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Travel restrictions and mobility amidst COVID curfew in India

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Abstract

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in India, the states were forced to tighten their borders. Closure of land borders within India became an increasing concern and witnessed unprecedented levels of mobility restrictions for the migrants.

Keywords

Border, India, mobility restrictions, migrants

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State borders, which were easier to cross earlier in India, have required a state modulated ‘e-pass’ since April 2020, in the early stages of the global COVID-19 pandemic. These passes were equated to ‘e-visas’ for movement between states within the country, owing to the increasing incidences of cross-state infections³. This national policy was a concerted effort of both central and state governments to help regulate and track the movement of citizens, thereby administering and controlling the deadly virus in the third phase of lockdown⁴. This was an unprecedented closing of inter-state borders in India’s history.

During the initial phases of the lockdown, states had made it a requisite to carry e-passes, without which passengers could not enter and transit through any state. Along with e-passes, the passengers were also required to register on state government websites. States, like Delhi and Maharashtra, had an additional requisite of downloading the Arogya Setu app. The administration of containing COVID-19 spread in India was mostly done through this mHealth application. Developed by the National Informatics Centre under the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology (MeitY), the user interface and experience of the app helped in syndromic mapping, contact tracing as well as generating e-passes based on self-declarations. It also had features of self-assessment and zonal-spread mapping, enabling the citizens to be well-informed about the contagion of COVID-19⁵.

For Karnataka, registration on Seva Sindhu portal was necessary for entering or transiting through the state. For Kerala, road and train travel required mandatory registration in the COVID-19 Jagratha portal. After having submitted the required information, the details were verified, after which an e-pass is issued along with a QR code to the registered mobile number and email. It was advised that the journey is started only after receiving the e-pass from the concerned governments. At every checkpost, e-passes would be checked and verified, without which entry was detained. Symptoms for COVID-19 among passengers were not checked at that point; however, later, some state governments allowed entry into their states with a negative COVID-19 test result. E-passes were only being issued for emergency cases/situations.

³ Shukla, Ajay Kumar. 2020. 14 states bank on NIC framework to issue movement e-pass services during Covid-19 lockdown. *ET Government*. 14 May 2020. Available online at: <https://government.economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/digital-india/over-14-states-opt-for-nic-framework-to-provide-movement-e-pass-services-during-covid-19-pandemic/75696558>. Last accessed 1 May 2021.

⁴ Times of India. 2020. *State-wise links to avail E-pass for emergency movement during lockdown*. 11 May 2020. Available online at: http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/articleshow/75670141.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst. Last accessed 1 May 2021.

⁵ Kodali PB, Hense S, Kopparty S, Kalapala GR, Haloi B. 2020. How Indians responded to the Arogya Setuapp?. *Indian J Public Health* [serial online]. Available online at: <https://www.ijph.in/text.asp?2020/64/6/228/285617>. Last accessed 1 May 2021.

Table 1: Examples of e-pass entry policies by Indian state, 2020

State	Passenger obligation to obtain e-pass.
Tamil Nadu	All passengers travelling to and within Tamil Nadu need to register on state website and apply for TN e-pass.
Kerala	All passengers travelling to Kerala need to register on state website and apply for e-pass; passengers visiting Kerala for short duration (≤ 7 days) need to report the details of onward journey.
Karnataka	Passenger cannot travel without the e-pass.
Andhra Pradesh	Register with Spandana website and get an e-pass.
Delhi	All passengers to download AarogyaSetu app.
Maharashtra (Mumbai)	All passengers to download AarogyaSetu app and furnish self-declaration on arrival; passengers visiting the state for short duration (≤ 7 days) need to share the details of onward journey.

Source: Compiled by authors, 2020

Subsequently, reports highlighted the difficulty in obtaining e-passes as the numbers of requests increased rapidly in the months during the initial lockdowns. The Tamil Nadu Government for instance had received 25.6 lakh applications in the individual category, out of which over 10 lakh passes have been provided⁶. Evidently, the rejection rate of e-pass was higher than the acceptance rate, so people were forced to take alternate routes to obtain E-pass to cross state border. Similarly, in the case of intrastate mobility, from Chennai to other districts, e-passes were to be applied online only in cases of medical emergencies, marriages, and death of family members. Also, taking the case of migrant labourers, they were not educated enough to use any mHealth application or register in portals.

As per media reports, such restrictions for obtaining the e-passes have given way to scams such as using the influence of politicians, and bureaucrats to obtain the e-passes. Additionally, many brokers have emerged to facilitate easy acquiring of passes. They even took to social media to advertise their services. Brokers obtain passes by preparing fake documents for marriages, medical emergencies, and deaths. Hence, to overcome the mobility barriers, illegal ways are being used to obtain the e-passes, which emerged as a new problem. To highlight the barriers to obtaining e-passes during the lockdown period, Box 1 explains the requirements to obtain an e-pass in the state of Tamil Nadu.

On July 1 2020, as the country entered into Unlock 2.0, Ministry of Home Affairs in the guidelines mentioned that state should discard the e-pass system for both intra and interstate movement of persons. The need for e-passes as a necessity for travel has been scrapped since then⁷. As of October 29, Tamil Nadu was the only state that required the need of an e-registration, not a pass, with the

⁶ The Hindu. 2020. *As applications are rejected, touts flood social media claiming to obtain e-passes for travel*. 17 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/as-applications-are-rejected-touts-flood-social-media-claiming-to-obtain-e-passes-for-travel/article31849775.ece>. . Last accessed 4 December 2020.

