

India: Bihar Will Take Worst Hit Due To Reverse Migration

Monday 6 April 2020, by [DRÈZE Jean](#), [NAIR Preetha](#) (Date first published: 1 April 2020).

Indian Economist Jean Dreze, in an interview with Outlook, says that because of the Coronavirus lockdown, there won't be any employment under MNREGA now and Bihar will be the worst-hit.

Belgian-born Indian economist, Jean Dreze, says that the central government needs to take immediate measures to address the situation that has emerged in the wake of mass exodus of migrant workers due to the Coronavirus lockdown. In an interview with Outlook, Dreze says Bihar will be the worst-hit in the next couple of months as the state has a huge number of landless laborers and is witnessing the return of workers from different parts of the country. Excerpts:

Q) You, along with other academics, have recently written to the central government regarding emergency relief for migrant workers. What are the immediate steps needed?

We need some emergency measures right now. Most of the measures in the relief package will take time after the lockdown. The measures such as cash transfer and Public Distribution System (PDS) will take time. Even if the cash transfers are made now, people can't go to the bank. Banks are going to be jammed the way it happened during demonetization.

Before the end of the lockdown, within the next few days, there should be larger Programmes of emergency relief including the distribution of food. Most of the state governments are doing that. But they need more resources from the central government. Though the government announced some package, I feel that they are moving slowly. It took more than a week to form the task force to address the COVID-19 crisis.

Q) Do you think the planning for the lockdown by the government was poor, leading to a large scale exodus of migrant laborers?

It's not the lockdown; it's almost a curfew. And the government's priority is just to enforce the curfew using whatever means. The migrants want to go back because they don't feel secure here. Nobody knows the exact figure of the exodus. The migrants know they may end up in jail here or they may go hungry. So they would try to go back to their villages. If the government wants them to stay back, give them some facilities and treat them with dignity. It takes a lot of organizational strength.

Q) How is reverse migration going to affect the economy, particularly the rural sector?

It's not just ordinary lockdown; it's very harsh. Those who have a little bit of land, they will be able to harvest crops as the wheat harvest season is nearing. That will give them some relief in states like Uttar Pradesh and Punjab. Usually, the agricultural laborers from UP and Bihar migrate to Punjab and Haryana around this time. That's a big source of income for them. Unfortunately, they won't be able to go this time. Those who don't have land will be in distress. Because of the lockdown, there

won't be any employment under MNREGA now. There has to be some immediate relief measures to deal with this impending crisis.

Q) There is a mass exodus of migrant workers from most of the cities to the villages. Which state, in your view, will be affected the most by the influx of migrants?

I am very worried about Bihar. Jharkhand looks slightly better as it's smallholder economy. There's a kind of social solidarity in Adivasi areas in Jharkhand. Bihar is the biggest worry in the next couple of months. It has huge numbers of landless labourers. Being a caste and class-ridden society, some communities are leading hand-to-mouth existence even at the best of times.

Q) Will cash transfers help the rural poor?

The government is relying a lot on cash now for relief, but they are not thinking about disbursement problems. Banks are going to be overcrowded as everyone will rush to banks after the lockdown is over. And they will be unable to cope with the demand. It will be difficult for people to withdraw money from their bank accounts. Poor people, who don't have access to Paytm, use the business correspondent system. But now the business correspondence is also closed as they use biometrics, which is a health hazard.

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