

Media Representations of the Impact of COVID-19 Lockdown on Migrant Labour in India

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Abstract

An abrupt imposition of a nationwide lockdown certainly resulted in a havoc condition for the migrant communities of India. The concerns of the migrant laborers were extensively covered in the media as an eye-opener. It presented the bitter truth of the poor versus rich class struggle intrinsic to the Indian Society. The paper inspects the situations of the migrant laborers in India during the first lockdown period of COVID-19 as depicted by 3 leading media units namely, Dainik Bhaskar, Times of India, and NDTV. These units were selected using purposive sampling, further the news reported specifically on migrant workers was selected for the time period of the first lockdown in India. NVivo 12 software was used to analyze the data. Sentiment analysis, word tree analysis, and word cloud analysis were performed to understand the issues faced by the migrant workers during the initial phase of lockdown. The findings are presented by means of diagrams and tables. It was found that lockdown had negative experiences for the migrant community.

Keywords: Migrant Labourers; Sentiment; COVID-19 pandemic lockdown; India

Introduction

Labour class rose with the dawn of the industrial revolution in Europe in 18th and 19th century. Proletariat (workers) and Bourgeoisie (owners) - the two new classes in the industrial era are discussed by Karl Marx who also projected that the labour class was exploited and merely considered as a factor of production by the owner class. To check this, the International labour Organization (ILO) was formed in 1919. Rights of the labourers were globally emphasised in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In 1991, with Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalization (LPG) introduced in India, it became important to discuss labour standards and rights in terms of migrant workers in India. So, who is a migrant worker?

ILO (2015) defines 'migrant worker' as those whether employed or not, but seeking employment in their present country of residence. Encyclopaedia Britannica (n.d.) defines migrant labour as a casual and unskilled worker who moves from one region to another offering their services on a temporary, usually seasonal basis.

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Migration in India

Why people migrate is mostly justified by the pull and push factors. While the pull factors focus on the features of the destination, push factors mostly concentrate on the source (Torado 1969). In India, agriculture is the main occupation which depends on rainfall. Technological backwardness and seasonal dependency makes these farmers unemployed during the non-harvest season. During their period of unemployment, they join the unorganised sector where the wages are very less. Also, natural calamities add to the troubles of the farmers. Powar (1983) opined that agriculture, being seasonal activity cannot permit year round employment. Myrdal (1970) added that lack of irrigation facilities results in extended unemployment time. Specific causes of migration include agriculture poverty, downfall of cottage industries, poverty, drought, large size of landless or small scale farmers, seasonal cycle of work and lower caste (Naoroji 1888; Oscar 1956). Instruments like UDHR, ICESCR, ILO, Fundamental Rights and Directive Principles of State Policy all assure the rights and keep up the work and living standards of the labour. However, the legal provisions mostly do not cover the migrant workers which constitute nearly 92% of worker category across globe.

Migrant workers in India are marked by 3 traits – Internal migration, informality and circularity. Each factor had contributed to the eagerness of the migrants to return back home. The highest percent of migrant origins account for 25 percent from Uttar Pradesh, while Madhya Pradesh accounts for 5% of the origin of total migrant population of India. This also means that around 6 lacs to 9 lacs of the migrants would be returning back to the state of Madhya Pradesh. Bhopal is expected to experience one of the highest influx of migrants (IndianExpressOnline 2020).

As reported by Kone et.al. (2018) most of the internal migrants in India belong to the category of short-distance, intra-district migrants i.e., approx 62 per cent of the internal migrants while the long-distance, interstate migrants accounted for 12 per cent of internal migrants. As per census 2011, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar had the maximum outflow of migrant workers while Maharashtra and Delhi were the states having highest influx (GOI 2011).

