money at high-interest rates just to meet basic needs. Additionally, the fear of contracting COVID-19 and the subsequent isolation prevented many from seeking medical attention, further worsening their health. The emotional stress, including the inability to attend funerals or manage weddings due to travel restrictions, added significant stress. This study, conducted in a village in Hapur, Uttar Pradesh, uses a descriptive qualitative approach, with case study methodology and semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of brick kiln migrants. The findings emphasize the resilience of migrant workers in the face of severe hardship while highlighting the urgent need for support systems to address both immediate and long-term needs. The study calls for comprehensive interventions to safeguard the welfare of migrant labourers, particularly during times of crisis.

Keywords: Migrant workers, brick kilns, COVID-19 pandemic, resilience.



1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic brought unforeseen challenges to the world, with migrant workers being among the most vulnerable groups affected. These workers, who often rely on daily wages for survival, faced a multitude of hardships during the lockdown. With no income, food insecurity became a pressing concern, forcing many families to borrow money at exorbitant interest rates just to secure necessities. At the same time, the closure of local markets exacerbated the scarcity of essential goods, and restrictions on movement made it even more difficult for workers to access vital resources. As families struggled to make ends meet, health crises emerged as another layer of hardship. Many workers, suffering from symptoms like coughs and fevers, avoided seeking medical help due to the fear of being misdiagnosed with COVID-19 and forcibly taken to quarantine centres. This deepened their suffering, as they refrained from getting treatment for fear of isolation, further undermining their health and well-being. The emotional toll of the pandemic was also significant. Migrant workers faced severe financial insecurity, including rising debts they continued to repay years after the lockdown. Personal losses, such as the inability to attend funerals or manage weddings due to travel restrictions, compounded the emotional and psychological stress. This period of extreme hardship has left long-term effects on migrant workers, who not only endured financial and health challenges but also faced isolation, fear, and a sense of powerlessness. This study aims to explore the multifaceted challenges faced by migrant workers during the pandemic,

examining their economic struggles, health risks, and emotional stress. By shedding light on these issues, it highlights the resilience and survival strategies employed by workers while underscoring the urgent need for support systems that address both immediate and long-term needs.

The present research paper has broad objectives:

- To study the problems and challenges faced by migrant workers during migration period.
- To study the impact of pandemic situation on the lives of brick kiln migrants.

2. METHODOLOGY

The present research study is a descriptive qualitative in nature in which researcher have been used case study method. The site of the study is a village in district Hapur, Uttar Pradesh. Those migrant workers who are involved in brick making process were selected as a sample for present study. For this study semi structured questionnaire as well as observation schedule was used.

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the analyses of the problems and challenges faced by workers during the migration period and highlights the issues occurring in the pandemic period. The section presents the following themes: -

- Struggles of Migrant Workers at Brick Kilns
- Survival of Migrants in Pandemic Period
- Struggles of Migrant Workers at Brick Kilns:

