



Research Paper

COVID Impact on Livelihoods of Marginalised Groups: The Case of the MSME Sector

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Abstract

The article's main aim is to make an assessment of Covid-19 and its impact on the MSME sector (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises). As we know MSMEs are the asset of the Indian economy since its commencement in 2006. It has created a space for the marginalised sections in the country's GDP through manufacture, manufacturing, processing, or storage of products and commodities etc. The MSMEs account for nearly 8% of India's GDP, nearly 45% of the total manufacturing output, and around 40% of the country's exports. It has been widely regarded as a source of economic growth and also a pathway of achieving more equitable development. Its developmental activities were suddenly disturbed in 2019 with the unexpected lockdown nationwide by the central Government due to the medical emergency of CORONA Virus which created pandemonium among the people.

Keywords: Covid – 19, Livelihoods, lockdowns, MSME, Marginalised, Poverty, Development, and Manufacturing.

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I. Introduction:

COVID, which has often been proffered as a once-in-a-century crisis has dramatically altered the way we live and work. The normalisation of uncertainty over the past two years promises to alter all aspects of human life - at least for the next few years. A marked feature of the pandemic is that no country is unscathed and the more interlinked the country is to other countries, the more devastating the impact. This paper explores the impact of COVID on the marginalised groups in India. It is imperative to note that the marginalised groups were already under severe economic stress since the implementation of demonetisation and GST which tended to have a far greater adverse impact on the non-formal sectors of the economy. The paper is divided into two parts. The first part offers a broad macro overview of the impact of COVID on the marginalised in the country and the second part, based on random unstructured interviews attempts to understand the impact on particular groups in different parts of the country.

The focus of the paper is to understand the economic impact based on inferences drawn from information and data releases available in the public domain. The term “marginalised groups” is used synonymously to refer to the Dalits, Tribals, women, those with disability and others poor who form part of the bottom quartile of the economic matrix of the country. It is imperative to note that for the purpose of this paper, the definition of micro, small and medium enterprises are stated under Section 7 of the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 as notified and published on 1 July 2020 wherein a “Micro enterprise” is one “where the investment in Plant and Machinery or Equipment does not exceed one crore rupees and turnover does not exceed five crore rupees”, a “Small Enterprise” is one “where the investment in Plant and Machinery or Equipment does not exceed ten crore rupees and turnover does not exceed fifty crore rupees” while a “Medium Enterprise” is one “where the investment in Plant and Machinery or Equipment does not exceed fifty crore rupees and turnover does not exceed two hundred and fifty crore rupees”¹.

¹ https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/MSME_gazette_of_india.pdf (Website last visited 06 November 2021).

The approach of the paper is that encouraging entrepreneurship by marginalised communities has a larger beneficial effect not only for the communities but also for the larger economy. In India the MSME sector provides livelihoods for about 11.09 crore people. It has been pointed out that world over, Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs) play a major role in developing economies. They account for the maximum number of jobs created in the economy worldwide - about 90% of the total businesses that exist employing 50% of workforce. The formal small and medium enterprises globally contributed about 40% of the GDP in the emerging economies while in the developing world 7 out of 10 jobs created are done so by the SMEs². There are no official estimates in India as to the benefits that may accrue to the economy by a larger involvement of the marginalised groups in entrepreneurship. This is in contrast to the an estimated that if the participation of women in economic activity equals male employment then the GDP may increase by 27% in the middle-east and North Africa and 19% in South Asia and add US\$28 trillion to global growth by 2025³.