Sabates-Wheeler and Waites (2003) have emphasised on the problems of the migrants at source and destination regions as -

- Migrants lack civic identity and citizenship in the destination places and face difficulty in exercising their citizenship rights even at source.
- Migrants exist in less favourable ways than non-migrants perhaps because of debt-interlocking, involvement in sub-contracting chains, greater isolation, fragmentation, and segmentation. Further leading to poorer working conditions, lower wages, exploitation, harassment, and other issues in labour market.
- Migrants have much feebler social networks than non-migrants also many belong to the discriminated social groups like Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes.
- Poor rural-urban migrants face difficulties in establishing claims and entitlements and, in particular, in acquiring shelter.

When it comes to the income patterns for rural households in India, NABARD (2018) presents the following statistics –



Table 1. Income of Rural Households in India

Average Monthly Household Income by Source of Income (In Rupees) & Contribution of various Sources to Total Income (in %)	Agricultural Households	Non-Agricultural Households
Cultivation	3140 (35%)	NA
Livestock Rearing	711 (8%)	NA
Other Enterprises	489 (6%)	851 (12%)
Wage Labour	3025 (34%)	3940 (54%)
Govt./ Pvt. Service	1444 (16%)	2326 (32%)
Other Sources	122 (1%)	152 (2 %)
All Sources Combined	8931 (100%)	7269 (100%)

(Source: NABARD, 2018)

Raveendran (2020) discusses the regular problems of the migrant workers including lack of proper accommodation, low standard of living, low income, lack of access to Government schemes and facilities in the absence of identity proof. She furthers that neo-liberal means of promoting consumerism and competition hinders economic and social justice. A structural shift in the paradigm is vital to reduce the disparities between the rich and the poor. It is noteworthy that majority of the migrants belong to the marginalised communities namely dalits, tribals and other minorities where the interplay of economic and social alienation pushes the younger generations of these communities to the margins for the rest of their lives. The stereotypical attitudes deeply rooted in the culture curtail from understanding and resolving the problems of these communities in a true sense. Finally, she strongly opine that the lockdown has been successful in drawing attention to the economic disparities in Indian Economy.

Statistics indicate that nearly 4% of the total migrant population received rations allotted by the Government, 29% did not receive rations despite of having ration cards (Farooqui and Pandey, 2020). Around 90% of the migrants either faced loss of pay or reduction in their pay (Shahare, 2020). A survey conducted across 179 districts in India from May 30, 2020 to July 16, 2020 found that around 35% of the migrants went without one day meal during the lockdown period (Pandit, 2020).

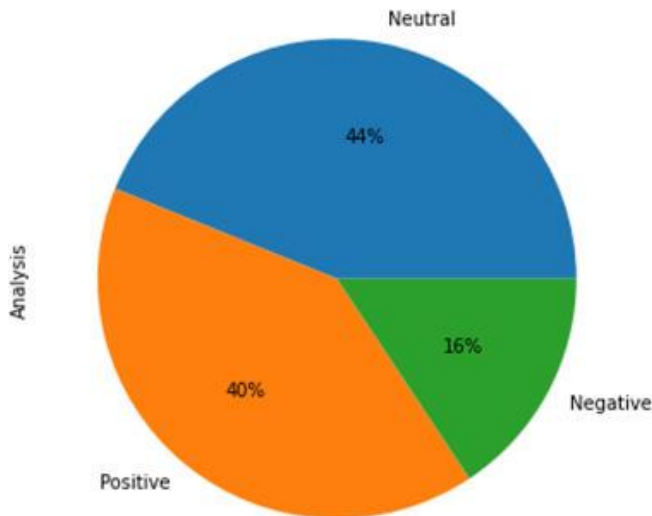
Rahaman et al. (2021) in their study explored the transmission and livelihood challenges for the stranded labourers and found that ration shortage (86%), financial distress (82%), reduction of wages (13%), job loss (86%) and anxiety for COVID-19 infection (81%) were the prominent problems of labourers during lockdown. Many of the labourers did not receive any ration kits (30%) and financial assistance (86%) during lockdown.

