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VOLUME 01 - POST 01

## **THE PANDEMIC AND THE LABOUR PANDEMONIUM**

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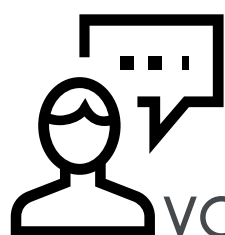
Agnelo Menezes

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## THE PANDEMIC AND THE LABOUR PANDEMONIUM



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# THE PANDEMIC AND THE LABOUR PANDEMONIUM

Agnelo Menezes<sup>1</sup> and Ambrose Machado<sup>2</sup>

## Abstract

This paper deals with the impact of the pandemic-induced lockdowns on India's poorest workers, who had earlier relocated themselves from rural to urban areas. After discussing the derogative nature of the term 'migrants', this paper reviews the travails that these poor workers had to endure while attempting to go home or while staying back in the host urban space. The paper scrutinizes the labour laws reforms introduced by some State Governments. The critical concerns that these reforms have overlooked are deliberated upon. Finally, frameworks based on policy formulation and execution; employment and income issues and effective reinforcement of social security nets are suggested by this paper.

Key words: Pandemic, Lockdown, Migrants, Relocation, Reforms, Ordinance, Informal Sector, Investments, Employment.

## INTRODUCTION

In India, during the pandemic-induced lockdowns two related clashes transpired – with labour being the common factor in both:

In this first, a metaphorical 'David-Goliath' clash literally took place. The lockdowns commanded people to 'stay at home' (thesis). In response, a group of citizens screamed 'we want to go home' (antithesis). What ultimately emerged is the 'long march' towards home (synthesis). 'David' is the poor relocated workers from the urban informal sector, who wants to go home and 'Goliath' is the entire government machinery that wants its citizens to stay at home.

The second was an allegorical 'clash of civilizations', leading to the literal 'remaking of the world order'. While labour was shut indoors, frantically trying to survive, labour reforms were stealthily announced by some State Governments. These labour reforms have remade the world of work, by diluting some of the fundamental labour related securities that are guaranteed by the Indian Constitution.

Understanding and analyzing these two labour related clashes is the mission of this paper. To do so, the writers have drawn upon evidence from current history. Due to the lockdowns and the

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recentness of the events, adequate quantitative data was hard to come by. Hence, this paper has used appropriate narratives and anecdotal information from sources like: government and institutional agencies, journalistic reportage from both traditional newspapers as well as online news platforms and the thoughts of social scientists and political commentators as recounted in TV and social media channels.

The paper initially reflects on the term ‘migrant workers’. After engaging with these labourers’ plight during the lockdowns and their home-returning woes, the paper then probes for connections between the labour reforms introduced during the lockdowns and the future of these poor labourers. The paper winds up by positing a labour related policy framework.

### **THE LOCKDOWNS-RELATED LABOUR DISTRESS:**

During the lockdowns, two sets of individuals craved to return home: the privileged ones from outside the country and the underprivileged workers from within the country. However, of these two returnees, the term ‘migrants’ is ascribed only to the poor workers. President Trump sneeringly uses this term to describe individuals as being parasites who are ‘essentially homeless and therefore entirely reliant on the host state for residence’<sup>3</sup>. So, by calling these poor returning workers ‘migrants’, we demean them, we disregard their Indian citizenship and like ‘Nero’s Guests’<sup>4</sup> we feel no qualms on seeing them going back from where they have come. Furthermore, these ‘wretched of the earth’ have only just entered our consciousness, via the TV and social media pictures and clips. This paper, willfully refrains from labelling these poor workers as ‘migrants’. Instead, it recognizes them as ‘poor informal sector workers’, who due to their lockdown-induced hardships, wish to return to their rural abodes.