II. Literature Survey

The focus of the paper is on two important aspects of long-term relevance for India. First, it attempts to understand the impact of COVID on MSMEs and second, it looks at the importance of encouraging marginalised groups to become entrepreneurs so that they economic multiplier effect tend to work on the larger aim of social and economic upliftment of the hitherto marginalised groups in the country. OCED studies have indicated that entrepreneurs who have been disadvantaged for various reasons generally lack access to important resources that may be accessible to others. These include financial, social and human capital resources. Hence, OCED now recommends that networking among disadvantaged entrepreneurs with policy support tends to have a number of beneficial outcomes. But this requires a network development that is more structured and where the outcomes and benefits become clear⁴. Blackburn and Small bone classify the barriers to sustaining self-employment and entrepreneurship among disadvantaged groups into macro and micro factors. Macro factors include broader environmental barriers such as socio- cultural and financial barriers. Micro factors include human and social capital. The latter are more likely to lend themselves to policy interventions whilst the former are wider societal issues and challenges⁵

The sectoral impact of COVID has been highlighted by different micro-studies apart from period reports by organisations like Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE). Udayan Rathore and Shantanu Khanna have highlighted the impact of COVID on the MSMEs through a primary survey. They proffer that the impact has been more severe on the smaller firms⁶. India was not the only country to be affected by the COVID crisis. A World Bank study pointed out that 34% of those surveyed claimed to have stopped work, while another 20% claimed no payments received during the pandemic while 62% reported loss of incomes during the pandemic⁷. Indra Kumar points out that the lockdown resulted in a complete shutting down of more than 60% of the activities of MSMEs⁸. Sahoo opines that the economic impact is substantial and “it would need a humongous effort on the part of the government, industry, civil society and all key stakeholders to ensure that

² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/smefinance> (Website last visited 06 November 2021)

³ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/7/speech-ded-puri-she-era> (Website last visited 06 November 2021).

⁴ Sarah Drakopoulou Dodd and Janroj Keles (2014) “Expanding the networks of disadvantaged entrepreneurs: A background paper”, OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs and Local Development (<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/Expanding%20the%20networks%20of%20disadvantaged%20entrepreneurs.pdf>) Website last visited 06 November 2021)

⁵ Robin Blackburn and David Smallbone (2014), “Sustaining self-employment for disadvantaged entrepreneurs: A Background Paper” OECD Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs and Local Development, OECD. (<https://www.oecd.org/cfe/leed/Background%20paper%20for%20sustainability%20policy%20brief%20rev.pdf>) Website last visited 06 November 2021)

⁶ Udayan Rathore and Shantanu Khanna, “Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs: Evidence from a primary firm survey in India”, Economic and Political Weekly Online edition, Vol 56, Issue 24, 12 June 2021 (<https://www.epw.in/journal/2021/24/insight/impact-covid-19-msmes.html>, Website last visited 27 June 2021).

⁷ Khamis, Melanie; Prinz, Daniel; Newhouse, David; Palacios-Lopez, Amparo; Pape, Utz; Weber, Michael. 2021. The Early Labor Market Impacts of COVID-19 in Developing Countries : Evidence from High-Frequency Phone Surveys. Jobs Working Paper; No. 58. World Bank, Washington, (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/35044> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO. Website last visited 06 November 2021).

⁸ D.Indrakumar (202) “Covid 19 and its impact on Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in India”, *Manpower Journal*, Vol LIV No 3 & 4, July - December 2020. (<http://iamrindia.gov.in/writereaddata/UploadFile/5.pdf> website last visited 06 November 2021)

the Indian economy recovers sufficiently and soon”⁹. Roy, Et Al, point out that the national lockdown led to a deterioration of business prospects of business entrepreneurs of the MSME sector in India with most part of the impact being due to the lack of alternative options for raising financial resources and the workers returning home due to lockdowns; they suggested remedial measures such as cash flow in the form of liquidity injection and tax relief for protecting affected MSME entrepreneurs¹⁰.