Covid-19 Pandemic Lockdown

Outbreak of Corona Virus in December 2019, in Wuhan placed a novel challenge in front of whole mankind. COVID-19 has affected every country in different magnitudes. Keeping in view the COVID-19 pandemic situation, a 21 days nationwide lockdown was announced by Shri Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of the nation on 24th March 2020 (Lockdown 1.0) which further was extended. Kumar, Nayar & Koya (2020) discussed the adverse effect of lockdown on the migrant rural communities in terms of employment, education and emotional turmoil. Many densely populated north Indian States are facing shortage of doctors, hospital beds and equipment (Mitra 2020). Healthcare services across India have to undergo a long way to meet the challenges of workforce shortage, poor infrastructure, absenteeism and quality of care (Health Management Information System, GOI 2020). The complexity of the Public Distribution System (PDS) also affected the Governmental ration relief among the stranded labourers during the lockdown. In such chaotic situations, many labourers tried to return home on foot and even died in accident. Also the reported cases included stranded migrants who committed suicide and died due to starvation (*India Non Virus Deaths During Lockdown*, 2020).

All the experiences had shaped the sentiments of the people which was represented across the news as well as on social media. Agarwal et al. (2022) analysed the sentiments projected on twitter and found that negativity was overshadowed by the positive attitude of the people.

Figure 1. Sentiment Analysis Worldwide using Twitter (Source: Agarwal et al., 2022)



Understanding News Media in India

143423 newspapers were circulated in India in 2020 (Statista, 2022), out of these 2527 newspapers were published in English language while 16,360 newspapers were published in Hindi language. In the state of Madhya Pradesh, 5446 newspapers were in circulation in 2020 (RNI, n.d.).



Covid-19 Pandemic Status in India

Express Web Desk (2021) denoted the following popular news pertaining to the migrant community during Covid-19 pandemic lockdown in India - March 26, 2020, the second day of the lockdown, India witnesses migrant labourers walking hundreds of kilometres along highways to reach their native villages.

Table 2. Covid-19 Pandemic Status in India (State-wise)

Name of State / UT	Active cases	Cured/Discharged/ Migrated*	Deaths**	Total Confirmed cases*
Total#	137448	141029	8102	286579
Andaman and Nicobar Islands	1	33	0	34
Andhra Pradesh	2292	2899	78	5269
Arunachal Pradesh	55	2	0	57
Assam	1839	1249	4	3092
Bihar	2606	3071	33	5710
Chandigarh	36	286	5	327
Chhattisgarh	854	402	6	1262
Dadar Nagar Haveli	24	2	0	26
Daman & Diu	2	0	0	2
Delhi	19581	12245	984	32810
Goa	320	67	0	387
Gujarat	5439	14735	1347	21521
Haryana	3339	2188	52	5579
Himachal Pradesh	191	254	6	451
Jammu and Kashmir	2785	1671	51	4507
Jharkhand	889	592	8	1489
Karnataka	3110	2862	69	6041
Kerala	1238	905	18	2161
Ladakh	62	52	1	115
Madhya Pradesh	2730	6892	427	10049
Maharashtra	46086	44517	3438	94041
Manipur	248	63	0	311
Meghalaya	30	13	1	44
Mizoram	92	1	0	93
Nagaland	106	22	0	128
Odisha	959	2282	9	3250
Puducherry	74	53	0	127
Punjab	518	2232	55	2805
Rajasthan	2772	8569	259	11600
Sikkim	13	0	0	13
Tamil Nadu	17182	19333	326	36841
Telangana	2138	1817	156	4111
Tripura	655	239	1	895
Uttarakhand	716	831	15	1562
Uttar Pradesh	4418	6871	321	11610
West Bengal	5117	3779	432	9328
Cases being reassigned to states	8931	0	0	8931

(ICMR Source: Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (Nair, 2022))

On May 1, 2020, the Home Ministry extended lockdown for two weeks starting May 4 with zone-wise restrictions. Also, the districts were categorised into red, orange and green zones on the basis of the number of Covid-19 cases. Shramik Special trains started for stranded migrant workers.