### **The Origin of Rural Workers’ Relocation**

Much before to this pandemic, these workers out-migrated from their native lands which offered them no jobs or jobs that paid them a pittance. The rural works revolve around collecting forest produce, cultivating some food grains or other crops on small plots of land, working as agricultural labourers or at sites under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). Census 2011 shows that between 2001 and 2011, India saw its highest rural-urban migration<sup>5</sup>. Since 1991, neoliberal policies have been exacerbating both the rural outflow as well as the urban inflow of labour. These policies have wantonly disrupted agriculture and other

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<sup>3</sup> Shanghvi, 12/05/2020

<sup>4</sup> Sainath, 2011

<sup>5</sup> Sainath, 14/05/2020

primary sector activities along with furthering deforestation, confiscation of tribal lands and displacement of thousands of rural peoples. The loss of *jal, jungle, jameen* has led to the jobs of ‘boatmen, fishermen, toddy tappers, toy makers, weavers, dyers [...] being snatched away. In post-1991 India, the ‘urbanization of capital’<sup>6</sup> has drained investment from rural areas and has been inundating urban spaces with financial and other commercial investments. Thus, these rural workers had to relocate due to both the push and pull factors associated with rural-urban migration. In the urban areas, these workers find jobs in the informal sector either as specific workers (maids, drivers, newspaper or grocery delivery persons, building sweepers, security workers, canteen servers or cooks, commercial sex providers, et al) or as seasonal or footloose daily wage earners (i.e., they get employed through a *dalal* for the various jobs that emerge now and then, at different venues like plantations, construction sites, bulk trading sites, et al). These low paying jobs are fraught with frequently occurring occupational hazards and with minimal or no securities which they are entitled to under the prevalent labour laws of the country, if they were part of the 7% of the Indian workforce that operates from the formal sector.

These poor relocated workers, which ‘by one estimate, contributes 10% to our GDP’<sup>7</sup>, live in hazardous, unhygienic conditions, which is ‘typical of informal worksites and labour colonies’<sup>8</sup>. Persistent water shortages and inadequate sanitation facilities make it difficult for these residents to adhere to even the minimum prescribed hygienic practices. With most of these workers living cheek-by-jowl in slums and chawls, maintaining the requisite Covid-19 social distancing protocol is impossible. Ms. Indira Jaising (Senior Advocate) recently reminded the Supreme Court that as a result of ‘its failure to intervene when the Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed in March 2020, ... millions of these workers were compelled to put up in cramped tenements or on the pavements, in a state of total depravation and so dependence, while being susceptible to the Covid-19 affliction’<sup>9</sup>.

Poor quality literacy (especially among these workers’ children) and undernourishment (among all their family members) constantly encumbers these workers and their family members. In the absence of a ration card or ration card portability, many of them have either no or very limited access to the Public Distribution System (PDS). Around 10 crore citizens are estimated to be missed out from the PDS<sup>10</sup>. Hence, more often than not, with their modest earning, they have to

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<sup>6</sup> Harvey, 1985

<sup>7</sup> Purie, 08/06/2020

<sup>8</sup> Ravindra and Daniel, 05/05/2020

<sup>9</sup> Mahapatra, 27/5/2020

<sup>10</sup> Special Correspondent, The Hindu, 15/05/2020

purchase from the open market and so their consumption basket is limited in size and depth. Migration has made these workers electorally inept. They can neither vote in their own nor in the host state. As they are electorally inconsequential, political parties in both the home and host states blatantly ignore them as ‘scum-of-the-earth’.

The immediate impact of the lockdown was the stoppage of work and so loss of employment and income. With their meager savings running down, these poor workers became dependent on the government and private generosity for all their basic needs – including sanitary napkins, contraceptives and other personal toiletries and medicines. From either the PDS and / or charity mediation, these workers could get dry food grains. But as dry food grains need fuel and water for cooking, these poor labourers were compelled to queue up for cooked food from community kitchens set up in the neighbouring educational institutions, places of public worship and *maidans*.

