Migrant Labour during the Pandemic: A Political Economy Perspective

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Abstract
This article aims to analyse the plight of the migrant workers in India during the Covid 19 pandemic from a political economy perspective. While taking note of the disruptions and uncertainties during the drastic lockdown that was announced suddenly, it is argued that the vulnerabilities of the migrant labour force are deeply embedded in the long-term changes in the political economy of development in India. These changes, on the one hand, have resulted in the gradual weakening of state support to the working classes, and on the other, have resulted in the normalisation of ‘cheap labour’ as a legitimate objective of neoliberal capitalist development. Locating the conditions of the migrant working class on the specificities of the manifold restructuring of the Indian economy under neoliberal globalisation, the study attempts to emphasise the structural dimensions of the current crisis faced by the migrant labourers.

JEL Codes: J46, J61, O15, O17, P16

Keywords
Labour migration, pandemic, vulnerable migrants, circular labour migration, global capitalism

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I. Introduction

The COVID-19 crisis has destroyed the lives and livelihoods of millions of people around the world, and it has emerged as the most disruptive global crisis in recent memory. However, the unfolding implications of the pandemic are being experienced in an uneven manner across the world. Despite the globally interconnected nature of the pandemic, to the extent that the fall-outs of and responses to the pandemic are being refracted through the pre-existing socio-economic and political structures, the unequal and uneven nature of these impacts assumes significance. In a highly unequal world, a severe crisis like the Covid 19 pandemic has further accentuated the widening gap between the superrich and the rest of the society. The rise in the wealth and assets of the billionaires during a period of drastic contractions in income, employment and consumption of a substantial section of the population suggest that inequality has emerged as a key dimension of this global crisis (Oxfam International, 2021). Several reports suggest a likely worsening, or a reversal of improvements, in key areas of human development and welfare, including food security and nutrition (United Nations, 2020).

The case of India exemplifies the interrelationship between inequality and destitution during the pandemic. After ignoring the early signs of the possibility of a pandemic, a sudden and harsh lockdown was imposed to contain the spread of the virus. The lockdown and its manifold impacts on the economy resulted in a drastic reduction in the employment, earnings, consumption and savings of a large section of the working class in the urban informal sector. Several thousands of workers, along with their families, started moving towards their villages, and many of them started walking on roads or railway tracks as public transport had been stopped. The sufferings, deaths and illness of the migrants on the roads, circulated through the news and social media, prompted governments and civil society groups to organise relief and transport for them to reach their homes. Probably for the first time, the enormity of the crisis of livelihoods faced by the migrant workers acquired the centre stage in the national-level political discussions. However, by and large, the crisis was viewed through the prism of the pandemic situation, and its deeper, structural roots were ignored.

This article, relying upon the existing secondary data, insights from field surveys by the author and other scholars, results of quick surveys brought out by various organisations, and media reports, aims at bringing out the long-term, structural features of the livelihoods crisis faced by the migrant workers. Locating the conditions of the migrant working class on the specificities of the manifold restructuring of the Indian economy under neoliberal globalisation, the article attempts to emphasise the structural dimensions of the current crisis faced by the migrant labourers. Based on the available secondary information and primary surveys done before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, the article contextualises the ways through which labour is being pushed out of agriculture and the rural economy and the modes through which it is being absorbed into the informal economy. By focusing on the precariousness faced by labour under contemporary capitalism, the article points to the need to understand the livelihoods crisis of the migrant workers in a class-theoretic, political economy framework rather than one focusing exclusively on the voluntary ‘choices’ exercised by the migrant workers. Marxian political economy, in particular, locates migration in the structural-historical context of capitalist accumulation. Scholars inspired by such formulations point to the inherent logic of labour exploitation under capitalism and the need for maintaining a ‘reserve labour’ (Vogel, 2013), as well as the emerging patterns of international division of labour as key aspects of understanding the conditions of migrant workers. Migration in the underdeveloped economies is seen in relation to ‘the mutually reinforcing dialectical relationship between the social process, reflecting production relations, and the spatial structure, reflecting uneven development’ (Shrestha, 1988, p. 181), and hence, the nature of agrarian change assumes significance for understanding the migration process (Delgado Wise & Veltmeyer,
Further, a political economy perspective recognises that ‘different social groups and different individuals are placed in very distinct ways in relation to … flows and interconnections’. It is the differentiated access to various resources, and their positions in the power relations that ultimately determine who ‘who moves and who doesn’t’ as well as how social groups negotiate with the processes of mobilities’ (Massey, 1993, p. 61 and 62).

