Research Paper

Psychological Distress among migrant labourers during the COVID-19 lockdown in a Southern state of India - A Cross-Sectional Study

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The imposition of the lockdown as a measure to contain the exponential progression of the Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) pandemic triggered a massive reverse migration of labourers from the "destination" to "source" in large parts of the country and has hit the unskilled and semi-skilled labourers the most. This study assessed psychological distress among migrant labourers who were heading back home due to lockdown. *Methods:* A cross-sectional study was conducted among 180 migrant labourers who were placed in five Government run shelters in a 2nd biggest city in Southern state of Karnataka. These migrant labourers were assessed for Psychological Distress using the Kessler Psychological Distress Scale. Data was analysed using Chi square tests, Fisher's exact tests and Poisson regression analysis. *Results:* Mild psychological distress was reported among 26.67%, moderate distress among 24.44% and severe distress among 15.56% of migrant labourers. Older age, being married, having more number of children were significantly associated with psychological distress ($p < 0.05$). Migrant labourers who experienced psychological distress were mostly working as unskilled labourers with a lesser pay than the labour laws of the country. Increasing severity of psychological distress was associated with higher odds of these correlates. *Conclusions:* Significant psychological distress was found in migrant labourers during reverse migration due to lockdown imposed to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The

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psychological wellbeing should also be considered on same lines of physical health while providing care in Government run shelter home for migration worker.

Article 19 of the Constitution of India gives us the right to move freely throughout the geographical territory of India; to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India.[1] Migration is a difficult issue with multiple factors affecting a person, both physically and psychologically. According to the 2011 census 37% of country population, i.e. 45.36 crore people migrated for the various reasons.[2] Among 45.36 crore, 13.9 crore people migrated internally for unskilled labour works. Internal migration involves a change of residence within national borders.[3] India has a long history of migration that has shaped its social history, culture and pattern of development. There are four migration streams: rural-rural, rural-urban, urban-rural and urban-urban. Further, the stream can be intra-district, intra-state and inter-state.[4] Internal migration in India particularly among the needy and disadvantaged has enough potential to improve human capital investment. In fact, internal migration has played a crucial role in increasing the urbanization of the country.[4] Many studies on migration reveal that the reason behind majority of migrations is economic betterment for males and marriage makes a movement to females. The economically motivated migrations are mostly male dominated, especially to the urban areas. Among the occupations, construction sector offers the main occupation for migrants, absorbing 36.2%, followed by agriculture (20.4%) and manufacturing (15.9 %).

The World Health Organisation (WHO) declared spread of Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19) as pandemic, due to its rapidly spreading nature, India went in to complete lockdown on March 24th, 2020 with a very short notice.[5] This impacted the livelihood of majority of migrant labourers who were working in elementary occupations like sales, service delivery, transport and construction sectors. In general, these occupations have job insecurity and associated with discrimination and exploitation.[6] The nationwide lockdown resulted in loss of job, insecurities and reverse migration of millions of migrant workers to their native villages who started to walk back due to lack of transportation services and interstate and intra state restrictions on travel. Most migrant labourers who were clueless about everything and worried about basic needs like shelter, food and daily needs. In order address the basic needs, government opened temporary shelter homes. However, the relocation process itself being an unpleasant experience and uncertainty being the major a reason for this reverse migration, can impact psychological well-being of migrants.[7,8] Amid the phases of movement back to home, there might be elements that can impact the mental health. Pre-movement components include the economic loss, loss of accomplishment, mistreatment and identity crisis and post migration variables include uncertainty, poverty, responsibility regarding households, financial stressors and stigma can lead to a lot of distress and can make a person vulnerable for mental illness.[9,10] These elements can be considered as defencelessness components alongside organic, social and mental variables.[11]

These factors directly or indirectly impact the mental health of migrant workers in India. A study shows most migrant workers were expressed concern such as a) Uncertainty about the duration of lockdown; b) Eagerness to travel and meet their family; c) Fear of being abandoned/deserted by their employers; d) Insecurity over income and job; e) Fear of inattention to other health issues of children and pregnant women; and f) Substance use–

related concerns.[6] In addition, a study from Chandigarh reports severe anxiety and depressive symptoms in migrant workers during lockdown period.[12]

This study was done to understand further, what are the correlates of psychological distress in migrant labours, which is limited in previous studies from India. So, this study evaluated prevalence and the correlates of psychological distress in migrant labours.