### **Return to the Native Home**

The relocated workers are not a homogeneous collective (socially, culturally and economically). Hence, during the lockdowns, poverty differentials have given rise to diverse hardship experiences. In an urban space, these workers tend to lose their community capital; hence, they are unable to form collectives to fight the various forms of urban exploitations that they continuously encounter. Tied down and tired of the lockdowns’ fallouts, millions of these workers took to walking to their native homes. Lockdown extension announcements caused a large number of these poor stranded workers to vent their frustration in numerous encounters with the police and authorities, with major street clashes taking place in Surat and Mumbai. These encounters resulted in the oblivious urban class creating another suspicion of and so a further aloofness from these poor workers. To reduce the amount they walked, a few of these workers began travelling clandestinely in heavy vehicles – even in ‘an airless concrete mixer’<sup>11</sup>. These long arduous walks, often on empty stomach and with very little water intake, took its toll. Ghose<sup>12</sup> reported that by 11<sup>th</sup> May, 2020, 29 of these workers or their near relations had died of exhaustion and 83 had died of road accidents. Near Aurangabad (Maharashtra), 16 weary workers were accidentally run over by a goods train while they slept on the tracks.

With civil society and opposition political parties pressuring the Central and State Governments to help these poor returning workers to travel in a safe and dignified manner, bus and train services were organized. However, prior to boarding any of these arranged trains or buses, these workers

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<sup>11</sup> Ghose S, 17/05/2020

<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

had to ‘present a doctor’s certificate stating that they were free of the Covid-19 virus – and for obtaining this they had to spend a significant amount of time and money’<sup>13</sup>. They then had to ‘fill in online forms to register for evacuation’<sup>14</sup> and pay for the cost of travel. In situations where tickets could be booked online, those without smartphones were left in the lurch<sup>15</sup>.

Often, when these poor workers availed of road transportation, they were left at the borders of the receiving states, which, at times, were unwilling to make further onward arrangements for them to enter or reach their homes. In UP’s Bareilly, a group of these workers were subjected to the humiliating experience of being mass-sprayed, while they were made to squat on the road, with a chemical disinfectant on arrival. Railway travel started becoming cumbersome, as trains were cancelled at the last minute, frequent delays took place at starting points, too many stoppages occurred during the journey and poor quality meals were dished out to them. In some cases, ‘the trains reached somewhere else rather than their destination... During the extra time taken on account of the diversion, passengers did not receive any food or water’<sup>16</sup>.

Intervention by civil society groups (which was always timely) and the Supreme Court (which was much protracted and delayed) led to improvement in the conditions of travel, which were now paid for by the government. The Indian Railways was ordered to provide adequate meals at appropriate intervals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) during the travel. The Central and States Governments were asked to co-ordinate, so as to eliminate any problem at the boarding and de-boarding points. The two set of governments are now required to share the travelling cost of these workers and their families. The railways was asked to reimburse those workers who had already paid the fare for their travel.

Not all of these poor workers got homeward bound. Some of them had to circumstantially stay back either due to lack of assets in their native villages and / or family compulsions (e.g., elderly, sick family members and children). Ironically, a few of these workers were coerced to stay back due to the ‘essential’ nature of the service they provide. Dreze<sup>17</sup> reports about the nexus between the builder lobby and the Karnataka Government as a case in point here.

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<sup>13</sup> Anon, May, 2020