Overview of Impact

The nature of the COVID impact differed during the first and second waves of the pandemic. While during the first wave, a national lockdown led to a complete paralysis in the economy, during the second wave this impact was lower since the impact differed across different states. At the outset it is imperative to point out that the impact of COVID has been extremely complex and it will not be possible to talk in terms of generic categories. Further, it is pertinent to note that the losses suffered were not uniform since the beginning of the pandemic. The incomes earned or lost depended on the skill sets and the nature of pre-COVID occupation with those in the semi-skilled and skilled categories’ earnings being affected only for a few months while for those without skills they were affected for a longer period of time. Even among this category those who worked in the healthcare and retail sectors including those who worked in the related ecosystem like those working as nurses, ambulance drivers, mortuary assistants, etc benefitted substantially even as other lost their livelihoods. Among those that were drastically affected were those who were dependent on manufacturing sector and non-healthcare, retail related sectors. Those with a desk job or those in the lower and middle layer of the labour markets were the biggest throughout the pandemic. Agriculture was relatively less affected compared to the other sectors since the second wave intensified after the completion of a large part of the agricultural operations. However, the impact of the second wave on the marginalised communities was drastic since the summer months are historically the time when agricultural employment is minimal and those dependent on it among the agricultural labour, small and marginal farmers tend to migrate to cities to supplement their earnings. However, this was not possible due to the impact of COVID since the urban centres were facing a lockdown at different stages.

COVID has had a devastating impact on the SMEs worldwide. An International Trade Centre survey on COVID-19 impact among businesses in 136 countries has shown that nearly 62% of women-led small businesses have been strongly affected by the crisis, compared to just over half of firms led by men, and women-owned are 27% more likely not to survive the pandemic¹¹. In India, it has been estimated that about 2.5 to 3 crore people employed by the MSME sector lost their livelihoods during the period from April to June 2020 in the first wave¹². ILO points out that the informal sector provides livelihoods to about 40 crore people in India or about 76.2% of the total workforce). This is important since there are 633.88 lakh MSMEs out of which 630.52 lakh are micro-enterprises which mostly depend on family labour¹³ while 3.31 lakh are categorised as small and only 0.05 lakh are medium scale units. They contribute about 33.50% of the GVA of the Indian Economy¹⁴ (p.22). About 51% of these are in rural areas while remaining is in urban areas. Among these as on 31.12.2020 a total number of 5,37,677 enterprises have registered under Manufacturing category of Udayan Scheme of the Government of India whereas 8,65,058 enterprises registered under Service sector¹⁵. Employment generation has not recovered to pre-covid levels. It has been pointed out that even as late as June 2021 the labour participation rate remains 2.7% below pre-COVID level while employment rate continues to remain 3.3% lower than COVID levels¹⁶. It

⁹ Ashwani Parvakar Shao (2020), “COVID 19 and Indian Economy: impact on Growth, Manufacturing, Trade and MSME Sector”, *Global Business Review*, September 2020, New Delhi (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0972150920945687> Website last visited 06 November 2021)

¹⁰ Arundhati Roy, BCM Patnaik, Ipseeta Satpathy (2020), “Impact of COVID-19 crisis on Indian MSME sector: a study of Remedial Measures”, *Eurasian Chemical Communications*, September 2020 (http://www.echemcom.com/article_114672_30a8869837121fb49cbc07f661224202.pdf Website last visited 06 November 2021).

¹¹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances/micro-small-medium-businesses-day> (Website last visited 06 November 2021)

¹² https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/25-30-million-lost-jobs-in-msmes-during-march-june-says-survey-120072800068_1.html (Website last visited 27 July 2021)

¹³ Annual Report, MSME Ministry 2020-21, p.23 (<https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/MSME-ANNUAL-REPORT-ENGLISH%202020-21.pdf>; Website visited 27 July 2021)

¹⁴ Annual report, MSME Ministry 2020-21, p.22 (<https://msme.gov.in/sites/default/files/MSME-ANNUAL-REPORT-ENGLISH%202020-21.pdf>; Website visited 27 July 2021)

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.6

¹⁶ “Employment recovery expected in July”, *Business Standard*, 26 July 2021, (https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/employment-recovery-expected-in-july-121072601447_1.html; website last visited 27 July 2021)

has been pointed out that over 97% of the MSMEs are actually micro firms which have an investment in plant and machinery of less than Rs.25 lakhs with 94% of them not registered with the government¹⁷.