Upon arriving at the kiln, families spend weeks setting up makeshift shelters and repairing basic infrastructure. One worker explained, "कमान के खान के लिए आए, जमीन है नाई हमपै तो का करें, मजदूरी ही हमार रास्ता है।" ("We have come here to earn our livelihood; we don't own any land, so labour is our only option.") Adjusting to new surroundings is difficult, as another noted, "नई जगह पे रहने में दिक्कत तो आती है, एक दो महीना तो घर जमाने में ही निकल जावे है।" ("Living in a new place is challenging; it takes one or two months just to settle down.") Workers repair rooms, level the ground, plaster walls, build bathrooms, and set up stoves and shelters for their animals. Life at the kiln is uncomfortable, surrounded by dirt and dust. One worker remarked, "खाने-कमाने की खातिर धूल-मिट्टी में आकर पड़ जावे है।" ("We come here to earn a living but end up amidst dust and dirt.") Families sleep on straw spread over the ground due to a lack of bedding. A woman shared, "खाने-कमाने की परेशानी तो नाए होत है, हाँ लेटन-बैठन की दिक्कत है।" ("We don't struggle to earn food, but there are issues with lying down and sitting.") She added, "एक ही चारपाई है, इसपे मैं लेट जाऊँ हूँ, बाकी सारे जने खोड़ी ज़मीन पे फूँस बिछाकर सोत हैं।" ("We have just one cot, which I use, while others sleep on straw spread over the ground.") Transporting goods to and from the kiln is a recurring challenge. One worker described, "सारी घर-गृहस्थी का सामान लाना और ले जाना पड़े है। अगर कोई सामान न होता तो यहीं से मोलकू लेना पड़े है तो परेशानी तो बहुत पड़े है।" ("We must bring and take back all household items. If something is missing, we have to buy it here, which is troublesome.") Due to high truck rental costs, families pool resources to bring essential items like utensils, clothes, and domestic animals. However, most belongings are left behind. One worker lamented, "सामान लाने ले जाने की परेशानी और भाड़े की परेशानी होती है।" ("Transporting goods and paying the fare is a big problem.") The absence of ration cards at the kiln prevents families from accessing subsidized food. Living in remote areas far from markets makes grocery shopping difficult, with women often foraging for vegetables in nearby forests. Adapting to a new environment adds to their struggles. One worker said, "भट्ठा पे आके भतेरी दिक्कत होवे है—नए नए आदमी, नई जगह, नई बोली, इन सब चीजों कू देखना पड़े है।" ("At the kiln, there are many challenges—new people, a new place, a new language—all these things need to be dealt with.") Extreme weather conditions further complicate life at the kiln. Workers endure scorching summers and freezing winters, which take a toll on their health. One explained, "ईंट पाथने के लिये रात-भर जगना पड़ता है, दिन में धूप में काम करना पड़ता है। सर्दी में सर्दी, गर्मी में गर्मी होती है।" ("We stay up all night making bricks and work in the sun during the day. Winters are harsh, and summers are scorching.") Emotional isolation is another major struggle. Being away from family for months weighs heavily on workers. One shared, "अपने भूले-बिछड़े परिवार की याद आती है, राशन की भी परेशानी होती है।" ("I miss my family, and there are difficulties with ration too.") The comfort of home remains unmatched, as another worker said, "जो सुकून अपने घर में मिले है, वो तो कहीं ना मिलता।" ("The peace found at home cannot be found anywhere else.") Despite these hardships, many workers find solace in the financial stability the kiln provides. As one remarked, "सही मायनों में तो परेशानी से बचने कू आवै हैं हम यहाँ पै। अब कुछ पाने कू कुछ खोना भी पड़े है। सही कमाई हो जावे है यहाँ।" ("We come here to escape struggles. You must lose something to gain something. The

earnings here are good.") For others, this transient lifestyle has become routine. One worker reflected, "परेशानी तो रहवै ही है। सारी ज़िंदगी यहीं कटी है। चार महीना कू ही तो जावै है अपने घर।" ("The struggles are always there. We've spent our whole lives like this, only going home for four months.") These realities highlight the resilience and sacrifices of workers who endure physical, emotional, and financial challenges in pursuit of a better livelihood.

• SURVIVAL OF MIGRANTS IN PANDEMIC PERIOD:

During the pandemic lockdown, migrant workers at brick kilns faced numerous hardships, with employment being their primary concern. The lockdown severely disrupted their livelihoods, forcing many workers to return to their villages due to restrictions and uncertainty. Those who stayed at the kilns continued brickmaking but were confined to the premises under strict regulations. Meanwhile, workers who returned home endured even harsher conditions, unable to find daily-wage jobs because of stringent lockdown measures and constant police monitoring.