<sup>14</sup> Shukla, 21/05/2020

<sup>15</sup> ibid

<sup>16</sup> Joshi, 25/05/2020

<sup>17</sup> Dreze, 28/04/2020

## **LABOUR REFORM ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **Post Lockdown Concerns**

According to the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy (CMIE), due to the pandemic's lockdowns nearly 120 million Indians (about 24 %) have lost their jobs. Of these, nearly 70 % of them are small traders and wage labourers. Thus, in the post-lockdown phase, the workers who have now returned to their native homes as well as those who stayed back in the urban space, would have to deal with additional burdens. Apart from arranging for food, these workers would have to get their children's education back on track, arrange for money to meet medical expenditures and / or repay their debts (loans or unpaid rents) and most importantly find a job. The returnees would have to search for rural based employment on farms, MNREGA and other government public work sites or in firms in their rural vicinity. Deka<sup>18</sup> reports that by 28<sup>th</sup> May 2020, the Union Government had said that it has sent 9.1 million of these poor workers home (of which 55% by train). With such an increase in the supply of rural labour, jobs would now not be easily forthcoming and wage rates would be slashed. Similar predicaments would be encountered by those who stayed back in the cities.

The labour reforms introduced during the course of the lockdowns, will make getting and retaining gainful employment a challenge in the post lockdown period. In the first half of May 2020, four State Governments announced labour reforms via the ordinance route. The rationale for these reforms were based on the following debatable premises:

1. An increase in investments certainly leads to increase in employment.
2. An increase in work time inevitably leads to an increase in production.
3. The looming recession needs inflow of investments to halt the downslide.
4. Indian labour laws are too stringent and so are an impediment to investment.
5. Investors leaving China would shift to India if the labour laws were reformed.

The Madhya Pradesh (MP) Government announced labour law exemptions to new investors for the next 1000 days. The Uttar Pradesh (UP) Government followed suit by making 38 of its 41 labour laws defunct for 1000 days. The Gujarat Government granted labour law exemptions for 1200 days. The Assam Government announced a provision for fixed-term employment of workers. Even, the Punjab and Rajasthan Governments were ready to tweak labour laws along the same line. Labour falls under the Concurrent List of the Constitution. Hence, the labour reforms proposed by State Governments, will need the Central Government's approval. Given that the

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<sup>18</sup> Deka, 08/06/2020



political affiliations at the Centre and these States are the same, these reforms will, in all probability, get the required endorsement.

The following is a summary of the changes that these reforms collectively propose:

1. In units that have less than 300 workers, employers will be able to fire labour at will, as trade unions would not be allowed to raise objections and bargain with the management.
2. Workers will not have the right to form trade unions or to be associated with them or represent their cases collectively with the employer or with the government.
3. For all new units, a quarterly third-party certification would now replace the Labour Inspector's monthly report.
4. Factory work-shifts will increase by four hours. Furthermore, the workers have no choice but to put in the additional four hours per day.

### **Critical Concerns**

Given that the poor and the labouring class are presently struggling through a dire phase, the timing of these labour reforms is inappropriate. Even the *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (RSS) affiliated *Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh* (BMS) has cast aspersions on the timing of these anti-labour amendments. While decreeing these amendments, these governments have clearly turned a blind eye towards the following subject matters:

#### **1. Constitutional Propriety**

- a. By adopting the Ordinance route for these amendments, these State Governments have undermined the sanctity of the Indian Constitution.
- b. By arbitrarily tampering with the labour laws these State Governments have violated the provision of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, a right that was upheld by the Supreme Court of India in 1962.
- c. By denying labour the right to refuse to put in the extra four hours per day, these State Governments have legalized servitude.

#### **2. Flawed Nature of the Premises**

- a. The amendment that has increased the working time, is based on the assumption that there exists a direct functional relationship between longer working hours and increments in productivity. As per the Law of Diminishing Returns, there exists an inverse relationship between these variables. Studies have shown that any working time duration above eight hours, leads to a decline in productivity due to fatigue and boredom setting in. This is why the eight working hours per day norm has come to be universally accepted. Again, if

creating more jobs for accommodating the returning workers is the intention of the reforms, then decreasing and not increasing work time would provide the solution.