On May 14, 2020 the Finance Minister, Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman announced Tranche 2 of Atmanirbhar package worth Rs 3.10 lakh crore (1.55% of GDP). It included free food grain supply to migrants for 2 months. Also, a special liquidity scheme was announced to provide Rs 10,000 working capital to 50 lakh street vendors at Rs 5,000 crore.

Research Methodology

The study is qualitative in nature. Multiphase sampling was used for the study. 3 leading media units were selected using purposive sampling. The media units were – Dainik Bhaskar, Times of India and NDTV. While the 2 units belonging to print media were the highest circulation units (Home | Audit Bureau of Circulation, n.d.), the news channel selected for the study was awarded as the most trusted broadcaster in 2019 (NDTV News Desk, 2019). The news articles and clippings were selected using purposive sampling with the search query “Migrant Covid-19 Lockdown” and news related to the migrant communities during COVID-19 pandemic, the first lockdown period in India were selected.

The news in Hindi language was translated to English for its usage in NVivo 12 software. This was done using Google translate. Balahur & Turchi (2012) opined that the translated text can obtain comparable performances to the one obtained for English.

Recent and Popular software – Nvivo12 was used for analysing the secondary data. Sentiment analysis, word cloud analysis and word tree analysis was carried on to understand the problems, issues and sentiments of the migrant labour communities in India.

Objectives

- To understand the emotions experienced by the migrant labourers during the first lockdown in India.
- To explore the problems faced by migrant labourers during the first lockdown in India.
- To examine the government initiatives taken by the Government of India for the migrants workers.

Results

Three different analysis were carried on to examine how the media units projected the problems and challenges of the migrant workers in India during the first lockdown as projected in the news channel namely – NDTV India and in the newspapers namely - Dainik Bhaskar and Times of India. News articles from Hindi news were translated and then analysed. From Figure 2 it is clear that out of the total 150 codes generated, 66 were neutral, however, when the positive and the negative sentiments are compared, the negative sentiments (62 codes) are way more than the positive sentiments (9 codes). It depicts that the migrants underwent an emotional turmoil during the lockdown. Though there were equal number of articles depicting a neutral stand, when the positive and negative sentiments are weighed, the negative ones certainly outweigh the positive sentiments when it comes to the migrant workers during the first lockdown. The negative sentiments depicted globally on twitter did not outweigh the positive ones, however, in Madhya Pradesh, this was not the case as reported in the 3 media units. However, overall on a larger magnitude the stand was negative as well as neutral.



Sentiment Analysis

Figure 2. Sentiment Analysis



Codes	Number of coding references
for nvivo	150
for nvivo - Mixed	13
for nvivo - Negative	62
for nvivo - Neutral	66
for nvivo - Positive	9

Word cloud analysis

Figure 3. Word Cloud Analysis



Word clouds are interesting ways to depict word frequencies and associations appearing in particular texts. From Figure 2, it can be said that the articles analysed emphasized primarily on the keywords 2020, migrant, labours, homes. Thus, housing was a primary concern for the migrant labourers during Covid-19 pandemic lockdown. Below (Figure 4) is a representation of the word tree map for the word cloud shown in Figure 3.

To understand these associations better, word tree analysis was performed.

Figure 4. Word Tree Map

2020	used	issues	construct	content	months	move	change	reuse	number			
		also	work	successful	problems	lives	clothes	part	covers	conditions		
	artefacts		practices	figure	people	design	available	https	needs	related	give	
		organizations										
activities	act		bags	get	areas	com	covid	ndtv	www	good	world	
		state			bhaskar	distancin	carry	objects	media	point	cultural	
units	workers		place	communit								
		international			dainik	presente	affected	howeve	action	gatherin	shows	asian
			travel	instrumen								
labours	sustainability				india	old	numerou	pradesh	techno	bhopal	class	collect
		migrant						example				
			make	social	women	informati	accesse		containm	got		original
period	home	provided	study	quality	modified	products	dwellers	systems	family	region	governm	
								others	employem	way		important

Word tree analysis

Culy and Lyding (2010) and Wattenberg and Viégas (2008) believed that the kind of visualization provided in word tree speeds up the analysis and provides an instant impression of the association between words.

