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VOLUME 01 – POST 02 **LABOUR KNOCKED DOWN BY THE PANDEMIC'S LOCKDOWNS**

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VOLUME 01 - POST 02

LABOUR KNOCKED DOWN BY THE PANDEMIC'S LOCKDOWNS

LABOUR KNOCKED DOWN BY THE PANDEMIC'S LOCKDOWNS

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This write-up 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 during the lockdowns and raises critical concerns that these reforms have overlooked. Finally, it engages with the lackadaisical attitude of the Government towards these poor doubly relocated workers.

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

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INTRODUCTION

More than 10 crore⁵ Indians work in the informal sector. These poor workers form the bulwark of the economy by being the ‘bulls that pull the yoke of Indian economy’⁶. These relocated workers who form 20% of the Indian labour force⁷, contribute substantially to the economy’s GDP growth by leaving their villages for jobs in the cities. Their labour is required in the ‘construction industry, garment and other manufacturing factories, farms of agriculturally developed states, sprawling offices in the service sector, sale of newspaper, milk, vegetable, fruit markets, etc., in big urban clusters’⁸. In spite of this significant contribution by them, during the pandemic-induced lockdowns, they suffered the most. This is so since these workers are the invisible group in the population. They are never factored into urban planning nor included in the city’s population, and rarely counted for even in their villages⁹. The lockdown made them visible to urban dwellers for the first time in recent history in India as they emerged from construction sites and sweatshops to go home¹⁰.

This write-up is a reflective compilation of the trauma and woes that these poor workers have gone through during the lockdown as well as those that they will have to bear up with after the lockdown ends. To compose this article, various sources that have brought out the trials and tribulations of these poor workers, have been accessed. This writers of this paper are grateful to those who have sensitized us by perceptively and candidly reporting on these issues through journalistic reportage in both traditional newspapers as well as online news platforms, via videography that has been made available in the open domain and by recounting the thoughts and insights of social scientists and political commentators through TV and social media channels.

This write-up takes the readers, initially through a reflection 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 remarks about the government’s policy apathy towards these poor workers. A set of videos are placed at the end of the references, it is suggested that you see and reflect on them, as Fr. Kolvenbach SJ, the former General of the Jesuit so aptly put it, ‘when the heart is touched by [in]direct experience, the mind is challenged to change’.

5 Dutta (2), India Today, 11/05/2020

6 Dutta (1), India Today, 07/05/2020

7 Srivastava & Nagraj, Scroll.in, 07/06/2020

8 Dutta (2), ibid

9 Srivastava & Nagraj, ibid

10 Srivastava & Nagraj, ibid



DELIBERATIONS ON THE TERM ‘MIGRANTS’

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’¹¹. In today’s context, this label declares the poor workers as the ‘perpetual outsider,.... neglected by the States and Centre, usually from two or three of the poorest States and, most of all, who do not qualify for belonging to the city where they work’.¹² So, by calling these poor returning workers ‘migrants’, we demean them, we disregard their Indian citizenship and like ‘Nero’s Guests’¹³ we feel no qualms on seeing them going back from where they have come. Furthermore, these ‘wretched of the earth’ apparently have only just entered our consciousness, via the TV and social media pictures and clips. This paper, wilfully refrains from using the term ‘migrants’ as it prefers calling them ‘poor informal sector workers’, who due to their lockdown-induced hardships, wish to return to their rural abodes.

FACTORS BEHIND THE RURAL-URBAN MIGRATION

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. Rural-urban migration has been a normal occurrence in both pre- and post-Independent India. However, since 1991, neoliberal policies, necessitated by the adoption of the Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization (LPG) model, have been intensifying both the rural outflow as well as the urban inflow of labour. These policies have disrupted agriculture and other primary sector activities, while subtly reinforcing rampant deforestation, confiscation of tribal lands and displacement of thousands of rural peoples. The loss of *jal* (water), *jungle* (forest), *jameen* (land) has led to the disappearance of many rural jobs. In post-1991 India, with capital concentrating in urban spaces, rural areas have been struggling to attract investments – and currently, rural investments have tended to bring in labour-savings technologies. Thus, the relocation of rural workers is the result of both the push and pull factors associated with rural-urban migration.