- b. In today's highly technologized world of work, the assumption that more investment leads to more jobs can be contested. The investment elasticity of labour employment is low across all modern business and commercial ventures. With automation being the current trend in production modalities, the expected expansion in employment cannot be assured by a gush of investments. The availability of skilled workers to match the technology deployed cannot be guaranteed within the given time frame.
- c. The amendment presumes that by giving employers total control over their workforce, investors will be attracted in hordes. Evidence presented by studies, like that of the V. V. Giri National Labour Institute (2017)<sup>19</sup>, show that investors' decisions are also influenced by other factors like adequacy (quantitatively and qualitatively) of infrastructure, stability in society per se, 'nature of contract enforcement, supply of skilled labour and steadiness of the tax structure'<sup>20</sup>.
- d. With the indistinct status of the collateral requirements raised in point 'c' above., like 'tax terrorism, frequent change in regulations, poor labour productivity,...'<sup>21</sup>, India will not be able to attract investors that exit China by limiting reforms to only amending of labour laws. Klein<sup>22</sup> points out that in the 1980s, China followed the same policy of opening up to foreign investments and simultaneously reducing protections for workers – it was a success, but attained through massive suppression, including the Tiananmen Square Massacre. The China-exiting investors have already begun moving towards Bangladesh and Vietnam, as these two economies have a better infrastructure spread and a more skilled and a better nourished work force<sup>23</sup>.

### **3. Economic Consequences of the Amendments**

- a. These amendments directly advocate the informalization of work and this leads to job insecurity, lowering of wages, reduction of consumption and demand in the economy. This can cause a downward economic spiral in any economy.

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<sup>19</sup> Deka, 25/5/2020

<sup>20</sup> Khan, 13/05/2020

<sup>21</sup> Kaul, 13/05/2020

<sup>22</sup> Klein, 2007

<sup>23</sup> Kaul, ibid

- b. These amendments have jeopardized job continuity as workers can be abruptly laid-off. As and when such lay-offs take place, social tensions mount, poverty increases and the trade cyclical movements plunge.
- c. These amendments have abolished the basic guidelines on occupational safety and minimum standards of work. Due to this the already pathetic working conditions in the Indian informal sector will either not improve or deteriorate further.
- d. Using the crises emerging from the pandemic and it's lockdowns as an opportunity to bring in the changes, reeks of 'Disaster Capitalism' that Klein<sup>24</sup> so strongly condemns as being dehumanizing and unethical. It seems as if the concerned governments are only interested in catering to the wellness of the corporate or owning class and not the wellbeing of the labouring masses.
- e. The amendments, by being so pro-employer, would lead to the stifling of wage rates and work conditions. Motivated by the need to cut costs, work spaces would resemble sweatshops. If the investors' ambition is to feed the local weekly markets, then the enslavement of labour would be the accepted norm. However, if the aspiration is to manufacture for the global market, then it would be imperative to hire high quality and so better paid workers and construct quality work spaces. Again, these reforms can hurt the Indian export sector, if production is carried out under sweatshop conditions and the conscience of the importing countries' governments or consumers is pricked.
- f. The amendments' unstated position that trade unions are bad for investments and growth is invalidated by global evidence. Labour productivity is high in France, Japan, South Korea and Germany, although trade unionism is an inherent facet of these economies; with the unionism density at 7.9%, 17.3%, 10.1 %, 17 % respectively – in India, it is 12.8%<sup>25</sup>. When the influence of trade unions is channelized to improve labour's performance and earnings, then both aggregate supply and aggregate demand get enhanced, leading to growth.
- g. Finally, labour laws matter and operate only in the formal sector. With nearly 90 % of the Indian workforce operating in the informal sector, these labour reforms are inconsequential for a massive majority of the Indian labouring class. However, these reforms do indirectly impact the informal sector. The fear and terror that the reforms unleash in the formal sector demonstratively percolates into and so vitiates all aspects of the informal sector

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<sup>24</sup> Klein, *ibid*

<sup>25</sup> ILO - <http://ilostat.ilo.org/topics/union-membership/>

environment. Thus, without actually having the reforms enacted for 90 % of India's 500 million workers from the informal sector<sup>26</sup>, all the employer-friendly clauses are tacitly transmitted here. Thus, expropriation of the capital surplus and so exploitation of the poor workers perpetuates.