The word tree for the query – ‘Labours’ was produced. The tree depicts that many labourers lost lives, met with accidents and severely injured. They were hungry, thirsty, tired and had to even wait in toilets. They underwent illegal movements in tankers and trucks. They also travelled by bicycles. They also participated in stoning and were not provided with spaces, facilities and other provisions by the Government. However, NGOs supported the cause and provided relief measures for the migrant labourers. Further, a word query of ‘Lockdown’ was executed.



Figure 5. Word Tree Analysis for the query 'Labours'

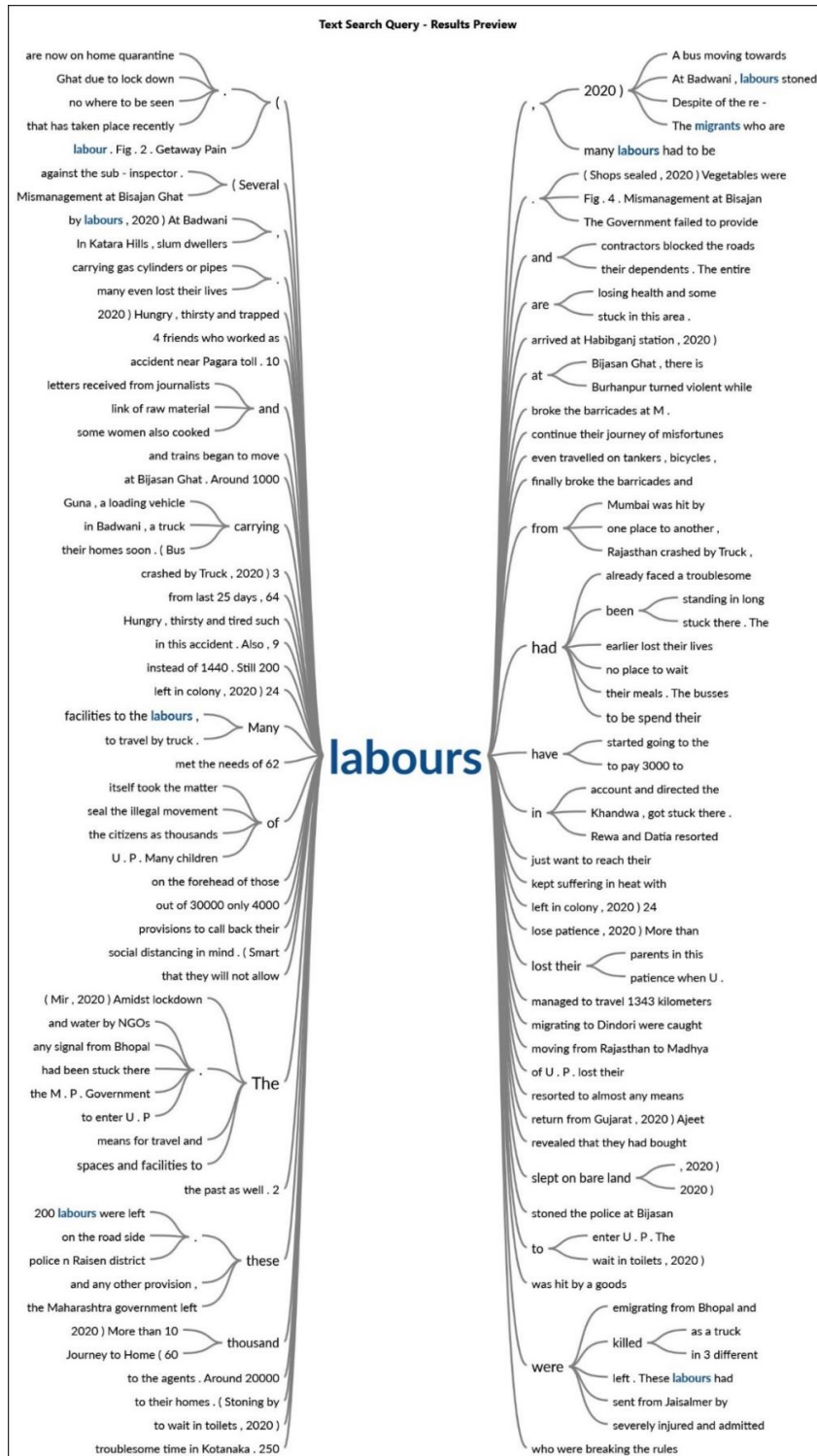
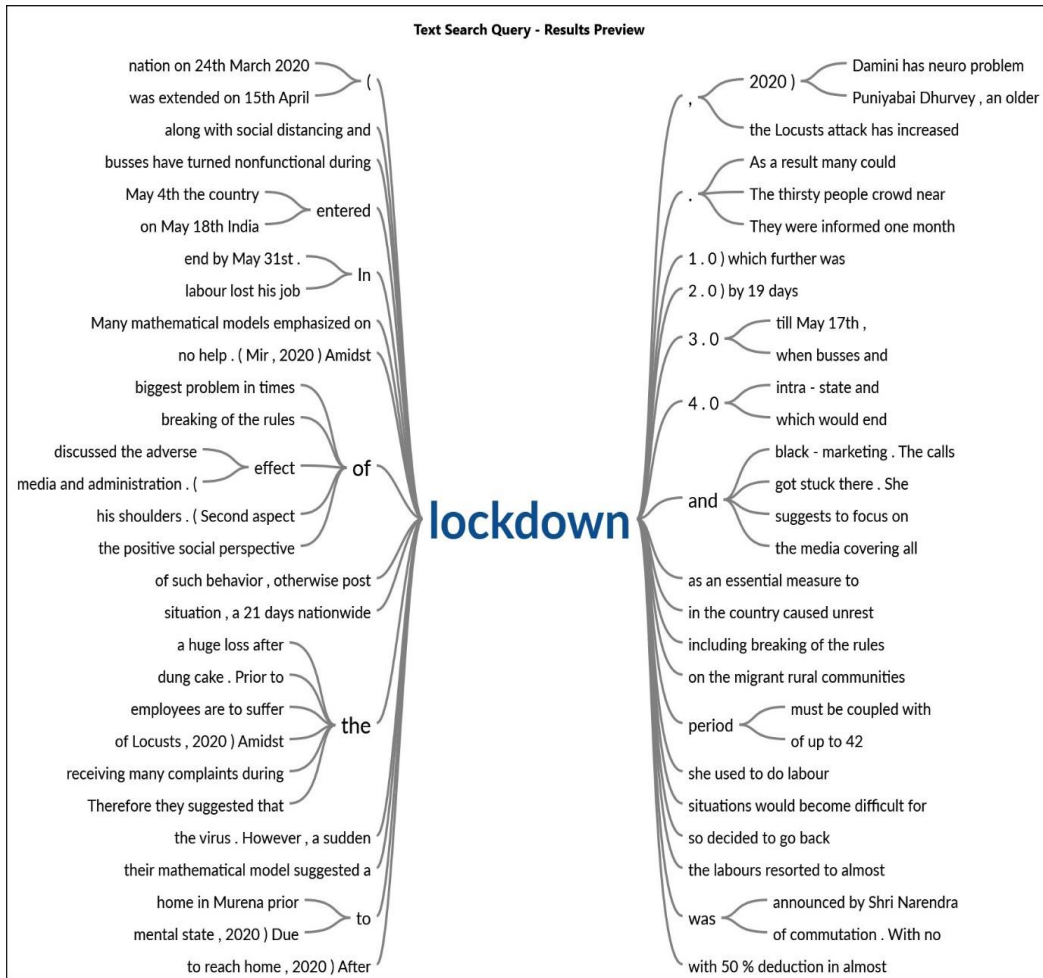


Figure 6. Word Tree Analysis for the query ‘Lockdown’



The word tree depicts that busses were non-functional during the first lockdown period in India. Employees suffered during the lockdown which included migrant workers as well. The locust attack during the lockdown period added to the turmoil of the labourers. The lockdown period also witnessed black marketing practices and resulted in unrest among labourers.