LIFE AS AN INFORMAL SECTOR WORKER

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. The poor workers would have been entitled to enjoy these labour protections, if they were a 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’¹⁴, live in hazardous, unhygienic conditions, which is ‘typical of informal worksites and labour colonies’¹⁵. 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. 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). 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’.

11 Shanghvi, 12/05/2020

12 Bijapurkar, R., Indian Express, 05/06/2020

13 Sainath, 2011

14 Purie, 08/06/2020

15 Ravindra & Daniel, 05/05/2020



LIFE OF THE POOR WORKERS DURING THE LOCKDOWN

These relocated workers are not a homogeneous collective (socially, culturally and economically). Hence, during the lockdowns, poverty differentials have given rise to diverse hardship experiences, caused by the stoppage of work and so loss of employment and income. Swain, a 45 year old poor labourer, narrated the following to a volunteer of Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), “My employer has abandoned me - he did not lift the phone when I contacted him to ask for my 10 days’ wages pending with him. They are big people. What can we do? Nobody understands our problems here. I would rather stay with my family even if I earn half of what I earned here.”¹⁶ With no income flows, the meagre savings of these relocated workers quickly began running down. Hence, they 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*.

The distress endured by the workers living in Nallasopra, a far off suburb of Mumbai, typifies what such workers had to endure in urban spaces across the country. With minimal facilities and paying extortionist rents, more than 1000 poor manufacturing labourers and their families stay in the Navjeevan slum community and around 2.5 lakh such workers stay in the chawls around Dhaniv Talav, Nallasopara. All these workers (mainly from UP and Bihar) were rendered jobless due to the lockdown. If they continued staying in this urban space, they were expected to pay Rs. 1000 to Rs. 1500 as rent and also defray the water and electricity bill separately. Again, to cook their meals they had to buy kerosene by paying Rs. 80 per litre, apart from purchasing the usual items that form a poor person’s meal. As the lockdown period prolonged, their deprivation increased and so their dependence on the charity of civil society and Government agencies grew. The reactions of a little boy and the eight-year-old Sama vis-à-vis the food handouts, highlights the severity of the food deprivation that children encountered. The

little boy told a reporter¹⁷, “Sometimes people come and distribute food. I have no idea who they are, but it’s very little. We only get to eat once in two-three days.” This is what the same reporter observed of Sama’s excitement on collecting her meal, the little girl jumped for joy saying, “I got rice!” and ran away.

Across the country, tied down and tired of the lockdowns’ fallouts, without jobs or money, millions of these workers set out for their native homes thousands of kilometres away, walking or on cycles or in autorickshaws or trucks. Dayaram¹⁸ was one such desperate person. With no way to feed his family or pay the rent, now that he and his wife had lost their jobs, he hoisted his 5 year old son Shivam, onto his shoulders and with his wife began to walk to his village, 500 kilometres away. He told a reporter that he was also anxious about his other 7-year old son Mangal, who was staying in the village with his elderly relatives – since taking care of two children in an urban space was too expensive and so difficult. Burdened with such domestic worries, every lockdown extension announcement triggered angst and frustration among these stranded workers, who then vented their exasperation by clashing with the police and other authorities.

To reduce the amount they walked, a few of these workers began travelling clandestinely in heavy vehicles – even in ‘an airless concrete mixer’¹⁹. Ramu²⁰, a young migrant worker from Madhya Pradesh, began the arduous homeward journey from Hyderabad along with his pregnant wife Dhanwanta and infant daughter Anuragini. Undeterred by no mechanical means of transportation, he wheeled his daughter and pregnant wife for most part of the 700 kilometre route on a makeshift cart that he made with wood and sticks and reached their village in Balaghat district a few days later. Other children like the 15-year old Kumari, had to cycle 1200 kilometres from Gurugram (Haryana) to Darbhanga district (Bihar) with her incapacitated father Mohan Paswan seated on the carrier. While this teenage girl’s story is commendable, we must also reflect on the forced circumstances that led her ordeal of cycling such a long distance²¹.