METHODOLOGY

This cross-sectional study was conducted at five Government run shelter homes for migrant labourers in Hubli, Karnataka, India. The study included the participants aged more than 18 years, of any gender and who are able to give a verbal informed consent. The data collection was done during the month of April 2020 (4th week of lockdown) with adherence to COVID-19 preventive measures and guidelines. Study was approved by the Institute Ethics Committee.

The Socio-demographic profile (age, gender, education, marital status, income) was collected using a semi structured questionnaire. The psychological distress was assessed by using Kessler Psychological Distress Scale (K10). The K10 is a 10-item questionnaire which has been widely used to measure current (1-month) distress severity associated with psychological symptoms.[13,14]

The scale used a five-value response option for each question – all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, a little of the time, and none of the time – that were scored from five through to one respectively. The Minimum score is 10 and maximum score is 50. A total score of < 20 is considered normal, 20-24 means having mild distress, 25-29 moderate distress and 30-50 means having severe distress.[14] The tool has been validated to screen for common mental disorders in developing countries including India.[15]

Statistical Analysis

StataCorp. 2019. Stata Statistical Software: Release 16. College Station, TX: StataCorp LLC was used for analysis.[16] The one month prevalence of psychological distress (mild / moderate / severe) in both genders was determined. The socio-demographic variables and academic performance were compared between those who had psychological distress and those who had not, using Chi-square and Fisher's exact tests, as necessary. Education, Type of employment and daily income were compared between the psychological distress and non-psychological distress groups using logistic regression analysis. Odds ratios were calculated after controlling for socio-demographic variables that were significant. All tests were 2-tailed and statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$.

RESULTS

A total of 180 migrant workers who took shelter in five government run shelter homes in Hubli took part in the study. The mean (± standard deviation) age of the sample was 27.5 ± 11.8 years (range, 17-64 years). Mild psychological distress was reported by 48 (26.67%) migrant workers (40 males and 8 females), moderate distress by 44 (24.44%; 41 males and 3 females), and severe distress by 28 (15.56%; 24 males and 4 females). There was no gender difference in prevalence of psychological distress (p = 0.38).

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Table 1: Socio-Demographic Factors and Psychological distress among migrant labourers

	No Mental Disorder	Mild Mental Disorder	Moderate mental disorder	evere mental disorder	Total	p Value
Migrant Labourers	60(33.33%)	48(26.67%)	44 (24.44%)	28(15.56%)	180	
Age Group						
0-17	1(100%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	0(0%)	1	
18-24	15 (44%)	9(26%)	8(24%)	2(6%)	34	
25-34	18 (37%)	11(22%)	10(20%)	10(20%)	49	
35-44	20 (35%)	15(26%)	12(21%)	10(18%)	57	
45-54	4(12%)	12(36%)	11(33%)	6(18%)	33	0.031
55-64	0(0%)	1(17%)	3(50%)	2(33%)	6	
Gender						
Male	55 (34%)	40 (25%)	41 (26%)	24 (15%)	160	0.38
Female	5 (25%)	8 (40%)	3 (%)	4 (20%)	20	
Marital Status						
single	27 (34%)	24 (30%)	16 (20%)	13 (16%)	80	0.043
married	32 (34%)	23 (24%)	26 (27%)	14 (15%)	95	
separated	0 (0%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	1 (33%)	3	
widowed	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	2	
No. of Kids						
0	3 (50%)	1 (17%)	0 (0%)	2 (33%)	6	0.045
1	6 (19%)	10 (31%)	8 (25%)	8 (25%)	32	
2	16 (30%)	16 (36%)	7 (16%)	5 (11%)	44	
3	2 (17%)	4 (33%)	6 (16%)	0 (0%)	12	
4	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	2 (50%)	0 (0%)	4	
5	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	2 (100%)	0 (0%)	2	