India's labour laws are embodiments of constitutionally guaranteed civil and democratic rights, which in turn are commensurate with spirit of the International Human Rights Covenants. Hence, the Association of Indian Trade Unions (AITUC) has strongly condemned the content, timing and ordinance route of these amendments. Taking advantage of hindsight, the proponents of rushed labour reforms should revisit debacle of the 2014 labour reforms tried out in Rajasthan. Prudence suggests that comprehensive labour reforms, through the democratic process of deliberations and discussions with all the concerned stakeholders, could be undertaken once this pandemic is far behind us.

## **FRAMEWORKS FOR THE FUTURE**

At the core of the pandemic-induced lockdowns has been a malfunctioning system that has mistreated, mislead and mismanaged India's poor urban workers. The 7<sup>th</sup> April 2020 Report of the International Labour Organization (ILO) has predicted that about 40 crore workers in India are likely to be pushed into poverty because of this pandemic. Again, Venugopal<sup>27</sup> states that about 20 crore Indians will face acute hunger during the current calendar year. These alarming reviews should spur us to radically overhaul our labour framework on three fronts discussed below:

### **1. FRAMEWORK 1: Policy Formulation and Execution**

- a. The after-shocks of all policies, especially those that will have an impact on the poor, have to be analytically discerned prior to their enforcement. If, for instance, these poor workers had been given at least a 7-day leeway prior to the first national lockdown, they would have gone home without any of the risks or hardships they were ultimately exposed to. They would have been safely re-integrated with their communities without being actual or perceived corona virus carriers<sup>28</sup>.
- b. Undertaking labour reforms without duly consulting all the stakeholders involved must be totally avoided. Democratic principles demand that discussions, deliberations and

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<sup>26</sup> Arun, 09/05/2020

<sup>27</sup> Venugopal, 21/04/2020

<sup>28</sup> Guha, 26/05/2020

dissensions must form the bulwark of macro policy formulation. Again, it is unethical to take advantage of a disaster situation to push through legislative changes, as those impacted by the policy changes cannot protest and / or offer viable solutions or alternatives. Thus, it is morally binding to refrain from adopting the ordinance route while changing or amending laws on matters that are not immediately exigent. Parliament or State Assemblies (whichever be the case) should be actively involved when such legislative exercises are undertaken.

- c. History corroborates the fact that public expenditures incurred during crisis times deliver cumulative social dividends that outweigh the consequent fiscal and monetary burdens on the government. Stingy public finance would lead to the generation of a chain of tragedies. The lackadaisical attitude of the colonial rulers across the globe during the 1918 Spanish Influenza Pandemic is a case in point here. Klein<sup>29</sup> points out to how the social benefits for the Sri Lankan fishing community were low in the post Tsunami phase, since the Government opted for austerity measures. The fiscal package announced by the Government of India in tranches, during the 2020 pandemic fails on this count – it opened credit routes and so gave no real cash to any beneficiary, even the street vendors.

## **2. FRAMEWORK 2: Employment and Income Issues**

- a. It is being envisaged that the shortage of labour in Punjab, Gujarat and Maharashtra (states from where the poor workers have walked out), will be countered by the surplus of labour in Bihar, Jharkhand and UP (states into which the poor workers have come back). Due to these contra labour supply movements, wages will be under stress and so will plummet downwards. Inflationary pressures will zoom upwards due to the shortage of the supply of all goods. To manage the pressures that emerge from such a labour supply disequilibrium, the government will have to appropriately introduce stringent monetary measures to rein in inflation and expansionary fiscal measures to boost the investment growth rate. Here is where the provisions of the Minimum Wages Act (1948) will come to the rescue of the labouring class.
- b. In an appeal letter<sup>30</sup> to the Indian Prime Minister, the writers bring to his notice that most of the labourers have not been paid since March 2020. This has made it impossible for them to sustain their families. Hence, for at least the remaining part of this calendar year, each family should be provided with an ex-gratia amount of Rs. 3,000 per month to support

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<sup>29</sup> Klein, *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> Anon, *ibid*

themselves. This expansionary fiscal measure would generate and sustain an increase in demand, leading to a revival of the economy.