Further for the query – ‘Problems’ the tree obtained majorly focusses on the problems of commutation, survival, resting spaces, health, poor ration and drinking water provisions along with the factors that added on to their existing problems like locusts attack and scorching heat. Also, the negative societal attitude was depicted in the media.

The word tree for the query – ‘Government’ was produced to critically analyse the efforts made by the Government. The tree depicts that Government was trying to stop the illegal movement of people including migrant workers. Special trains were arranged, and claims made to transfer funds in Jan Dhan Yojana accounts. But, the efforts to provide legitimate means and resting spaces were a failure. A lot of promises were made, the reality of which can be best checked with primary data.



Figure 7. Word Tree Analysis for the query ‘Problems’

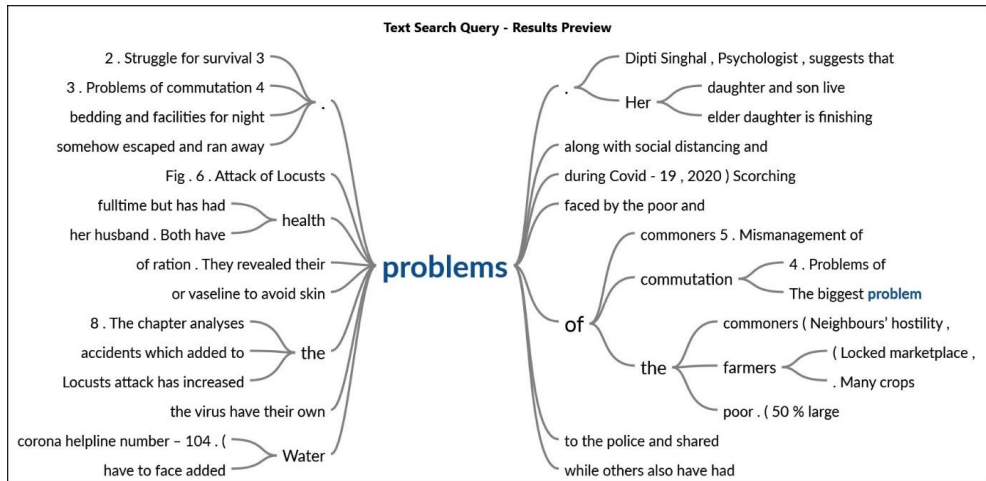
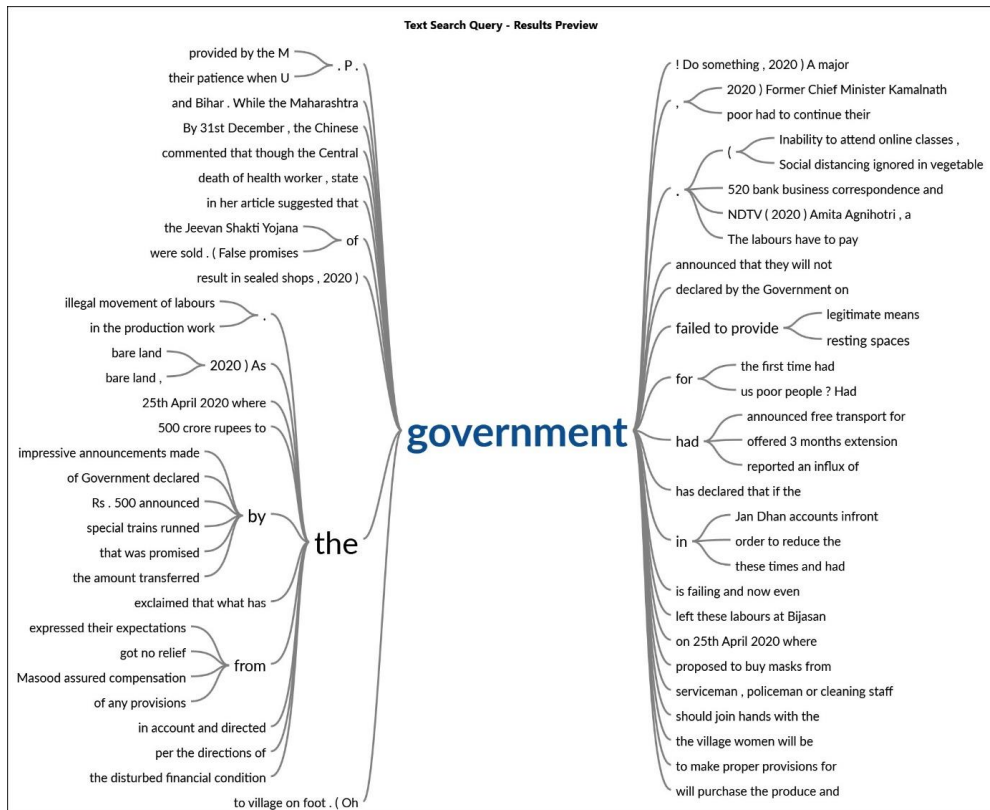