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- 17 Parth, M. N, Al Jazeera, 21/04/2020
18 Siddiqui, D., Al Jazeera, 22/04/2020
19 Ghose S, 17/05/2020
20 Dwary, A, NDTV, 13/05/2020
21 Anon, News18, 20/05/2020
22 Asif, T, The Wire, 25/05/2020

These long arduous walks, often on empty stomach and with very little water intake, took its toll. Many died before they could reach home, either in road accidents or from hunger, dehydration, heart attack or sheer exhaustion. Ghose²³ reported that by 11th May, 2020, 29 of these workers or their near relations had died of exhaustion and 83 had died of road accidents. Again, while travelling in a truck on their way home 23 workers were killed in a collision somewhere in north India. Abhishek Singh Meena²⁴, the top district official, reported that another 35 were injured when the vehicle carrying them crashed into a parked truck on a highway near a roadside eatery in the Auraiya district (UP). A speeding bus ran over and killed six of these workers as they tried to walk home, the police said, days after 16 weary migrants, who were sleeping on a railway line, were accidentally run over by a goods train, near Aurangabad (Maharashtra)²⁵. A labourer from Basti district (UP) and his family²⁶ started their journey from Mumbai on foot. After some time, they got a lift in a truck. But as this labourer's deteriorated, the truck on the roadside, where of struggle, he died death, in Shahjahanpur, destination.

Often, when such poor of road transportation, at the borders of the – often the receiving were unwilling to make arrangements for these UP's Bareilly, a group were subjected to the experience of being the road and then being with a chemical

With civil society and political parties the Central and State to help these poor workers to travel in a manner, bus and train organized. However, this

with paperwork and glitches, which led to many making their own desperate arrangements to go home. In the soaring heat, migrant families were forced to wait in queues, either for tickets or at centres where they were screened and declared virus-free to travel on trains²⁷. For obtaining this clearance they had to spend a significant amount of time and money²⁸. They then had to 'fill in online forms to register for evacuation'²⁹ and pay for the cost of travel. In situations where tickets could be booked online, those without smartphones were left in the lurch.



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workers availed they were left receiving states State authorities further onward labourers. In of such workers humiliating made to squat on mass-sprayed disinfectant.

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- 23 Ghose S, ibid
 24 Singh, A. K., Al Jazeera, 16/05/2020
 25 Ghose S, ibid
 26 Anon, ABP News, 09/05/2020
 27 Kumar, M, NDTV, 27/05/2020
 28 Anon, May, 2020
 29 Shukla, 21/05/2020



These incomeless workers were made to pay for the fare of whatever mode they got to travel by. A labourer from Patna (Bihar) told India Today, “I had Rs. 1,000 left with me, half of which has been spent on the ticket. I do not know how I am going to feed my kids back home.”³⁰ NDTV reported that they met workers who had borrowed to pay Rs. 850 for the one way trip from Surat to Prayagraj (UP). The penniless and starving Swain, who was mentioned before, could go back 1,700 kilometres to Odisha since his family wired him the money³¹. One of the laid-off labourers,³² told a reporter that his meagre savings were exhausted, because of his mother’s surgery in UP. This person could go back to see his mother, wife and two children, only because his fellow brethren had paid for the train ticket.