Survival during this period was extremely challenging. With no income, food shortages became a pressing issue, compelling families to take loans or borrow money at high-interest rates just to secure two meals a day. One worker shared, "कर्जा लेकर रोटी पानी खाया हा और ब्याज पै पैसे लिए हे" (I was scared all the time. I ate food by taking out a loan and took money on interest.) Managing household expenses became overwhelming, and even years later, many families were still repaying the debts they had accrued during the lockdown. The closure of weekly markets further intensified their struggles, as one respondent explained, "हफ्ते के बाजार बंद हो गए थे, सामान की बहुत दिक्कत हुई।" (The weekly markets were closed, and there were a lot of problems with goods.) Health crises added to their suffering. Many workers reported symptoms like coughs and fevers but avoided seeking medical care. One worker explained, "डर की वजह से दवाई बी ना ली, काई कोरोना बताकर उठाकर ले जाते।" (Due to fear, we did not take medicine. They would take us away, saying it was corona.) Fear of being diagnosed with COVID-19 and sent to quarantine centres or hospitals kept workers and their families from seeking medical attention. One respondent recounted how their husband, suffering from a persistent cough, refused to take medicine or visit a doctor due to fear of being forcibly taken away. Another shared how they avoided medical care even after an accident, concerned about being misdiagnosed with COVID-19. These accounts reveal the severe challenges faced by migrant workers during the pandemic, from economic insecurity to health risks, compounded by fear and limited access to resources.

FEAR, INEQUALITY, AND HARDSHIP: The pandemic brought intense fear and hardship, particularly for the poor. One respondent shared, "कोरोना में बहुत डर लगता था, ऐसा लगता था कि मरने का अगला नंबर हमारा ही है। पुलिस की गाड़ी की आवाज सुनते ही बच्चे अंदर हो जाते थे, डर लगा रहवै था हर वक्त।" (We were very scared during Corona; it seemed we were the next to die. Children would go inside as soon as they heard the police vehicle, we were scared all the time). Children instinctively hid upon hearing police vehicles, reflecting the pervasive anxiety. The physical toll of the pandemic left many labourers with lasting pain in their hands and legs, making daily work excruciating and requiring constant medication. Economic inequality during this time was stark. As one worker explained, "कोरोना का असर तो बीबी हम गरीबों पर ही था सारा, बड़ी नोकरी वालों ने तो घर में बैठकर बढ़िया से बढ़िया पकवान खाए हैं, हमने तो तनक तनक मर मर के अपना टैम काटा है। मेरी नातिन दिल्ली के दो घरों में खाना बनाने जावे है, वो बताती रहवै है सब बातें कि का चल रहा है, दुनिया में।" (The effect of Corona was only on the poor, the working people have eaten delicious food while staying at home; we have barely managed to pass our time. My granddaughter goes to cook food in homes in Delhi; she keeps telling me all about what is going on in society). While the wealthy enjoyed comfort, the poor struggled daily to survive. The fear of the disease magnified their suffering. One respondent recounted, "मोहल्ले की एक लड़की घनी तकड़ी थी, उसकु पानी भी ना दिया आग में लगीं ने, अर वो पानी-पानी मांगती हुई प्यासी ही मर गई। बहुत बुरा टैम था वो।" (A girl from the neighbourhood was very healthy. During the Corona period, no one gave her even water, and she died thirsty, asking for water. It was a very bad time). Such incidents showcased the cruelty and helplessness of the time. Rumours further fueled anxiety, with tales of unknown medicines dropped from helicopters. As another shared, "कोरोना में डर लगा रहवै था, जाने कैसी-कैसी दवाइएँ छोड़ी गईं ही हेलिकॉप्टरों से।" (There was fear of Corona, and no one knew what kinds of medicines were dropped from helicopters). These accounts highlight the profound suffering, inequality, and fear that defined the lives of the poor during the pandemic.

