The ‘Long March’ of Migrant Laborers in India: Cities and Moral Outrage

Rakesh Krishnan, doctoral candidate, Department of Sociology, University of Hyderabad, India

The announcement of the national lockdown in India on 24 March 2020 triggered fear and panic among the people. A dystopian future of Mad Max and The Waste Land started playing in the minds of the millions. The middle class in urban India started its preparation by stockpiling whatever it deemed necessary. Various gated communities piled additional rules and clauses for self-preservation, sometimes bordering on hysteria and lack of common sense. Fear, self-preservation, and distrust of the outsiders underpinned the dispositions of the people in the gated communities. All in the hope that they will be shielded in an impenetrable cocoon that will keep out the virus which was circulating outside their well-protected walls. The irony is that the virus was imported by the global Indians and corporate middle-class in the gated communities!

While the mobile and privileged in the cities unleashed their defensive and offensive strategies to cope with the imminent threat of a virus, the unknown and unacknowledged bodies that serviced them started the long journey to their villages. Multiple narratives of long walks, deaths, despair, and humiliation faced not only by the servicing class but also by other unorganized workers - the invisible population in the cityscape exposed the underbelly of the Indian growth story. The long march by the migrant laborers fanned moral outrage in the public sphere. Many commentators
and policymakers lamented on the lack of planning and accommodation of the vulnerable population. The sufferings of the migrant laborers are real, but is the moral outrage real?

**Migrant Laborers and their COVID Moments**

The long march of the migrant laborers catapulted into the national imagination through certain arresting press photographs. People walking on the empty national highways with whatever they can carry, in the scorching Indian summer with no shelter or food on the way. This kicked up debates and discussions on state failure in combating the pandemic that has enveloped us, COVID-19. Debates and discussions focused around the need for giving them free and dignified travel, full wages during the lockdown period, and improving hygiene and accommodation standards in the labor camps. National and provincial governments pushed the liability on each other in taking responsibility. Different provincial governments squabbled on the procedures and protocols of travel and quarantine. Amidst all this confusion and uncertainty, civil society organizations and other voluntary associations provided food, shelter, and hygiene kits.
Migrant laborers in the highways of despair, a scene from New Delhi.

Picture Courtesy: Danish Siddiqui/Reuters

https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/inpictures/pictures-long-road-home-india-migrant-workers-200422084700100.html

Policymakers and social scientists were also caught up in defining and quantifying the migrant laborers in distress. The government of India stated a figure in the Supreme Court of India, which was immediately admonished by academicians, journalists, and others. It exposed the lack of systematic documentation of the migrant laborers in the country. Maybe it can also be a reason for state inaction, as lack of statistics impedes policymaking. Nevertheless, whether it is two million or fifty million, the suffering is real and need the attention of the state. It is pertinent to
re-contextualize the statement: if only one man dies of hunger, that is a tragedy, and if one million dies, it is a statistic.

What makes these sufferings doubly tragic are the conditions that welcomed them after their long march. More than social distancing and quarantine orchestrated on farming fields, it is the water scarcity, little to no income to withstand the lockdown period and cramped housing that challenges the norms of physical distancing. Paradoxically, these material conditions caused them to migrate to cities or outside their villages.

Cities in India are bustling with economic activities. The thundering piling machine is a piece of unending music in the Indian growth story and urban neighborhoods. The migrants from India’s countryside mostly find a livelihood in these sites and also work as security guards, delivery agents, Uber drivers, etc. In sum, it is not a qualitative transformation. Contractual labor with cramped and shared housing facilities with little to no social security is their new life in transforming India. Even as India is urbanizing in both quantitative and qualitative terms, they remain outliers to the imagination of the cities. To complicate the matter even further, rural folks who are unskilled or semi-skilled do not have bargaining power due to the surplus labor force. Confined to labor camps and slums which are hidden behind scaffoldings during prestigious events, they are invisible and de-humanized.
The long march on the highways of despair and misery is thus a movement between two worlds of miseries and deprivations. Maybe the cityscape gives them employment but not the dignity of labor. COVID-19 has been another event that shows them that they do not belong to the cities. They were seen as a risk due to pitiable living conditions, and they were left unattended. Domestic help and drivers in the gated communities, who till the other day were integral to the urban household management were seen as a threat. When households and families retreated from social interactions, the expendables had to be exiled.

Planners and policymakers who envisage smart and global cities reduced the migrant laborers to a footnote in their city maps, with hardly any right to the city! So, when the pandemic unfolded, they were pushed back to where they ‘belonged’: their homelands. For argument sake, should
planners and policymakers factor a rare event in their vision? Will it be too costly? I think a cost-
benefit analysis is futile, one should rather factor dignity of labor and humanity in their plans.