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic variables of the migrant workers. Older age, being separated or widowed and having more number of children were significantly associated

with psychological distress ($p < 0.05$). There was no significant association with gender, education or state of origin.There was a significant association between type of employment and psychological distress ($p < 0.01$). Majority of migrant workers who were as unskilled or semi-skilled workers had higher psychological distress than skilled or highly skilled workers as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Education, Type of work, Daily Income and Psychological Distress among Migrant labourers

	No Mental Disorder	Mild Mental Disorder	Moderate mental disorder	severe mental disorder	Total	p Value
Education						
illiterate	13(28%)	17(36%)	9(19%)	8 (17%)	47	0.17
Primary School	15(29%)	9(17%)	17(33%)	11 (21%)	52	
High School	15(33%)	17(38%)	8(18%)	5 (11%)	45	
PUC	9(41%)	2(9%)	7(32%)	4 (18%)	22	
Bachelor's Degree	6(55%)	3(27%)	2(18%)	0 (0%)	11	
Post Graduation	2(67%)	0(0%)	1(33%)	0(0%)	3	
Type of work						
unskilled	35 (28%)	27 (22%)	38 (30%)	25 (20%)	125	<0.01
semi skilled	14 (35%)	17 (43%)	6 (15%)	3 (8%)	40	
skilled	8 (67%)	4 (33%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	12	
highly skilled	3 (100%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	3	
Daily Income						
<250	11 (32%)	9 (26%)	10 (29%)	4 (12%)	34	0.418
251-500	40 (33%)	30 (25%)	26 (22%)	24 (20%)	120	
501-750	8 (33%)	9 (38%)	7 (29%)	0 (0%)	24	
>750	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	1 (50%)	0 (0%)	2	

Education might be the reason why these workers, end up as unskilled workers ($p <0.01$) and higher the education, psychological distress was significantly lower ($p<0.05$). The odds of having a poor psychological distress was 0.66 when a workers had a better education as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Odds ratio of variables and Correlation

		Psychological Distress		Odds Ratio	P Value
		Yes	No		
Gender	Male	105	15	1.57	0.4
	Female	15	5		
Marital Status	Married	57	28	1.03	0.09
	Single/Separated/Widowed	63	32		
Children	Yes	68	26	2.61	0.02
	No	3	3		
Education	Illiterate	34	13	0.69	0.01
	Literate	86	47		
Type of work	Unskilled	90	35	0.46	0.02
	Semi killed/Skilled /Highly skilled	30	25		
Daily income	<749 INR	103	51	0.93	0.88
	>750 INR	17	9		

DISCUSSION

This study was done in Hubli, which is located Northern part of Southern Indian state of Karnataka with a population of 943, 857 as per 2011 census. The imposition of a nation-wide lockdown in India resulted in reverse migration. 180 migrant labourers were kept in five temporary shelter homes run by the Government to provide basic needs like shelter, food and daily needs in Hubli city. In which, a total of 180 participants were included in the study from the five shelter homes to understand the psychological distress. We measured psychological distress which despite not being a diagnostic criterion for mental illness, is useful for identifying symptoms associated with various psychological disorders (e.g., depressed mood, anxiety).[17] Strong association has been shown between a high score on the K10 and a current Composite International Diagnostic Interview diagnosis of anxiety and affective disorders.[15]

The prevalence of Psychological distress during Lockdown time was 66.67% in Migrant workers. Older age, being separated or widowed, having more number of children were significantly associated with psychological distress. Majority of migrant workers who were as unskilled or semi-skilled workers had higher psychological distress than skilled or highly skilled workers. There was no significant association with gender, education or state of origin.