II. Labour Migration in India: Emerging Patterns

Migration in India is comparatively low (Bell et al., 2015). According to the 2011 Population Census, the number of migrants was 450 million. The share of the migrant in total population increased to 37% in 2011, from 30% in 2001. A significant part of the migration is primarily for ‘social reasons’, such as marriage and the movement of families. However, there are indications that migration for economic reasons, which includes migration for work, business and studies, particularly among the males is on the rise. After the initiation of sweeping economic reforms since the early 1990s, it was expected that the observed increase in per capita income would also lead to a substantial increase in labour migration. To some extent, the increase in the extent of labour migration has been observed in the available secondary data on migration (Srivastava, 2011; Srivastava et al., 2020).

Migration streams in India continue to be segmented and diverse. Analysis of NSS data suggest that on an average migrants are better-off than the non-migrant populations (Kundu & Sarangi, 2007). However, as Vakulabharanam and Thakurta (2014) have shown on the basis of the 64th round data, inequality in MPCE is higher among the migrants than among the non-migrant populations. The difference in MPCE between the unskilled migrant and non-migrant workers is not high, but because of the relatively higher presence of educated and skilled workers among the migrants, particularly among the migrant workers in the urban–urban stream, they tend to be much better-off than the average population (Vakulabharanam & Thakurata, 2014). Thus, migration, while opening up opportunities, might reflect pre-existing inequalities, rather than diluting it.

Among the recent changes that have been noted by researchers is the emergence of a new migration corridor involving outmigration from the relatively less-developed states of eastern and north-eastern India to the relatively developed states in South and Western India (Mishra, 2016a, 2020b; Sarkar & Mishra, 2020; Srivastava et al., 2020). The inter-state flow of labour migration (0–9 years) from the NSS, 2007–2008 data suggest that apart from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Odisha, Assam and West Bengal are the net migrant labour-sending states, while Maharashtra, Punjab, Haryana, Delhi, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Goa are among net migrant-receiving states. Tamil Nadu and Kerala, despite receiving significant number of migrants are net senders, although in the case of the later the net volume is declining (Srivastava et al., 2020). Such migration patterns are broadly consistent with the nature of inter-state differences in wages for casual workers (see, Acharya, 2017; Venkatesh, 2013). Migrant workers, often cite higher wages as well as the higher probability of finding work at the destination as their reason for migration (Sarkar & Mishra, 2020). The language barriers, which were supposed to be a significant factor discouraging inter-state migration, is weakening (Ministry of Finance, 2017). Apart from the outmigration of young males from rural India to distant cities and towns, there is also the increased mobility of young females from relatively less-developed states, such as Odisha, to the export-processing zones and factories located in various southern states.

Post-reform economic growth, for the most part, has been accompanied by processes of uneven economic development, which is not only manifested through widening inter-state differences but also
divergences in inter-regional economic development at the sub-state levels. In this context, there is a growing optimism associated with the increasing flow of labour migration from the relatively less-developed regions to the developed states and cities. In the context of international migration, the developmental role of remittance flows is well-recognised, and in a similar vein, the outmigration of labour from the backward regions has raised expectations for a spatially anchored, market-mediated path out of poverty through the labour markets.

The gains from providing cheap labour within the domestic economy are also based on the diverse trajectories of demographic transition within India. The migration flows broadly reflect a supply of labour from states with relatively higher levels of fertility and a higher share of the younger-age population to the southern states with better levels of human development that are close to achieving replacement-levels of fertility, thus a kind of domestic demographic dividend (also see, Kulkarni, 2017; Srivastava et al., 2020). If such labour migration leads to higher earnings and consumption expenditure for the poor, migrant-sending households, it is likely to pull them out of poverty; while not putting an additional burden on the state and providing a source of cheap labour at the destination areas. Such migration decisions are also being seen as a voluntary decision of individuals and households to expanding opportunities in an expanding economy. However, the enormous diversity in the migration flows and the widely differentiated nature, processes and outcomes of migration flows suggest against the dangers of such generalisations for all sections of the migrants (Srivastava et al., 2020). For a section of educated, better-skilled migrant workers, the service-sector led transformation of the Indian economy has made a range of high-paying jobs accessible, and they have gained from migrating out to distant cities and towns. At the same time, there is clear evidence that for a majority of migrant workers, who work as informal workers, the available employment opportunities are highly precarious (Srivastava, 2020). Low education and skills force a substantial majority of migrant workers to survive at the bottom of the job pyramid, either as self-employed or as low-earning, casual wage workers.