The ‘Morality’ of the Moral Outrage

Every day thousands from rural India undertake bus and train journeys in search of employment, did anyone complain? They traveled in ‘normal’ buses and trains without the agony that was witnessed during the national lockdown. They migrated to cities and industrial towns, blended into the invisible underbelly of these locations, to service the urban India and labor in the booming economic activities. These journeys were celebrated as employment generation and propulsion to urbanizing India. What these journeys hid was the physical and emotional pain in leaving the homeland in search of livelihood and the deteriorating rural conditions. If we did not emote then, if we did not exhibit moral outrage then, is the present moral outrage righteous and justifiable?

I reckon the present moral outrage has nothing to do with the inactivity of the State concerning the migrant laborers. It has to do with urban India, especially, the politically amoral middle-class. When the entire population was in the lockdown some got stuck in the workplace, some at relatives and friend’s place, and students in the universities and colleges. All of them longed to reach home, to be with their loved ones. The uncertainty and risk in travel compounded the longing to travel. It is this register that made urban India identify with the stranded migrant laborers. The risky perilous journey exposing themselves to the silent virus made it a daunting task. Hence, the tale and travails of the migrant laborers in any available mode of transport became a possible scenario for the travel longing urban India. The migrant, who was a stranger
until then, became someone with whom they could identify. The cry for resolution of the migrant predicament was nothing but a cry for bounding their risks and uncertainties.

The moral outrage is nothing but false and shallow. The conditions that pushed the migrant laborer could have been avoided. It could have been avoided if the civil society and urban middle-class leveraged its social and political capital to create more inclusive cities and society. However, it did not question the structure that has normalized crisis in the world of migrant laborers now and before. Why? It is the same structure that has created and supports the urban Indian middle-class. It is the same structure that has created the conditions for the long march, now and in the past. Rural distress, lack of economic and social mobility in the non-urban spaces, imagining smart cities without people, and forging social solidarities on economic relations caused the turmoil that triggered the long march. The erasure of these factors in the conscience of the middle-class and urban population is a dangerous trend. A state and society forgetting a considerable section of the population is an undesirable scenario.

**Lamp and Shadow of the Neoliberal Cities**

The illusion of economic growth and development is at the heart of the problem: the uneven and combined development happening in the country. A radical political economist, R. S. Rao can help us in understanding this illusion. Professor R. S. Rao’s rebuttal of the celebrated Nehruvian thesis (Nehru was the first Prime Minister of India and touted as the fountainhead of planning and development) of temples of modern democracy and light-shadow illustration of developmental processes are significant and powerful reminders.
During the inauguration of a dam, Nehru famously outlined his new vision for India. “For me, the temples, the gurudwaras, the churches, the mosques of today are these places where human beings labor for the benefit of other human beings, of humanity as a whole. They are the temples of today. I feel more, if I may use the word, religious-minded when I see these great works than when I see any temple or any place of pure worship. These are the places of worship because here we worship something; we build up Indians; we build up the millions of India and so this is a sacred task”. R. S. Rao had responded very sharply, “Yes, they are the modern temples. Like old temples, which forbade the entry of the poor low caste people, the modern temples too forbade the entry of the poor”.

Prof Rao recalled how the tribal people around the dam project reacted to the lack of electricity at their homes, “A lamp would throw light around, but it also creates a shadow beneath and there is space in that shadow”. The statement highlights the complexity of the process of development wherein the visibility of the project and its benefits occlude the losers of such projects. It was a gentle and firm reminder that one should not collapse development projects as developments per se.

Lack of empathy towards the people, those who occupy the shadows when the lights of development glow are making the process of economic growth devoid of a soul. People or human-centric development seems to be beyond the logic of capital and market. So, it is quintessential to place people back in the drawing boards. The demand is to cultivate a disposition or a political morality that can blend technocratic visions of the society with people-centric development.
If this is the history and politics that surround us, the moral outrage displayed at the sight of the long march is misplaced. When millions fled the villages in ‘normal modes of transport’ which may not be physically exhaustive like the long march, but mentally traumatic, there was no concern let alone outrage. The deafening silence is structured by the yearning for more economic activities that have made the larger society politically sterile. The urban middle-class has abdicated its historical and sociological role: building social solidarity in the face of adversity to advocate and deliver structural changes. Moral and ethical considerations are now subverted for economic mobilities. Thomas Hobbes had reminded us centuries ago that: if we are not moral to each other, we will be living in the state of nature, in which everyone is at war against everyone else. We might ask, in the post-pandemic world, will it be possible to build moral cities?