Railway travel for these poor soon became cumbersome. Train schedules were not announced sufficiently in time. Hence, people often gathered around the major railway stations – violating the Covid-19 social distancing requirement. Some stayed on the roadside near the stations, hoping to board a train as well as to avoid paying rent for even temporary urban shelters³³. Again, 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 and water from the taps of the train toilets were dished out to these poor travellers³⁴. In some cases, ‘the trains reached

“ 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’ ”



- 30 Pandey, India Today, 07/05/2020
- 31 Srivastava & Nagraj, ibid
- 32 Pandey, ibid
- 33 Anon, ABP News, 09/05/2020
- 34 Pandey, ibid
- 35 Joshi, 25/05/2020



The travel travails were experienced across age and gender. Some unfortunate children were bereaved by the loss of a near relative during the arduous trip back. A two year old baby's twenty-three year old mother had died of extreme heat, hunger and dehydration shortly before the train rolled into Muzaffarpur station in Bihar. She was heading to her village in Katihar with her sister, sister's husband and two children³⁶. Around the same time and at the same Muzaffarpur station in Bihar, a two-year-old child also died, reportedly from heat on top of inadequate food. The child's family had boarded a different train from Delhi³⁷.

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 has been instructed to reimburse those poor workers who had already paid the fare for their travel. This reimbursement will be fraught with difficulties and paper work, making the poor fare-payers give up the thought of ever getting that money back.

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. Dreze³⁸ reports about the nexus between the builder lobby and the Karnataka Government as a case in point here. These workers had to bear the brunt of urban hardships.

“The railways has been instructed to reimburse those poor workers who had already paid the fare for their travel. This reimbursement will be fraught with difficulties and paper work, making the poor fare-payers give up the thought of ever getting that money back.”

36 Kumar, M, ibid

37 ibid

38 Dreze, 28/04/2020

Sahu,³⁹ a 36-year-old laid-off textile worker in Surat, (Gujarat), told an Al Jazeera reporter that he would work for 12 hours a day, but now he has nothing to do but sit in his cramped room. He also said that he and his eight companions were trying to make one person's food feed four – he also felt that death for them was round the corner. Sunita Devi⁴⁰, a widow had barely any savings, and the lockdown had come as a blow. Her employers, who run businesses, had asked her to stop coming to work during this period without providing any pay to tide her over these six weeks. “I worked inside their houses, and now they have closed their doors on me. They claim I may infect them. I have a few rupees left. Do I use it to pay rent (Rs. 2000 per month) or do I buy milk, vegetables for my children?” was Devi's rhetorical question to Al Jazeera. Another worker, Indrajeet, from north India, complained⁴¹ that the shoe factory owner, for whom he worked, had switched off his phone once the lockdown began, leaving the workers to fend for themselves. Many of these workers sunk into debt, as shown by the following Al Jazeera report. Manisha⁴² a widow, a mother to three daughters and a farm worker, earns Rs 100 per day if she gets work and Rs 1000 as a pension from the government. She was able to buy some food from a market 10 kilometres from her house. However, as no buses were running due to the lockdown, the return ride by autorickshaw cost her Rs. 300. As she did not have that much of money, pawned her necklace with the driver, which would be redeemed only after she pays him back the money with interest.

LIFE OF THE POOR WORKERS POST THE LOCKDOWN

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. Deka⁴³ reports that by 28th May 2020, the Union Government had said that it has sent 9.1 millions 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.

Labour reforms were introduced (via the Ordinance route) by at least four States during the course of the lockdowns. These changes will make getting and retaining gainful employment a challenge in the post lockdown period. The following is a summary of the changes that these reforms collectively propose:

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.

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.

For all new units, a quarterly third-party certification would now replace the Labour Inspector's monthly report.

Factory work-shifts will increase by four hours. Furthermore, the workers have no choice but to put in the additional four hours per day.