The significant gender differences in the occupational and industrial distribution of the migrant workforce point to the role of entrenched social hierarchies in shaping migration flows. In a study based on the NSS 64th round data, Mazumdar et al. (2013) point out that in 2007–2008, of the total male migrants, 15.60% were engaged in agriculture and allied activities, 16.77% were in construction, 24.01% were in mining, manufacturing and electricity, 16.19% were in trade, hotel and restaurants, and 27.44% were in other services (excluding trade, hotel and restaurants). Female migrants were more concentrated in agriculture and allied activities (34.31%), followed by services other than trade, hotel and restaurants (29.54%), mining, manufacturing and electricity (19.44%), construction (11.39%), and trade, hotel and restaurants (5.23%). Male short-term migrants were overwhelmingly concentrated in the construction sector (41.73%), while short-term female migrants were mainly engaged in agriculture (43.47%) and in construction (33%) (Mazumdar et al., 2013).

A frequently cited evidence to underscore the diverse motivations and outcomes of internal labour migration in India is the differences in the socio-economic profile of circular, short-term or seasonal migrants and that of the long-term migrants (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; Mishra, 2020b; Sharma, 2005). Circular and seasonal migration is typically underestimated in official statistics (Srivastava, 2019). Available data suggest that while long-term migrants are more likely to be from rich and middle peasants, upper castes and those already in non-farm occupations, relatively developed regions; seasonal migrants mostly belong to the less-developed regions, scheduled caste and scheduled tribe communities and landless or marginal farmer households (Keshri & Bhagat, 2012; Sharma, 2005). Insights from field surveys in the Kalahandi-Balangir-Koraput region in interior Odisha suggest that seasonal and circular outmigration is mainly from the land poor, less educated and socially marginalised groups such as SCs, STs and OBCs (Mishra, 2020b). The two distinctive features of such circular outmigration from the
region are the relatively more significant presence of women and children, particularly among those who migrate to the brickkilns through tied loans from labour contractors, and the overwhelming dominance of inter-state migration (Mishra, 2016b, 2020b). The distress dimension of seasonal migration in this predominantly rainfed region has been noted by several researchers (Agnihotri & Mazumdar, 2009; Meher, 2019; Sengupta & Vijay, 2017). But at the same time, autonomous migration of young males to the construction and other sectors in states such as Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka, often facilitated through social and family networks, have been on the rise (Mishra, 2020b). Thus, the circular migration flows are far from being static, which is reflected in the shift from dadan migration through contractors to autonomous migration of the youth, the changes in the duration and frequency of migration episodes, as well as the role of remittances in the overall livelihoods strategy of the migrant-sending households. Such changes have been noticed in field studies in other parts of India as well (Sarkar & Mishra, 2020).

Notwithstanding the heterogeneity of these migration flows, the agrarian origins of the migration flow need specific mention. Post-reform economic changes in India has resulted in the widening disparities between the farm and non-farm sector as well as between the rural and urban incomes. While there was a sustained and perceptible increase in India’s per capita income, the agricultural sector faced a prolonged period of agrarian distress, precisely during a period of relative economic prosperity for the rest of the economy (Mishra, 2020a; Reddy & Mishra, 2009). A substantial majority of farmer households are not able to cover their consumption needs solely from the agricultural earnings (Basole & Basu, 2011). Hence, there has been an increased dependence on non-agricultural incomes within and outside the rural economy. The share of labour households has increased, and a large chunk of small and marginal households tend to depend on wage labour as a subsidiary or main source of income. For the first time, the share of workers dependent on agriculture has gone below 50%; and also there has been a decline in the share and in the absolute number of farmers in rural India. With improvements in roads and transport, commuting to nearby small towns as well as semi-permanent and short-duration circular migration has increased.