It is imperative to note that the MSME sector has been a focus of policy makers and bankers for a few decades even before COVID. This is because of the nature of Indian economy. As in the case of other developing countries, there is a large unmet demand for various forms of financing by small and medium enterprises. It is well acknowledged that MSMEs are constrained by funds from the formal sector and are forced to depend on the informal channels or for funds from the internal networks of promoters for their financing needs. The International Finance Corporation (IFC) observes that in the developing countries the annual demand for funds by SMEs is US\$5.2 trillion dollars¹⁸ and increases when informal and micro units are also considered. India has realised that the MSMEs deserve support long before the impact of COVID. The Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 or Act 27 of 2006 was passed “to provide for facilitating the promotion and development and enhancing the competitiveness of micro, small and medium enterprises and for matters connected therewith or incidental thereto”¹⁹. The act has a number of provisions for the promotion, growth, development and measures to increase the competitiveness of MSMEs. These include by way of development of skills in employees, management and entrepreneurs including their technological upgradation, assisting the marketing of their products, creating the necessary infrastructure and facilitating backward and forward integration with other larger enterprises. An important aspect of the act is that the Act empowers the government to issue guidelines and/or instructions to the Reserve Bank of India (RBI) to facilitate credit flow to the MSME sector (Section 10 of the Act) and providing for procurement preference for MSMEs in Central and State Government ministries, departments, public sector enterprises, etc. (Section 11 of the Act). Importantly, it provides for provisions wherein a buyer has to settle their dues to MSMEs within a period not exceeding 45 days (Section 15).

The social aspects of the crisis may be gleaned from the nature of ownership of the MSMEs. As per government statistics, socially backward groups owned almost 66.27% of MSMEs. Bulk of that was owned by OBCs (49.72%). The representation of SC and ST owners in MSME sector was low at 12.45% and 4.10% respectively. In rural areas, almost 73.67% of MSMEs were owned by socially backward groups, of which 51.59% belonged to the OBCs. In urban areas, almost 58.68% belonged to the socially backward groups, of which 47.80% belonged to the OBCs²⁰. The following table provided by official data indicates the larger social composition in terms of SC, ST, OBC and others.

Social Distribution of MSMEs

Sector	SC	ST	OBC	Others
Micro	12.48	4.11	49.83	32.79
Small	5.50	1.65	29.64	62.82
Medium	0	1.09	23.85	70.80
All	12.45	4.10	49.72	32.95

Source: Annual Report, 2020-21, Ministry of MSME, Government of India

It is imperative to note that in a survey by Dun and Bradstreet over 82 per cent of more than 250 respondent SMEs in the country reported negative impact of the pandemic while nearly 70% opined that their businesses may take more than an year. Moreover, around 60 per cent survey respondents expected more measures and support from the government even as lack of market access (42 per cent), overall productivity improvement (37 per cent), and access to more finance (37 per cent) were the top three challenges cited by MSMEs in the survey titled Impact of COVID-19 on Small Businesses in India and the Way Ahead. The surveyed businesses in seven major cities belonged to the manufacturing and services sectors with annual revenue between Rs 100 crore and Rs 300 crores²¹

Loss of Livelihoods

Hence, there is a need to take a sector specific approach while discussing loss of livelihoods. The impact of COVID has been disastrous on almost all sections, though the intensity of the impact varies and is directly correlated to the economic status and the linkages with the formal economy. The impact has been disproportionately high on the middle classes and the poor while those classes that derive their incomes and

¹⁷ https://www.iimb.ac.in/sites/default/files/2020-05/MSME_sector_critical_times_Covid-19.pdf (Website last visited) 06 November 2021)