Figure 8. Word Tree Analysis for the query ‘Government’



Discussion

From the findings it can be said that the class struggle theory as proposed by Karl Marx really got materialised and emphasized during the lockdown period. The problems of the migrant

labourers got attention during the Covid-19 period. Though some of these problems are not new to the migrant workers, yet Covid-19 was an eye opener for the general public. The findings are

- To understand the emotions experienced by the migrant labourers during the first lockdown in India.

The migrants experienced negative sentiments during the lockdown period. Though majority of the news articles were neutrally projected, yet upon comparing the negative and positive sentiments, it is evident that the media reported the emotional turmoil of the migrant workers. The overall neutral stand was also reported in the study by Agarwal et al. (2022). This also implies that overall, people across the world had a positive outlook which was also the case with India.

- To explore the problems faced by migrant labourers during the first lockdown in India.

Upon analysis it was found that the media majorly focused on the problems of employment, loss of income, commutation, survival, resting spaces, health, poor ration and drinking water provisions that the migrant workers had to struggle with during the immediate announcement of first lockdown. The results are similar to the studies done by Farooqui and Pandey (2020), Shahare (2020), Pandit (2020) and Rahaman et al. (2021). Along with this the factors that added on to the existing problems of the labourers in Madhya Pradesh were locusts attack, scorching heat and indifferent societal attitude.

- To examine the government initiatives taken by the Government of India for the migrants workers.

The move of the Government to stop illegal movement of the labourers was mostly emphasized by the media, especially during the initial phase of lockdown. The Government had declared provision of free ration, which however did not reach many beneficiaries. Also, the later announcements made by the Government have definitely failed as the media reports similar struggles even in 2021 (Kaushal 2021). Similar results are found in the studies done by Farooqui and Pandey (2020), Pandit (2020) and Rahaman et al. (2021).

Conclusion

It is true that the society is split between the powerful and the powerless. Also, Madhya Pradesh was one of the worst struck state in terms of Covid-19 pandemic (Ghosh et al., 2020). The migrant workers represent the lowest stratum of the society. Lockdown just drew attention to the pitiful living conditions of the migrant labourers. However, leaving everything on the Government has not proved to be a good option, somewhere as the people themselves have less faith on the Government and somewhere because the responsibility of the entire nation cannot rest on few people. However, a claim like “the responsibility of the entire nation cannot rest on few people” is a direct question to the efficiency of the Government itself. The society needs to join hands and work along breaking the limits to one’s own family and relatives and embrace entire human race as one big family. Perhaps, that is when such macro level problems can be tackled.



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