- c. Urban employment generating schemes, along the lines of MNREGA would have to be created. The budgetary allocation for MNREGA will have to be further boosted. Such moves would help in building / maintaining infrastructure across the country and in turn, generate gainful employment. It would be imperative for the government to monetarily and fiscally support programmes dedicated to increasing the livelihood opportunities for women. Apart from reducing gender disparity this move would also help in augmenting family earnings and so spending and saving.

### **3. FRAMEWORK 3: Effective Reinforcement of Social Safety Nets**

- a. The impact of such lockdowns on the densely populated slums, chawls and remote tribal regions has to be documented and archived. These records would serve as a guide to policy for handling such future disasters effectively. Similarly, it is imperative to ensure that the data emerging from a current crisis is scientifically collected, collated, analyzed and stored. This will improve the efficacy of future policies with reference to crises.
- b. The government should universalize the PDS to guarantee food and nourishment security for all, under trying and normal situations. Such distribution should be scientifically managed so as to cut down waiting and queue time.
- c. The public healthcare system in India, which has been neglected for decades, has to be overhauled, strengthened and universalized. Various financial and insurance schemes should be introduced to cater to the needs of all for all sorts of medical exigencies.
- d. The primary education infrastructure needs to be fortified and revamped. It is expected that post the lockdowns, many of the poor children will drop out of education, as they will be compelled to work to fend for themselves or contribute to the family's hand-to-mouth income. The restarting of the midday meal scheme on a war footing is recommended, since during the lockdowns, with schools shut, many poor children would have been hungry for varying durations. The government must create alternative modalities of reaching food to poor children – even when schools have to shut down.
- e. Given the yeomen role played by the NGO sector during the lockdowns, the Government must overcome its current mistrust of this welfare agency. All the appropriate government departments should be obligated to collaborate with credible NGOs so as to widen and deepen the reach and quality of the desired social outcomes.
- f. Resorting to Public Interest Litigations (PILs) as well as Right To Information (RTI) to expose or counter inequalities and unjust practices should become an integral part of the

curriculum across all disciplines. This would ensure that guaranteeing transparency in public programmes would become the norm.

## FINAL COMMENTS

This article is a flashback of, to cite the Madras High Court, ‘the pathetic condition of migrant labourers [which was] nothing but a human tragedy’<sup>31</sup>. The article attempted to recall ‘the horrendous privations and sufferings that millions of desperate and destitute Indian citizens had to endure’<sup>32</sup> through the lockdowns and beyond. It is a recollection of the callous manner in which these stranded daily wage labourers were treated nonchalantly by the administration machinery. It is finally, a reminiscence of how in the midst of an ocean of inhumane treatment, there were islands of compassion shown mainly by non-government entities.

It took a pandemic and its lockdowns for the government and the non-poor citizens to finally ‘see’ its invisible labouring underbelly. However, it was the same pandemic and its lockdowns that ‘land[ed] the poor labourers between a rock and a hard place’<sup>33</sup> as they were deserted, debilitated and deluded. Now, we have to diligently allow this pandemic and its lockdowns to delist us as ‘Nero’s Guests’,<sup>34</sup> so that we actively co-create with ‘David’ and ‘Goliath’ a new world order, where clashes do not lead to pandemonium but to a synthesis of orderliness.

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<sup>31</sup> Stalin, 16/05/2020

<sup>32</sup> Singh, 28/05/2020

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