¹⁸ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/sme/finance> (Website last visited 06 November 2021)

¹⁹ <https://legislative.gov.in/sites/default/files/A2006-27.pdf>

²⁰ Ibid, p.25

²¹ <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/sme/msme-eodb-over-82-small-businesses-had-negative-covid-impact-lack-of-market-access-top-challenge-survey/2238325/> (website last visited 06 November 2021)

ownership stakes in the larger companies or with investments in the financial markets have benefitted. The most important sources of suffering were two pronged: the loss of employment and incomes due to pandemic induced shut downs and the health related suffering and expenses for those who were infected by the virus.

The Pandemic induced lockdown led to loss of livelihoods by way of closure of businesses. While there was total lockdown in the first wave, in the course of the second wave it was more regionalised. However, closure led to a disproportionate impact on the smaller units. Udayan Rathore and Shantanu Khanna in their study found that on an average production declined drastically with capacity utilisation declining from an average of 75% to 13% while only 44% of the firms continued to retain the services of their workers. A worryingly large number of firms or about 69% in their survey expressed the view that they will not be able to survive for more than three months²². A year later, other reports pointed out that about 59% of the start-ups and MSMEs were expected to scale down, shut down or sell themselves due to the impact of COVID with about 41% of the MSMEs possessing less than a month of funds available with them²³.

Our analysis based on extrapolation of government data on MSMEs and the impact of COVID indicates that the states that were drastically affected by the second wave were also those with high levels of employment provided by MSMEs. The states where MSMEs employment is distributed include UP (165.26 lakhs), West Bengal (135.52 lakhs), Maharashtra (90.77 lakhs), Tamil Nadu (96.73 lakhs), Karnataka (70.84 lakhs), Gujarat (61.16 lakhs), Andhra Pradesh (55.99 lakhs), Madhya Pradesh (48.80 lakhs), Rajasthan (46.33 lakhs), Kerala (44.64 lakhs) and Telengana (40.16 lakhs). Interestingly, among these states, UP, West Bengal, AP, MP and Rajasthan are predominantly agrarian based. Thus, the consequences of these are that the impact of second wave tended to be worse in rural areas and hence the impact on most of the MSMEs was devastating. The Urban MSMEs are predominantly located in Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Gujarat - all the states that were severely affected by the Second Wave.

Credit issues and Livelihood impact

A major problem during the pandemic was that MSMEs in general and the marginalised in particular suffered a double whammy as the loss of employment was also followed up by a complete halt in various formal banking services. This in turn led to the starving up of credit to these groups. The loss of the little formal credit channel forced most of the MSMEs and their promoters to turn to the more expensive informal credit using the little collateral or social capital that they were still able to mobilise. The sharp decline in credit through the formal channels was aggravated by the moratorium on repayments issued by the Reserve Bank of India. The moratorium tended to benefit the existing borrowers and led to the postponement of loan disbursements for those who needed additional credit or were applying afresh for credit. The problem with the pandemic induced lock down was that it started in March, which is usually the end of the financial year. The result was that in March 2020 the banks had mostly postponed credit disbursement decisions to the next financial year that was due to start in April 2020. However, the lockdown meant that credit disbursement did not happen till about August-September 2020 thereby forcing many MSMEs into insolvency at its worst or deeper into debt since the promoters had to borrow from the informal market.

Apart from the fact that there are problems of credit supply to the MSMEs a major challenge for the MSMEs during the pandemic was that most of them are dependent on the cash economy with little connections to the formal banking sector. The shutdown of the economy and difficulty in accessing cash due to fears of the spread of COVID with contact with currency notes and the general lack of economic activity affected MSMEs and their solvency.