The outmigration of labour from agricultural households is both accumulative as well as for survival. As the relatively better-off sections of the peasantry have been able to invest in the education of their children, some of them have started to move out in search of better employment opportunities. In such types of outmigration, accumulated social capital in terms of support from networks of family, relatives and friends, as well as households savings, play a significant role in accessing information and financing the cost of migration. On the other hand, for the majority of landless labour, small and marginal farmer households, it is no longer possible to eke out a living from agriculture alone, and hence they also try to move out through various channels of circular migration. With low levels of education, financial and social capital, they typically try to access jobs through labour contractors or through the networks of families and friends. Some of the worst types of migration labour contracts are found in the case of those who migrate after taking tied loans from labour contractors and their agents. Many of them end-up as self-employed in the urban informal economy or as manual wage workers in sectors such as construction. There are significant regional variations in the way such labour migration is structured, and it is also important to note that the outcomes of migration vary significantly across different categories of migrants, even within the same region. Outmigration from the rural areas is part of the process of differentiation of the peasantry. Trajectories of outmigration are often shaped by the class-location of the out-migrating individuals and households in the rural economy (Vijay, 2016; Thapa, 2016). To the extent that petty commodity production is the dominant form of production in rural India, the migration patterns are intrinsically linked with the production relations in agriculture in varied and complex ways. As noted above, agrarian accumulation has led to investments in non-agrarian activities and livelihoods (Lerche,
2011), and outmigration for self-employment and wage employment for the rich and middle peasants can be seen as part of this process. On the other hand, there is evidence to argue that one of the prominent aspects of the ties of circular migrants with their places of origin is through periodic participation in agricultural activities. In some cases, such correspondence between seasonality of agriculture and circular migration is gradually weakening (Sarkar & Mishra, 2020), putting the household livelihoods trajectories in a path of gradual deagrarianisation. In some cases, though, remittances are being used to free mortgaged agricultural land, finance agricultural operations, creating a possibility that outmigration of a section of family labour might provide a breathing space for petty commodity production in agriculture, although not enough is known regarding the regional variations in the extent of such relationships (Mishra, 2020b).

The post-reform economic growth in India has been termed as ‘jobless growth’—the nature of the growth has been such that it has not generated enough employment opportunities for the expanding labour force (Kannan & Raveendran, 2009; Thomas, 2012). The share of manufacturing in employment has remained more or less constant, and the service sector, which has been a key driver of growth, has not generated many avenues for employment, particularly for the workers who are leaving agriculture in ever larger numbers (Ghose, 2020). Whatever jobs are being available in the high-end, globally integrated and IT or IT-enabled segments, those require high-skilled workers. This skill-biased service-sector growth, despite contributing to the growth of per capita income, has simultaneously contributed to the crisis of employment in India. The employment structure in India is dominated by the large informal economy. Apart from the persistence of the unorganised sector, jobs in the formal sector are being informalised (Mehrotra & Parida, 2019). Thus, with low skills, less education and less access to social capital, for a significant majority of the migrant workers, the informal economy has been the primary source of employment. A significant majority survive through self-employment, and others work as casual wage labourers, and many trying to survive through switching between the two. The precariousness of work in the informal economy has been widely noted. The linkage between informality and global capitalism is an important dimension to understand the persistence of informality in contemporary India. Of course, the informal economy has not remained stagnant. Verick (2018), for example, points to the changing composition of the informal workers during 2009–2010 to 2011–2012, while the share of workers in the unorganised sector declined (from 86.3% in 2004–2005 to 84.7% in 2009–2010, and further to 82.7% in 2011–2012), the share of those who are informal workers in a formal economy had gone up, keeping the share of informal workers at around 92% (Verick, 2018). Migrant informal workers are being absorbed both through the dispersed and hierarchically linked networks of contractors, as well as autonomous wage workers. Informality is often seen in quantitative thresholds, below which lies the unorganised sector, the specificity of which, in turn, is explained as being beyond state regulation. Useful as it may, such characterisation overlooks the layered and durable interactions of such ‘unorganised establishments’ with agencies of the state. These tiny enterprises may not be registered, but they are certainly regulated by the state-through direct and indirect restrictions, regulations and concessions. Informality is simultaneously reflected in the labour relations of these micro-entities. Migration flows, to some extent at least, get clustered around ties of social identities based on caste, religion, ethnicity, language and region. The labour contractors, for example, often recruit, mobilise, supervise and discipline labour through such ties that go beyond the worksites. It is not entirely accidental that a group of workers from the same regions work together in multiple sites, move from one site to another, depending upon where the contractor sends them for work. There is a substantial migrant workforce that is employed through labour contractors, even when the primary employers are large firms, often having ties with global production and distribution networks (Mezzadri & Srivastava, 2015; Srivastava & Sutradhar, 2016). They remain invisible in the payrolls of the companies, and this invisibility is reinforced through
various forms of social and political marginalisation. This large section of migrant workers, who work either as self-employed or wage workers in the informal sector or as informal workers in the formal sector, are vulnerable migrants (Srivastava, 2020). Some of them, such as those working as bonded labourers, daadan labour or similar exploitative forms of labour relations, are part of the unfree labour force (Breman & Guerin, 2009; Mishra, 2019).