When the ordinance is approved by the Centre, the basic guidelines on occupational safety and minimum standards of work would get compromised. This will substantially worsen the conditions of such workers⁴⁴. Ironically, in spite

39 Sanghera, Tish, Al Jazeera, 02/04/2020

40 Yadav, A., Al Jazeera, 19/04/2020

41 Parth, M. N, ibid

42 Purohit, K., Al Jazeera, 03/04/2020

43 Deka, 08/06/2020

44 Hassan, Z., The Wire, 29/05/2020

of being termed ‘labour reforms’, these changes are very anti-labour in character. These amendments lead to job insecurity, lowering of wages, reduction of consumption and demand in the economy. This can cause a downward economic spiral in any economy. The reforms have also jeopardized job continuity as workers can be abruptly laid-off. The management of the elite Delhi Golf Club⁴⁵ announced that sixty-six employees of the club have been laid off due to pressures on earning amid the coronavirus lockdown. As and when such lay-offs take place, social tensions will mount, poverty will increase and the trade cyclical movements will plunge. The work-time extension fails to consider that workers, to earn a living, travel every day for about 3 to 4 hours over long distance (on a one-way average of at least 10 kilometres). Due to this, workers get very little quality time with the family and this severely affect the family dynamics. As cost-cutting is a prime motivation with employers, these pro-employer amendments will further stifle wage rates and worsen work conditions. 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.

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%⁴⁶. 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.

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 environment. Thus, without actually having the reforms enacted for 90 % of India’s 500 million workers from the informal sector⁴⁷, all the employer-friendly clauses are tacitly transmitted here. Thus, expropriation of the capital surplus and so exploitation of the poor workers perpetuates.

Finally, 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. By using the crises emerging from the pandemic and it’s lockdowns as an opportunity to bring in the changes, these governments have followed the path of ‘Disaster Capitalism’ that Klein⁴⁸ so strongly condemns as being dehumanizing and unethical.

OVERALL REMARKS

The government has apparently assumed that we Indians are a socio-economic homogenous lot. Hence, it adopted the notorious ‘one-size-suits-all’ principle of governance, while announcing the first lockdown, by giving us a four-hour notice. These lockdowns have revealed the government’s absolute lack of sensitivity towards the labouring class, as it failed to think of the lockdowns’ consequences on the most vulnerable sections of our country.

When the Shramik train services were started, in Maharashtra, the accompanying rules and regulations were issued only in Marathi – in spite of knowing fully well that the returning workers were not conversant in that language. By holding on to its linguist bias, the railway and government authorities denied some of the workers a chance to return home in some comfort⁴⁹. The government could airlift people from abroad by charging those people a pittance, but it has refrained from taking on any fiscal burden when it came to transporting arrangements the poor workers. The Gujarat Government sent buses to Uttarakhand to rescue 1800 pilgrims, but it considered it to be a fiscal burden if it were to make arrangements for sending back to Andhra the stranded fisher-workers in Veeraval (Gujarat)⁵⁰.

45 Dwivedi, Sukirti, NDTV, 31/05/2020

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

47 Arun, 09/05/2020

48 Klein, ibid

49 Dutta (2), ibid

50 Satheesh, S, Al Jazeera, 26/04/2020

Even the Supreme Court of India, let these poor workers down. It took more than two months for the Court to realize and acknowledge the enormity of one of the greatest human tragedies in the recent past and to direct the Centre, States and the UTs governments to act. Initially, it dismissed petitions filed by concerned citizens with the remark, ‘It is impossible for this court to monitor who is walking and not walking.’⁵¹ Again, its comment, ‘How can anyone stop this when they sleep on railway tracks?’⁵² on the Aurangabad train accident is appalling. A prompt and appropriate response from the Supreme Court would have saved lakhs of poor workers the unnecessary pain they had to bear.

The poor workers’ labour is being overtly treated as a commodity by those in power. The Karnataka government cancelled the trains that were supposed to take these poor workers back home. It did so in cahoots with the builder lobby that did not want to let go of the cheap labour power for the construction sector. The UP government announced that the UP workers will not be allowed to go to other States, unless the recently set up Migration Commission allows them to do so. The labour issue commentator, Juhie Singh⁵³ remarked, ‘the Migrant Commission has been set up as a knee jerk step taken to quell public anger and pacify the media...’. The Government seems to have forgotten that the Directive Principles of State Policy calls it to be a welfare agency. Again, it seems to have overlooked Article 19 of the Indian Constitution that gives us the right to freely move within our country.

