Migrant Workers and COVID-19: Listening to the Unheard Voices of Invisible India

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Abstract
The internal migrant workers in India, despite being highly vulnerable in terms of physical and mental health, have remained the backbone of the Indian economy. However, the recent lockdown situation created by pandemic has put them in a more precarious condition. On one hand, they have lost their jobs and earnings, while on the other, they did not have enough resources to survive at the place of migration. As a result, the nation witnessed mass exodus, where men, women, children were seen returning to their native places on foot. This article, through a critical review of interdisciplinary and ethnographic research, focuses on the status of migrant workers in India amidst lockdown and strategies that may help to mitigate the situation. This article also explores the future course of action that can improve migrant workers’ condition.

Keywords
Lockdown, COVID-19, migrant workers, India

The first case of novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in India was detected on 30 January 2020. Due to its contagious nature with no promising cure and limited health care facilities along with a large population, the only precaution that the Indian government could have taken for its containment was to implement a nation-wide lockdown. On 25 March 2020, India declared a nationwide lockdown for 21 days. It was extended till 31 May 2020 in various phases. Although this initiative has helped the government to reduce the spread of the disease and stop community-level transmission, it hampered the economy, thus leading to the
economic crisis for industries, businesses and people belonging to various societal strata. It has adversely affected the member of the lower section of the society, particularly the internal or within country migrant workers. World Bank (2020) in its report says that ‘lockdowns, loss of employment, and social distancing prompted a chaotic and painful process of mass return for internal migrants in India and many countries’ (p. 5). Its impact is going to be more pervasive and chronic on the wellbeing of migrant workers and may further dehumanise them (Pandey et al., 2020). In this regard, this article discusses the condition of migrant workers during the lockdown, the strategies adopted by the Indian government to mitigate the situation, challenges that it is experiencing while implementing these strategies, and recommendations for a future course of action.

**The Genesis of the Mass Exodus**

The issue of migrant workers’ suffering caught the eyes of urban India for the first time on 28 March 2020, where the whole nation witnessed thousands of helpless migrant workers standing in a long queue of approximately 3 km in front of Anand Vihar Bus terminus (Delhi) desperate to catch the bus to reach to their native place (the Delhi and Uttar Pradesh Government had arranged buses for the stranded migrants) (Singh, 2020). As the days passed, the country witnessed more heart-wrenching images and news of the migrant workers walking hundreds of kilometres to reach their home across state borders. However, the question that many members of the privileged class have asked is the reason for this mass exodus particularly when the government was providing them food and other essential items. The answer to this is the following.

**Inadequate Resources to Survive at the Place of Migration**

Migrant workers constitute one of the weaker sections of the society (Sainath, 2020) that have forever been whimpering under the whips of the capitalistic society. The pandemic has rubbed salt to their wounds. It has put many migrants, particularly those who are unskilled and working in informal sectors, in an adverse condition. In haste to control the situation created by pandemic, the state considered little about these people while implementing a nationwide lockdown, and the employers and intermediaries, who were the last hope had also turned their backs on these pitiable people. The migrant workers’ class, which largely depends on their daily earning, had literally nothing to fall back on. A survey of 11,159 migrant workers by the Stranded Workers Action Network (2020) reported that only 72 per cent of migrant workers had rations in storage for the next 2 days. Ninety-six per cent reported that they have not received any ration from the
government agencies. If we take a look at the available cash with them, approximately 70 per cent migrant workers had only ₹200–300 for the remaining days in the lockdown. Also, 89 per cent workers reported that they had not been paid by their employers. Furthermore, the migrants were unable to return to their native place due to the interruption to the public transportation system. The landlords, despite the government’s order, did not exempt the room rent (Kottai, 2020). These socio-politically induced constraints left migrants choiceless, and therefore, they ultimately took up the herculean task of reaching back home on foot, putting up with their unrequited biological needs, and braving the harsh climate and equally harsh attitude of the police. Their plight and suffering can be seen in the following excerpt of Kamta Prasad, a native of Tikamgarh, Madhya Pradesh, who works as construction labour in Delhi.

I work as a labourer at construction sites. With the announcement of countrywide lockdown, I became unemployed. I know it would be not easy for me to survive in Delhi in the next 18 days of lockdown. I have only about ₹1000 as my savings and I want to spend it on my journey from Delhi to my native place. (Singh, 2020, para. 5)

Ironically, although the migrants are the pillars of modern India and part of our society, in many ways they are the part of the ‘Invisible India … a part that is unrecognised, unfeted and dusted under the carpets most of the time, belonging to a host of 126 million migrant workers who work silently’ (Bijoor, 2020, para. 5).