Declining sales margins

An unintended and unimaginable consequence of the COVID induced disruption is the extreme disruption in the global supply chain. There is, literally, no country or geography of the world that is untouched. Even the most powerful economies are shuddering at the thought of disruptions that they are likely to face in the next three to six months. In many of the western countries which import most of their goods, shopping shelves are empty or prices have shot up. The supply chain disruption started with an explosion in container shipping prices, which have reached hitherto unforeseen levels and are now affecting all parts of the economic value chain. Freight costs - air, sea, road and rail - have increased sharply: such is the stress in some parts of the supply chain that the cost of transporting a 20 foot container has increased from US\$1200 in October 2019 to

²² Udayan Rathore and Shantanu Khanna, "Impact of COVID-19 on MSMEs: Evidence from a primary firm survey in India", Economic and Political Weekly Online edition, Vol 56, Issue 24, 12 June 2021 (<https://www.epw.in/journal/2021/24/insight/impact-covid-19-msmes.html>, Website last visited 27 June 2021).

²³ "Covid-19 impact: Many startups, MSMEs stare at closure, says survey". Business Standard, 26 May 2021, (https://www.business-standard.com/article/companies/covid-19-impact-many-startups-msmes-stare-at-closure-says-survey-121052601337_1.html, Website last visited 27 July 2021).

about US\$10,000 in September 2021. A hitherto never seen back log to unload Container ships even among the most efficient ports is leading to a sharp increase in cost of production which will invariably feed into increased prices for consumer. Even among the most efficient ports of the world, the average waiting time to unload cargo has increased by about 30%. This is important because any consumption by the MSMEs as intermediate goods in their production or business process, if imported is through shipping channels. Hence, the immediate consequence of this supply chain disruption is that it has led to an increase costs and volatility in the price of inputs.

Thus, a consequence of supply chain disruption is that it has sharply eroded the margins of most businesses. Unlike the larger companies, MSMEs do not have the pricing power and often are dependent on working on different forms of arbitrage for their survival. The disruption in the supply chain in the aftermath of COVID has led to most MSMEs finding their traditional networks and channels being cut off or severely disrupted. The lucky few that have survived have had to rework their supply chain and this means forcing them into new business relationships that were needed to replace the disrupted relationships. The important aspect of this new relationship is that these new networks require trust which takes time to form and till the formation of trust the cost of transaction remains high. Invariably, the worst hit are the businesses run by the marginalised groups since their social networking and social capital are not as well established as the other communities.

In the case of MSMEs located in rural areas, COVID has led to multiple negative impacts. First while the supply chain was disrupted, the cost of health care expenses led to additional burden since most of the MSMEs run on family labour. This leads to magnified impact of infections by the virus. Second, the disruption led to the cut off of market access for the MSMEs. Unlike the large companies, MSMEs do not have the financial or other resources to carry large inventories or to withstand delays in payments by buyers. Their working capital limits are few and any disruption is disastrous for their survival. The cutting off the link between urban and rural areas only aggravated their problems.

Suggestions

Based on our field interactions with entrepreneurs from marginalised groups we opine that apart from the efforts to increase credit supply and other forms of support provided for in the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises Development Act, 2006 there is a need to increase cooperation and collaboration among different MSMEs by creating a large internal network that works under the auspices of the government so that they can access resources that are available within the MSME sector rather than depend on external players for their survival. This creation of a large market place will not only enable them to sell their produce but also source the materials they require from amongst themselves. This sort of a network will enable the entrepreneurs, especially from the hitherto marginalised communities to withstand external shocks in future.

III. Conclusion

The foregoing analysis clearly indicates that the MSME sector was devastated by the pandemic. The impact was aggravated due to its structure and the fact that it is largely dependent on a cash economy and access to informal financial channels apart from the fact that they work on low margins and the use of forms of arbitrage. The pandemic disrupted not only the supply chain but also the very basis on which the MSMEs work while cutting off their ability to access markets for their supplies and to sell their goods and services. In the context of the impact of the pandemic, there is a need for support to MSMEs on a mission mode with greater linkages to the formal banking channels with the support including credit guarantees by the Central Government.

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