The precarious living and working conditions of the migrant workers in general and migrant informal workers in particular have been noticed through the examination of the available primary and secondary data. However, it has been often described as a positive outcome, on the grounds that (a) it is part of a process of structural transformation and sectoral reallocation of labour that leads to an increase in overall labour productivity; (b) since the wages and earnings that migrant workers are higher at the destinations than what they would have earned at the origin areas, on an average it improves their living conditions; (c) such movements signal the individuals exercising their agencies to overcome the limitations imposed by the local economies at the origins and in its essence a response to expanding opportunities in a growing economy. These arguments are supported by empirical evidence to some extent, but such outcomes have to be contextualised with the fact that despite these positive outcomes, not all sections of the migrant workers have been able to achieve such sustained improvements in their living standards. Notwithstanding some improvements in their earnings and employment prospects post-migration, many of the migrants live in make-shift shelters, worksites, open spaces and slums. They often live in cramped rented or employer-provided accommodations, try to spend as little as possible for themselves and save enough to send money back to their families (Mishra, 2019, 2020b; Sengupta & Vijaya, 2015; Vijay, 2005). For a substantial section of migrants, the earnings are not good enough to bring their families to the destinations. Circular migrants, who change their worksites and employers frequently, find it difficult to bring their families with them. Thus, except for specific sectors such as brick kilns and some construction activities (Mishra, 2016b; Sengupta & Vijaya, 2015; Smita, 2007), male-selective migration is increasingly the norm. Even when migrant workers bring their families to the destinations, they face hardships in getting adequate housing and other essential amenities. In both cases, single migrants sharing living costs with others, and the unpaid family labour of migrants at destinations or at the origin areas, labour households help in bringing down the cost of reproduction of labour for capital. The social economies of reproduction play a significant role in the accumulation strategies under contemporary global capitalism.

III. Migrant Workers During the Pandemic

It is in this context of vulnerability of the migrant workers that their plight during the COVID-19 pandemic could be understood. The initial response to the pandemic situation was a sudden and harshly implemented lockdown. This had a severe but uneven impact on the economy. While for the middle classes, it meant being confined to their homes and gradually switching over to online modes of work, communication and entertainment, for the working classes, it was a sudden disruption of earnings. For the poor, particularly those living in the congested slums, social distancing was a luxury (Wasdani & Prasad, 2020). For a long time, researchers on migration have been pointing out that there is not enough statistics on migration. Also, there was a divergence between the picture from secondary sources and that from field-based research. The invisibility of the migrant workers both from official statistics and policy thinking meant that their response to the lockdown was hardly anticipated. A large majority of migrant workers were surviving under such conditions that they could not survive the abrupt decline in their
earnings. They simply did not have enough savings with them to meet their consumption needs or pay their rents. As the lockdown progressed, thousands of migrant workers and their families started to move out to roads, bus stations and train stations in an effort to reach their homes. As public transport systems had been closed, many of them started walking on the roads to reach their homes hundreds of kilometres away. This lead to an unprecedented humanitarian crisis. The unpreparedness of civic authorities and government departments to deal with a crisis of this magnitude led to further sufferings of the migrants. Many died due to diseases, exhaustion, accidents, and many more, including women and children, suffered a lot of hardships and humiliation during this journey back home (Bhagat et al., 2020; Mishra et al., 2020).