The prevalence of Psychological distress during Lockdown time was 66.67% in Migrant workers, which is higher by nearly 300% compared to earlier studies from India have reported rates between 13% and 45%.[18] The prevalence reported from studies across high income countries varies from 8% to 57% and for LMIC from 10% to 20%.[15] The higher prevalence rates in our study might be due to acute crisis situation due to lockdown which led to significant uncertainty. And many studies have proved in past that uncertainty leads to significant psychological distress.[7,8]

As age increases, the psychological distress was positively correlated from 55.88% in age group of 18-24 to 100% in age group of 54-65 years. The pattern of increasing prevalence in our study is similar to other results from India[19] and across the world.[20,21,22] Though females

were just 11.11% of the study population, they showed more distress when compared to male which was not significantly correlated. The odds of female having psychological distress was 1.5 times compared to men in our sample. Similar findings were found in studies in India.[23,24]

Many studies have proved in the past that more number of years a person had studies, better will be his coping skills and psychological distress will be lower. No significant evidence was found in our study. It was found that for increase in the level of education i.e., from primary to post graduation, there was reduction in 0.11 in the total score of the psychological distress when multiple regression was done. The odds of having psychological distress in an educated person was 0.66. Similar results have been published in many studies.[25,26,27]

Being married and having children has been always related to psychological distress. In addition, reverse migration increased the level of distress in migrant labours. This can be primarily due to economic uncertainty and increased monetary stress. Many studies concluded the same facts.[28,29,30] The responsibility of being married and having kids increases the stress as in majority of the cases, the migrant labour is the sole bread earner for the family and loss of job, financial insecurity impacts the migrant labour psychologically. In addition, online print media reported suicide in migrant workers across India due to above psychological, psychosocial and financial issues.[31,32,33] The welfare of underprivileged vulnerable population need to be taken along with addressing the mental health needs during lockdown and post lockdown period.

Migrants who are unskilled usually find it difficult to integrate into the new place. Usually lower the skill levels, higher the chances that they are ignored of their existence which happened with unskilled labours.[34] Majority of migrants who were skilled or highly skilled were able to retain the jobs with some pay cuts but migrants in unskilled and semi-skilled sector lost the jobs as many employers did not recognise the existence during the hard time.[35,36] This led to higher rates of psychological distress in our population. The distress was almost three times more than those found in other studies in India.[15,37,38] This was also reflected on the daily wage earnings of these migrant workers. Migrants who were paid less than the minimum pay according to labour laws[39], were seen to have more psychological distress as they were doing more unskilled work and the competition for same is high while demand is low in the market.[36] This increased the uncertainty among the migrants and thus the psychological distress. Similar findings were found in previous studies.[40,41] The satisfaction among the migrant labours with lower daily wages was less and many of them were forced to do two jobs in a day for more financial stability.[42,43]

Overall, the present study demonstrated that psychological morbidity is highly prevalent among migrant labour due to reverse migration during the COVID 19 Lockdown. The imposition of the lockdown was necessary to contain the exponential progression of the COVID-19 pandemic and this has hit the unskilled and semi-skilled migrant labourers the most. These invisible drivers of the informal economy indirectly helping urbanisation were abandoned by their employers and were left with no hope. This led to significant psychological stress among them like never before. This is being aggravated by the uncertainty of the pandemic. These labourers were relatively less educated, unskilled or semi skilled workers who had a high probability of being rendered unemployed and losing

livelihoods due to the profile of their employment and nature of work arrangement. They stand to bear a disproportionate brunt of the COVID-19 shock.

The present study has few limitations. This study was based on the use of brief screening instruments K10. The assessment was cross-sectional, and various confounders like ongoing stressors, coping mechanisms etc were not taken.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the present study suggests that the current COVID-19 pandemic is causing significant psychological distress in migrants workers especially in those employed as unskilled labour. With India breaching 5 million case mark, if government thinks of another lockdown, policy makers should consider psychological health along with physical health and provide adequate financial and economic security to the invisible builders of modern economy, migrant labourers. And also, In these hard times, it is very important for the government and policy makers to consider the psychological distress among these migrant labourers and help them sail the storm with ease.

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