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Is the realty sector equipped enough to handle the situation this time?

Amid resurgence of Covid second wave, reverse migration is being witnessed across the real estate sector. Let's see how well are realtors prepared to tackle the situation of looking after their in situ labourers.

By Kausar Firdausi



The exponential second surge in covid cases across India has certainly brought the worry and apprehension amongst people especially in the marginalised groups who depend on daily wages for livelihood. Therefore, reverse migration of the labour force is once again looming across various sectors. However, the real estate sector is today far better prepared than they were a year ago. The pandemic-infused stringent lockdown last year, which brought construction activity to a complete halt across the country because of which the realty sector had to suffer significantly. Moreover, the mass exodus of the labourers became a major issue thereafter.

Industry experts believe that this period was an eye-opener for many developers who then realised the significance of human capital to their business. "Many developers re-strategised their business policies and unleashed various measures over the year

which provided for basic necessities such as food and shelter for labourers, sanitation facilities at sites for safety and hygiene of their workers. Regular testing of site workers is being conducted to mitigate risks. Above all, many are also giving wages to their workers despite temporary lockdowns which inevitably will prevent workers from going back."

Also Anshuman Magazine, chairman & CEO, India, South-East Asia, Middle East & Africa, CBRE is of the view that the trend of reverse migration witnessed last year may not be the same, as large and medium-sized developers have already started taking necessary precautions to enable the well-being of the workers by facilitating food, shelter, and healthcare gears at the construction sites. "With the most recent announcement of vaccination for all citizens over 18 years of age, we are optimistic that the situation across the country will ease out for industries across

sectors," says Magazine.

Although there is no announcement of a complete lockdown yet and if a lockdown-like situation arises, the real estate sector already has tried and tested methods to tackle the situation. "We hope that this year the situation will not be as grim as it was last year. Large scale inoculation drives are also strengthening the confidence," says Shashank Vashishtha, executive director, eXp India, a cloud-based realty brokerage major.

However, there is not likely to be another lockdown, as the government has made it clear that the focus is now on 'test-track-treat' protocol, and not shutting down establishments. "I believe industry leaders will have to step in and take initiatives in terms of acting as a bridge between the government and workers in order to implement certain timely actions which can provide solutions to such challenges. One such step could be

to inform these labourers/workers how their health and well-being are ensured through systematic efforts," puts in Vinit Dugarwal, director, AMs Project Consultants.

Developers across the country have been taking steps to keep migrant workers safe by regularly testing and isolating them at sites if required. We are taking steps to accelerate vaccination drives for construction workers. These measures will act as a safety net to keep reverse migration challenges at bay and will keep sales momentum unhampered," affirms Deepak Goradia, vice chairman & MD, Dosti Realty.

Aman Trehan, executive director, Trehan Iris too asserts that they have always maintained labour camps at site even during the last lockdown. "We ensured that our labour at site is well taken care of and don't have to leave the site even though there is no work. We supplied them with their monthly ration and essentials and took care of their medical needs," says Trehan.

Through its programme iMpower, implemented by M3M India's NGO partner Aide et Action, M3M Foundation is working with health department through primary health centres and the support of ANM and Asha workers along with the project team for the behavioural change of the communities, linkages with healthcare services, testing and vaccination for covid as per the government guidelines. The support to pregnant mothers in labour camps, support in institutional delivery and also linkages with other government schemes are some of other efforts which are giving confidence to the workers working with M3M," divulges Dr Payal Kanodia, trustee, M3M Foundation.

There cannot be going back on providing them the food and shelter, as Wave Infratech did last year or going a level up by ensuring proper healthcare facilities and including them

in the vaccination drive. "This is the time we need to come forward and take care of our assets, or migrant labourers," encourages Rajiv Gupta, managing director, Wave Infratech.

Also avers Pradeep Aggarwal, founder & chairman, Signature Global Group, chairman, ASSOCHAM, national council on real estate, housing and urban development, "If any critical situation occurs, we will abide by the government's guidelines and retain the labour as much as possible. The safety and security of everyone involved will be our priority, as it has been for years."

Ozone Group too lays emphasis on the safety and well-being of their labour force at all their projects. "We are working closely with our contractors to ensure that there is adequate sanitisation at the projects several times a day, apart from educating and encouraging our labour force to constantly sanitise and maintain high levels of hygiene," states Dr. S Vasudevan, CMD, Ozone Group.

States like Maharashtra, Delhi, UP and Karnataka are imposing mini lockdown and night & weekend curfews. If Abhishek Kumar, co-founder, Covie is to be believed, the reverse migration is not happening only due to second wave as during this time of the year normally the migrant labour goes back to their states for harvest season and new year. This year it's clubbed with elections in some of the major states like WB, TN, Kerala, by-election in Karnataka and Panchayat elections in UP that lots of people are going back to their homes.

However, the situation is still evolving and changing by the day. "Though we are confident that many of the steps taken by us will be sufficient to tackle the situation, there is no way of knowing for sure. Only time will tell," sums up Sandeep Katiyar, CEO, IOAK.