The government’s stimulus package can be dubbed as a survival and not a revival one. The package fails to address the main issue of falling demand. By making financial assistance available only in the form of credit and not as direct cash transfers, the most badly affected small businesses (including the street vendors, which it mentions as a beneficiary) will not be helped at all. The package makes no effort to repay the MSME the Rs. 5000 crores that the government owes this sector. Liquidity in hand and not access to liquidity via credit should have been the mantra to help businesses restart or keep going. This sort of a fiscal stimulus would have slowed down the exodus of poor workers back to the rural sector.

States which were able to sustain their growth stories have done so with the supply of migrant workforce.⁵⁴ Although informally employed, the skills of these poor workers lubricate the supply chains that feed the domestic and global markets and their remitted earnings support rural communities. Heads⁵⁵ of industry bodies have said that since most of these relocated workers leave their villages to better their earnings, they are desperate to learn the required skills; this makes their quality of work superior to that of locals. The lockdowns have destroyed this win-win situation for the employer and the poor employees. Aware of their dependence on migrant workers, many industries and State Governments are now grappling to find ways to lure back these workers.⁵⁶ Labour Economist KR Shyam Sundar⁵⁷, Professor at the Xavier School of Management, Jamshedpur avers that long distance rural-urban migration may not restart till the time the poor workers feel safe in the event of factories closing again. Currently, they seem to have correctly chosen life over livelihood.⁵⁸

51 Vaidyanathan, A., NDTV, 15/05/2020

52 ibid

53 Singh, J, The Wire, 29/05/2020

54 Dutta (2), ibid

55 Srivastava & Nagraj, ibid

56 ibid

57 ibid

58 Dutta (1), ibid

It is heartening to note that in the midst of this dismal scenario, there are the ‘Good Samaritans’ around. There are a large number NGOs and kind hearted people who have reached out to help these poor stranded workers across all the cities in India. The following illustration is meant to symbolise this spirit of giving. Neeti Goel and the KhaanaChahiye.com initiative⁵⁹ have been making large amounts of meals available to the stranded workers. The Karnataka businessmen brothers, Tajammul Pasha and Muzammil Pasha⁶⁰, on seeing the daily lockdown plight of the wage labourers sold their land for Rs. 25 lakh and have used the money to buy essentials and food grain for a large number of poor people. The concern shown by individuals and institutions in filing PILs and fighting for the rights of the poor, during the lockdown days have certainly helped in easing the burden on the poor.



59 Parth, M. N, *ibid*

60 Kidwai, N., NDTV, 01/05/2020

FINAL COMMENTS

The Indian economy cannot return to normal without the contribution of these poor workers. Unfortunately, the struggling workers have never been in the focus of serious policy making. This lackadaisical attitude of governments is evident from the fact that there is no concrete data on these poor relocated workers.¹ Politically, the government does not find it expedient to increase its fiscal deficit (even marginally) by paying for the wellbeing of these poor workers. The government's preference lies obviously in the erecting of statues, constructing a new Parliament edifice and investing in the Mumbai-Ahmedabad bullet train.

This article is primarily a flashback of, to cite the Madras High Court, 'the pathetic condition of migrant labourers [which was] nothing but a human tragedy'². The article has attempted to recall 'the horrendous privations and sufferings that millions of desperate and destitute

Indian citizens had to endure'³ 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 indeed 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'⁴ as they were deserted, debilitated and deluded. These days, with the millennial folk conscientizing us that 'Silence is Violence', we, the non-poor urban dwellers have to delist ourselves as 'Nero's Guests'⁵ and with the Governments, start actively co-breathing with these poor workers to build a new world order, where pandemonium gives way to orderliness.

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- 1 Dutta (2), ibid
 - 2 Stalin, 16/05/2020
 - 3 Singh, 28/05/2020
 - 4 Ghosh P, 08/04/2020
 - 5 Sainath, 2011
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