⁷ Ministry of Home Affairs. 2020. *Guidelines for Phased Re-opening (Unlock 2)*. 29 June 2020. Available online at https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/MHAOrder_29062020.pdf. Last accessed 30 November 2020.

government for travel to tourist hotspots, such as hill station retreats and, also, for people coming into the state from outside⁸.

Box 1: The process to procure an E-pass in Tamil Nadu

1. The website enables individuals and organisations to apply for e-passes for movement of people or employees. It issues six types of e-passes: 1) individual/group travel by road (bike, bus, car, van); 2) individual/group coming inside Tamil Nadu via train/flight; 3) individual/group travel within Tamil Nadu via train/flight; 4) commercial establishments / organization / industries / businesses / traders / financial companies; 5) business round trip; and 6) bring guest workers (migrants) inside Tamil Nadu from other states.
2. For workforce, mainly working in unorganised and informal sector workers moving inter-district (outside a district) and inter-state (outside Tamil Nadu) also need to apply for an e-pass. As they move according to the availability of work, they cannot produce organisation name each and every time.
3. Inter-district: Organisations will have to upload their Good and Service Tax (GST) registration certificate/Registrar of Companies (RoC) registration certificate/Udyog Aadhaar as proof and must follow the standard operating procedure as detailed along with any other orders issued by the government, and details of vehicles permitted for transporting employees.
4. Inter-state: Bring guest workers inside Tamil Nadu from other states. Organisations will have to upload their GST registration certificate/RoC registration certificate/Udyog Aadhaar as proof and must follow the standard operating procedure as detailed along with any other orders issued by the government, and details of vehicles permitted for transporting employees.

Source: Compiled by the authors from official orders of Government of Tamil Nadu, 2020

In addition to an e-pass, states also required everyone, including migrants, to go through quarantines. The rule and arrangement vary from state to state. For instance, Tamil Nadu initially required all migrants from other states who arrived after April 10, 2020 to go through 14-day home quarantine. In cases where home quarantine facility was not available, then they must undertake 14 days of institutional quarantine. These institutional quarantine centres were state-sponsored hostels that were compulsory, and situated in every check post in all border districts, which further facilitated initial screening⁹.

In Kerala, a home quarantine period of 14 days is mandatory for migrants entering from other states and who plan to stay for more than seven days. Karnataka was one state that followed distinct

⁸ The Hindu. 2020. *As applications are rejected, touts flood social media claiming to obtain e-passes for travel*. 17 June 2020. Available online at: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/chennai/as-applications-are-rejected-touts-flood-social-media-claiming-to-obtain-e-passes-for-travel/article31849775.ece>. Last accessed 4 December 2020.

⁹ ETB Sivapriyan. 2020. *TN sets up quarantine centres for those returning from other states*. *Deccan Herald*. 6 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/south/tn-sets-up-quarantine-centres-for-those-returning-from-other-states-834217.html>. Last accessed 1 May 2021.

policies for passengers coming from different states. For passengers from Maharashtra, for instance, seven days of institutional quarantine were required, after which 14 days of home quarantine is required. Maharashtra made it compulsory for international passengers to do seven days of institutional quarantine, followed by seven days of home quarantine. In cases of domestic passengers, all persons shall mandatorily be checked and only asymptomatic passengers will be allowed to board the train. Delhi segregated persons on the basis of symptomatic and asymptomatic. Asymptomatic patients could go to home quarantine directly, whereas symptomatic migrants were to be isolated and taken to the nearest facility for institutionalized quarantine. Bihar, which witnessed a huge influx of reverse migration, ironically did not stress an institutionalized or home quarantine. In addition, for short-visit business travel, quarantine was exempted in states like Kerala and Maharashtra. But mobility for long-term employment, especially for interstate migrant workers in informal/unorganised sectors, went unaddressed. This trend indicates discriminatory treatment between business-class and working-class laborers, while crossing state borders. However, at the time of writing this report, these restrictions had been lifted in almost all states. As the devastating second wave of COVID-19 hits its peak in India, the e-pass is back once again.

Considering the population dynamics and class divide that persists in India, the interventions failed to emerge as an intuitive response to this global concern. The central and state governments failed to take into account their obligation to provide equal and unbiased access to borders to migrant workers who need protection at the time of a global pandemic. Bogdan, Benton and Fratzke, in their assertion, had aptly cited the major error in the government's intervention. Substituting the need of testing, tracking and mitigating exposure to mere imposition of travel restriction cannot be affirmed as the solution for handling the issues at hand¹⁰. This not only disrupted the livelihood of the poorer section of the society, but also, resulted into national havoc.

As the pandemic enters a new deadly phase, the interventions for a country like India need to be more inclusive and aware of existing dynamics in order to succeed, and save lives.

¹⁰ Banulescu-Bogdan, Natalia, Meghan Benton and Susan Fratzke. 2020. Coronavirus Is Spreading across Borders, But It Is Not a Migration Problem. *Migration Policy Institute*. 4 March 2020. Available online at <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/coronavirus-not-a-migration-problem>. Last accessed 12 December 2020.