PERSONAL LOSSES AND FINANCIAL BURDENS: The pandemic profoundly disrupted personal lives. Weddings were conducted with limited resources, and travel restrictions prevented families from mourning their loved ones. "हमारे ससुर का इंतकाल हुआ था उस टैम, मगर कोई भी देखने न जा सका।" (My father-in-law passed away, but no one could go to see

him). Fear of COVID-19 led many to avoid medical care. One respondent shared, “म्हारे आदमी को खांसी हो गई थी, डर की वजह से दवाई बी ना ली, काई करोना बताकर उठाकर ले जाते आग में लगे।” (My husband had a cough but didn't take medicine out of fear; they claimed it was Covid and took him away). Even after the lockdown was lifted, challenges persisted. Another respondent said, “परेसानी कू कौन हल कर रा... दहशत से मर गए।” (Who would solve the problems? Some died of fear, some of the disease, and some due to negligence). Financial burdens loomed large, with workers struggling to arrange resources. “दो लड़कियों की शादी की थी... बहुत परेशानी हुई।” (I arranged two daughters' weddings but couldn't get the necessary goods or loans; it was very difficult). Others sold livestock to survive, as one said, “घर की भैंस-बकरी बेचनी पड़ी, बीमारी की परेशानी ना थी। पैसों की परेशानी थी।” (We sold our buffalo and goat not due to illness but money problems). Despite their resilience, the emotional and financial scars of those days remain a haunting reminder of their struggles.

4. FINDINGS

This part presents the findings of this research study, where the findings are presented in the light of the framed objectives and structured in a systematic manner.

- **LIVING CONDITIONS AND SHELTER CHALLENGES:** Migrant workers often face significant hardships in establishing shelter at brick kilns, as they are forced to build makeshift accommodations that lack basic infrastructure. These temporary homes are often plagued with issues such as unplastered walls and inadequate bedding, leading to exposure to dirt, dust, and discomfort. According to a study by Singh (2019), these poor living conditions significantly affect workers' physical health and overall well-being, especially during extreme weather conditions (Singh, 2019). Furthermore, these inadequate shelters contribute to poor sanitation, which increases the risk of communicable diseases, further exacerbating the vulnerability of migrant workers.
- **LIMITED ACCESS TO ESSENTIALS AND FINANCIAL STRUGGLES:** Migrant workers face financial constraints due to high transportation costs, which limit their ability to bring essential items from home. The ration cards, often tied to their home states, restrict access to subsidized food, forcing workers to rely on foraged vegetables and long trips to distant markets. A study by Saha (2021) highlights how these logistical and financial challenges are exacerbated by inadequate access to public services and subsidies, leaving workers vulnerable during crises (Saha, 2021). In many cases, the financial burdens lead to the accumulation of debt, with families borrowing from informal sources at high-interest rates to meet basic needs.
- **HEALTH RISKS AND ENVIRONMENTAL STRAINS:** Migrant workers endure health risks from extreme weather conditions while working outdoors. These risks are compounded by inadequate shelter and limited access to healthcare. Research by Gupta et al. (2020) suggests that exposure to harsh weather conditions like scorching summers and freezing winters significantly increases health problems among brick kiln workers, particularly respiratory and skin conditions (Gupta et al., 2020). In addition, the lack of personal protective equipment and inadequate workplace safety protocols further heightens workers' susceptibility to work-related injuries and illnesses.
- **SOCIAL ISOLATION AND ADJUSTMENT ISSUES:** Migrant workers often feel isolated due to language barriers and limited interactions with local communities. This social detachment leads to frustration, loneliness, and mental health challenges. According to a study by Khanna (2018), the lack of social integration is a major factor contributing to the emotional and psychological toll on migrant workers, making it difficult for them to adjust to new environments. These feelings of isolation are often amplified by the absence of family support and community networks, which further hinder their ability to cope with the stresses of migration.
- **EMPLOYMENT AND FINANCIAL INSECURITY:** The pandemic significantly disrupted employment for migrant workers, leading to financial crises. Many workers lost their jobs due to factory closures or reduced demand for labour, heightening their economic vulnerability. A study by Prasad (2021) highlights that the pandemic exacerbated pre-existing financial insecurities for many migrant workers, forcing them to take loans or sell assets to survive (Prasad, 2021). In many cases, this economic instability also led to the depletion of savings, leaving families with limited resources to fall back on during subsequent economic instability.
- **FOOD SCARCITY AND DEBT DEPENDENCY:** During the pandemic, food scarcity became a serious issue, with many families forced to borrow money or sell assets to meet their daily needs. This financial strain, coupled with closed markets, increased the vulnerability of workers (Mishra, 2020). Research by Kumar et al. (2021) emphasizes that the rising cost of food and the inability to access markets exacerbated food insecurity, pushing

workers into debt dependency. Moreover, the lack of support from government schemes, particularly in rural areas, further contributed to food scarcity and dependency on informal credit systems.