The full impact of the lockdown and the pandemic on India’s vulnerable migrant workers would require a detailed study, and at the moment, only a fragmented picture could be presented from various rapid surveys and assessments. Broadly, the immediate impacts of the pandemic included loss of employment and earnings, non-payment of backlog wages, loss in consumption, and depletion of savings. The results of a quick telephonic survey of 3,196 randomly selected workers from a database conducted by Jan Sahas, suggested that 92.5% of workers had already suffered a loss of employment by the end of March 2020 (Jan Sahas, 2020). Another survey conducted by the Centre for Equity Studies and others noted nearly 92% of the respondents did not find any work during the lockdown. No significant difference in loss of employment was found between rural and urban areas, which goes against the popular perception that job loss due to the lockdown was largely an urban phenomenon. In comparison to the intra-state migrants, inter-state migrants suffered job loss to a greater extent. There was also a widely shared anxiety regarding future employment prospects; only 46% of the workers were optimistic about getting back their old jobs (Centre for Equity Studies et al., 2020).

As expected, the catastrophic and abrupt loss of employment led to a drastic fall in the income of the migrant workers. The Jan Sahas survey reported that as such, a majority of workers were being paid a wage that was below the statutory minimum wages. In the aftermath of the lockdown, there was a severe curtailment of wages, and the situation was so difficult that in April 2020, nearly 66% of workers had reported that they would not be able to manage even beyond a week. Many of the workers could not get their backlog payments. According to a report by the Stranded Workers Solidarity Network (SWAN), since the lockdown, about 78% has not been paid at all (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). Another survey on migrant workers from Odisha revealed that nearly one-fourth of the surveyed workers did not have any money left with them at all; slightly over one-fifth reported that they had less than two thousand rupees with them. The reported median amount at their disposal was only ₹1900 (Gram Vikas & Centre for Migration and Inclusive Development, 2020).

Such loss of earnings also led to food shortages for the migrants and their families. As per the Jan Sahas survey mentioned above, nearly 42% of workers mentioned that they did not have the ration for the day. The SWAN survey had noted that between 50–54% of workers had rations left for less than a day, and about 72% of the workers had said that their ration would be finished in two days. Similarly, the Centre for Equity study reported that in June 2020, 10.7% suffered extreme food insecurity, 20.5% had said that they went out of food for 4–7 days, and the rest, 29.9% faced food shortages for 1–2 days. According to this survey, only 38.9% said that they never went entirely out of food.

Migrant workers not only had to suffer a loss of employment and earnings, but they also had to pay higher prices to purchase essential items. Several of them survived by spending from their meagre savings or by borrowings, which was extremely difficult during the lockdown. As per the Jan Sahas survey, more than 79% of workers thought that they would not be able to pay off their debts in the near future, while according to the Centre for Equity Studies report, 50.7% of respondents could not get any loans (Centre for Equity Studies et al., 2020; Jan Sahas, 2020; Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020).
In a village-level survey, it was reported that many workers reported that their employers did not help them at all after the lockdown and had to wait for the money sent by family members, while some got monetary help from their labour contractors to cover the high cost of transport (Mishra et al., 2020). Female workers suffered disproportionately during the crisis (Rajan et al., 2020). The report by the Centre for Equity Studies point to the differentiated nature of the adverse impacts of the pandemic people belonging to the marginalised social groups suffered more than others.

Migrant workers were harshly treated by the law enforcement authorities and were subjected to coercive crowd control measures. Their livelihoods crisis was seen primarily as a law-and-order problem. However, as gradually the magnitude and severity of the crisis unfolded, state and non-state agencies tried to support them through various measures ranging from free kitchens, subsidised rations, medical aid and transport support.

Migrants who returned to their home states were at times subjected to discrimination and were often stigmatised as virus-spreaders. In some areas, panchayats played a significant role in organising quarantine centres for the returnees, but there were complaints of inadequate food, shelter, water and sanitation facilities at the quarantine centres (Mishra et al., 2020). Caste and gender discriminations and exploitation was also reported. Although several relief measures were initiated both by the central and various state governments, the coverage was inadequate, and exclusion errors were reported from various parts of the country.

The rural economies were also severely affected as a result of the pandemic and the lockdown. Agricultural operations were affected; perishable products, including vegetables, fruits and milk, etc., could not be transported to markets. The dairy and poultry sector suffered a considerable loss due to the disruption of supply chains (Mishra et al., 2020; Rawal et al., 2020). In some areas, a shortage of labourers led to the closing down of mandis and hence farmers could not sale their harvested crops for months (Arora, 2020). Along with this, for the rural labour households, lack of wage employment was a major problem. In this context, it was difficult for the returnee migrants to get alternative employment opportunities in their places of origin. Of particular significance was the role of employment opportunities provided through the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). After an initial period of abrupt discontinuation of work under MGNREGA, attempts were made to provide work under the scheme. Wherever such work was made available, there was a great demand for it, and the number of workdays created through MGNREGS increased for a few months in a number of states. Subsequently, a new programme called Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Rozgar Abhiyan was created to provide employment opportunities to the rural labour class. Nevertheless, such support was not considered enough by the migrant labourers, and soon they had to return to their destination areas.

**IV. Looking Beyond the Pandemic: Long-term Implications**

The pandemic created a crisis for the migrant and other workers, but its implications are going to be felt for long. As such, the Indian economy was facing a range of hardships before the onset of the pandemic, particularly on the employment front (Ghosh, 2020). There were indications that economic growth was faltering, and the rural households in general and the rural labour households, in particular, were facing a severe livelihoods crisis. Real wages, both in rural and urban areas, had stagnated, mainly because of the slow growth of non-farm jobs, and unemployment increased. From a political economy perspective, the neoliberal turn in India has resulted in ‘an expansion of the effect of class power of ruling class and expansion of the misery for the masses’ (Das, 2020, p. 529).
The so-called ‘migrant crisis’ essentially emerged out of the conditions of the working classes under neoliberal globalisation. Neoliberal economic policies, notwithstanding the variations in their manifestations under specific context, created conditions for further weakening of the working classes and their representatives. It was presented as a set of economic policies designed for improving efficiency and fostering economic growth, while it was as much an ideological project of big capital (Harvey, 2005). By articulating the universal superiority of market-based allocation of resources, it created conditions for a systematic weakening of welfare and social protection measures designed to protect the working classes and other marginalised sections of the society. In its more aggressive forms, it attacked any interventions designed to promote equality and a decent standard of living for the working classes. It involved a reconfiguration of state interventions in favour of capital and an aggressive transfer of wealth and assets in favour of the richer sections of the society. Inequality has increased manifold, both in the developing as well as the developed world. Because of the integrated nature of the global economy and the concentration of economic power, the scope for charting alternative, autonomous pathways for development, with greater social control over assets and economic decision-making, have shrunk in many different countries.

The post-reforms period witnessed several changes in the domain of economic policymaking that signify the tilt in favour of capital at the expense of the working classes (Sood et al., 2014). Looking beyond the specifics of such changes that weakened state support for the working class and the marginalised social groups and strengthened the bargaining power of big capital, it is important to underscore the terms within which the Indian economy is getting integrated with global capitalism. Several facets of this integration are premised on the availability of cheap labour in India. Given that a significant section of the working classes is engaged in the informal economy, the global linkages are invariably interlinked with the possibilities of integrating informal workers, without social security and state protection, to be part of such global value and commodity chains, under a system of the global division of labour. Migrant informal workers are part of this global capitalism as providers of cheap labour at the low end of the value and commodity chains, generally involving low levels of skills. Thus, it is hardly surprising that multinational corporations, big corporations and those working with cutting edge and high-end technologies prefer to employ informal workers through layers of contractors. Such labour relations have been encountered too frequently in a wide range of industries, and these cannot probably be dismissed as mere aberrations. This is the ‘low road to capitalism’ that is premised on the availability and exploitation of labour, often through pre- and non-capitalist institutions (Basile, 2013). That a large segment of the migrant workers could not bear an abrupt disruption of their earnings even for a few weeks was the outcome of a process that has made precarious employment a durable aspect of labour relations in India (Breman, 2020). While informality has a long history in India, during the period of post-reform economic growth, such employment relations have acquired a renewed significance and salience (Harriss-White, 2003). The links between the precarity of informal workers and capitalist accumulation have been widely noted (Lerche & Shah, 2018). Such precarious livelihoods are part of the structural conditions that facilitate the use of cheap labour and surplus appropriation under contemporary capitalism.