- **HEALTHCARE AVOIDANCE:** Due to the stigma surrounding COVID-19 and the fear of quarantine, many migrant workers avoided seeking medical help, even for serious symptoms. A report by WHO (2020) discusses how mistrust in healthcare systems and the fear of being forcibly isolated deterred workers from seeking timely medical attention (WHO, 2020). Additionally, the lack of accessible healthcare facilities near migrant work sites further delayed treatment, often leading to more severe health outcomes.
- **INFLATION AND RESTRICTED ACCESS TO GOODS:** The pandemic caused inflation and closed markets, which increased the financial strain on migrant workers. Research by Mishra and Shukla (2021) highlights that price hikes during the lockdown, coupled with limited access to essential goods, intensified the struggles faced by workers in procuring necessities (Mishra & Shukla, 2021). This increased cost of living further eroded workers' purchasing power, particularly when essential supplies like food and medicines were scarce or overpriced.
- **UNPAID DEBT FROM THE PANDEMIC:** Many migrant workers continue to repay high-interest loans taken during the pandemic, reflecting the lasting financial stress of the crisis. According to a report by the International Labour Organization, the pandemic left migrant workers in a perpetual cycle of debt, making it harder for them to recover even years later (ILO, 2020). This ongoing financial strain limits workers' ability to save or invest in their future, trapping many in a cycle of poverty that affects multiple generations.
- **EMOTIONAL HARDSHIP AND SOCIAL ISOLATION:** The pandemic exacerbated feelings of fear, loneliness, and social isolation among migrant workers. According to research by Reddy (2021), emotional stress and mental health challenges during the pandemic have been significant among workers who already face social exclusion and limited social support (Reddy, 2021). Furthermore, the heightened anxiety about the virus and the uncertainty about their futures led to increased psychological distress, manifesting in depression and other mental health issues.

5. CONCLUSION

The challenges faced by migrant workers during the pandemic were both profound and far-reaching, affecting every aspect of their lives. From economic struggles to health crises and emotional distress, these workers endured significant hardships. With no steady income, many had to take loans at high-interest rates just to afford necessities, while the closure of markets further limited their access to goods. The fear of contracting COVID-19 and the subsequent treatment, along with limited medical resources, prevented many from seeking the care they needed, exacerbating their physical suffering (Patel & Gupta, 2020). A study by Saha (2021) highlights that migrant worker, already marginalized, were further disadvantaged by a lack of access to healthcare and financial assistance during the crisis (Saha 2021). The emotional toll was equally heavy, as migrant workers were forced to deal with the pain of personal losses, such as the inability to attend funerals or manage important family events due to travel restrictions. Furthermore, Khanna (2018) stated in their study; the pervasive fear and isolation created an environment where workers not only struggled physically and financially but also mentally and emotionally (Khanna, 2018). According to Banerjee 2020, migrant workers showed remarkable resilience, coping with overwhelming circumstances through sheer determination and resourcefulness (Banerjee & Duflo, 2020). However, the unresolved effects of the pandemic continue to impact their lives, with many still dealing with debts incurred during the crisis and its long-term psychological toll. This highlights the urgent need for comprehensive support systems that address the immediate and long-term needs of migrant workers, ensuring their survival and well-being in times of crisis. The pandemic has underscored the vulnerabilities of migrant labourers, who, despite contributing significantly to the economy, remain largely unprotected in times of emergency.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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