The sources of vulnerabilities are not only economic but also social and political. Migrant workers are routinely stigmatised as ‘outsiders’, who are responsible for making the cities ‘crowded, polluted and crime prone’. Often, migrants are targets of nativist politicians, who portray them as ‘encroachers’, taking away jobs and assets from the ‘sons of the soil’. Sometimes, they are discriminated against on racial, religious and cultural differences (Remesh, 2016). Such negative social attitudes also got manifested during the pandemic. In political terms, vulnerable migrants face double exclusions—at the place of origin, their absence weakens their bargaining power, and at the destinations, they often remain
perpetual outsiders. Their citizenship rights remain fractured, and their access to state institutions are often blocked because of procedural and ideological biases. Migrants are not always passive victims; they tend to form social networks, join associations and try to access formal and informal institutions. However, to the extent that access to state support and welfare programmes are anchored to the domicile status of individuals, migrant workers in general and circular migrants in the particular face numerous barriers to exercise their rights as full and equal citizens. Economic, social and political exclusions and discriminations tend to reinforce one another. When state governments attempted to organise subsidised transport for the stranded migrant workers, poor financial resources, lack of access to information as well as linguistic barriers contributed to the inability of some migrant workers to access the benefits.

During the pandemic, the actions and inactions of the state and government agencies were crucial for the migrants. Initial response to the attempts by migrant workers was largely coercive as their behaviour was seen as a law-and-order problem. Gradually, there was a more organised response to provide relief and transport to the stranded workers. The organisation of such support to the migrant workers alerted the government machinery at various level to the acute shortage of information regarding migrant workers either at the state or central government levels. Attempts were made to register migrant workers through online platforms.

At the same time, several decisions were taken by various state governments that were against the interests of labour. Several state governments relaxed the provisions of the existing labour laws as a counter-measure to the economic crisis. The stated objective of such sudden suspension was that it would boost employment by giving greater flexibility to the employers, an argument that not only disregarded the available empirical evidence but also the realities of the pandemic situation (Rathi & Chatterjee, 2020). This was followed by the announcement of three labour codes and rules, which was presented as part of an ongoing process of simplification and relaxation of the labour laws in India. The implications of these laws and rules for labour welfare need a detailed examination. From the perspective of the vulnerable migrant workers, the upward revision of the thresholds of employment size for the application of several laws, restrictions put on labour and their representatives to go on strike and engage in collective bargaining, as well as dilution of minimum wage provisions and other protective measures for labour meant a weakening of their position (Roychowdhury & Sarkar, 2021). Jayati Ghosh has argued that besides its failure to design an adequate economic policy response to the challenges created by the pandemic, the government was using the pandemic situation as an opportunity to push through ‘reforms’ designed to ‘alter the relative power of big capital to labour and to other groups in society’ (Ghosh, 2020).

The Covid 19 pandemic has destroyed the lives and livelihoods of millions of Indians. Among the worst affected sections are the vulnerable migrant workers. The extent of their vulnerabilities has remained invisible from official statistics as well as policy measures, and it took a humanitarian crisis of a massive scale for them to find temporary visibility in the public discussions. Their sufferings did not result solely or primarily from the pandemic per se; rather, it was the culmination of a long process of exclusion and adverse incorporation into the circuits of global capitalism as cheap and disposable labour. The neoliberal economic policies have created a livelihoods crisis for the rural, agrarian economies, and the limited options that labour has in the non-farm economy is mostly in the informal economy, with low earnings, hyper insecurity and lack of basic social security. The vulnerable migrant workers are the unacknowledged foundations of India’s integration into the circuits of global capitalism. The crisis faced by a large section of the working classes during the pandemic is symptomatic of the conditions of survival of labour under super-exploitation by capital. There has been a steady erosion of the power of the working classes vis-à-vis capital in the past decades—a process that continued unabated even during the pandemic. Apart from a range of supportive measures that strengthen the livelihoods prospects of the migrant workers, safeguards their economic and political rights, and minimises their exclusion from
state-sponsored welfare schemes, a recognition of the structural nature of the employment crisis of the Indian economy would be required to address their persistent vulnerability.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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