Loss of Dignity and Violation of Fundamental Rights

The privileged or ‘The Visible India’ has largely been oblivious to these human beings and rarely talked about their rights and dignity due to two reasons. The first reason is the difference in the conceptualisation of fundamental rights for ourselves and others. In this context former chief justice, Shah (2020) says that there is a gap between what we [the middle and upper class] consider as relevant for the right of living for ourselves and for the people who are below than us in socio-economic terms. This perception of fundamental rights is often diminished to mere survival when it is considered in the case of a less privileged class. A Public Interest Litigation (PIL) was filed by activists under the Article 21 of Indian constitution, in which they proposed that migrant workers who are stuck at the place of migration, should be paid the minimum wages till the lockdown is over. However, one of the questions raised in the Supreme Court of India was the requirement of minimum wages as the workers are getting meals and food grains (Stranded Workers Action Network, 2020). Article 21 of the Indian Constitution says that the fundamental rights of the individual are not confined to mere survival, but it is also about the right to the livelihood, dignity, liberty and health of the citizens. Hence, the same should naturally be extended to the underprivileged class, whereas a free soul of a civic society they should have the right to live with
dignity and to be treated equally. However, the inherent inequality in India’s socio-economic system violates the fundamental rights of the citizens of the Republic of India. For example, on 25 March 2020, only 4-hour notice was given to its citizens before declaring the complete shutdown which led to many migrant workers stranded in the city. Nevertheless, if migrant workers’ rights were considered, a large number of workers would have gone to their place without any hassle. As Karat (2020) said:

If their [migrant workers’] rights as citizens had been factored in, it would have been better planned … This right was denied to them. Instead, this huge army of India’s labour force was reduced to becoming objects of suspicion, considered as burdens, in many cases beaten into submission for trying to get home, herded into camps, treated as less than humans, leave alone as equal citizens. (para. 3)

The second reason for ignorance or indifference towards these migrant workers is their non-participation in the voting process. They leave their identities at their native place, and often contractors and employers (at the place of migration) do not care about helping them avail their right to vote. Hence, in their own country, their identity trickles down to that of refugees, where they were and are being treated as secondary citizens. The dignity of the migrant workers, which was almost non-existent in the eyes of ‘The Visible India’ fell further low, as they were left to the charity of the privileged class. In order to get food, they queued for hours in line. Most of the volunteers who have been offering help, were more interested in clicking pictures and posting them on social media. Anup Kumar, a migrant labourer in Mumbai, was going (on foot) to his native place in Uttar Pradesh, shared:

We sometimes get food, sometimes we do not…We have to depend on charity for survival. We have no money. Please let us go [he requests the reporter]. Can you explain them [the police] the condition we are in? There is no dignity in living like this. It is humiliating. (Parth, 2020, paras. 10–11)

Migrant workers’ suffering is not new; however, it took a pandemic for the privileged class to become cognizant of their agony. In this light, the pandemic has finally done some justice by rendering them some spotlight for all the appropriate reasons.

Lack of Faith in the Existing Socio-political System

In 2013–2014, the first author in a research project on health and mental health of the migrant labourers, interviewed some of the migrant labourers in order to explore their suffering. One of the causes of their suffering that emerged was migrants’ perception of their own powerlessness and exploitation by the privileged class. This perception had created a sense of injustice in them, thus leading to losing faith in the system and perceiving the system as an agency that, instead of working for poor, works against them. The narrative of Bano, a
28-year-old domestic helper, living in a shelter-home (run by Centre for Equity Studies) in Delhi with her children indicated the same. During the interview, she responded in the following manner that reflected her distrust and indifference towards the system:

Whatever you are doing, it is for yourself, for your benefit, and not for the poor. This might be your first experience of interviewing us but it is not the first time for us. I am safe in the shelter otherwise we lived on the roadside for three years. In winters and in rainy seasons we used polythene and blankets to cover ourselves while sleeping. Then we moved to a nearby park where our dwellings were put on fire. Had we also been rich, the policemen would have never put our dwellings in flames. It was winter when they had burned our houses because of which my children and I had to suffer as all our clothes were burned. Nobody protects the poor. (Yadav, 2019, p. 9)

Come 2020, during the COVID-19 lockdown, their lack of faith in the system was no less. Romodar, a stranded migrant labourer in Mumbai, who was going on foot to his native place in Uttar Pradesh, said:

I stood in queue until 2 in the morning, just to submit my form to the police station … There is no assurance when we would be able to board the train home. I do not trust anyone. We are poor people. Nobody listens to us. (Parth, 2020, para. 6)

Another migrant worker says that *Hum keede makode hain, humein marne ke liye chhod diya hai* (‘We are seen as vermin and have been left to die.’) (Yadav, 2020, para 1). The migrant workers’ class does not trust the system, and they are also very well aware that the privileged do not care about them. However, the lockdown situation has exposed this insensitivity towards them in a barbaric manner (Mander, 2020). The society which was never their home and was ashamed of these stark pictures of penury, yet again reminded them of their destitution and their inevitable fate which is abundant with oddities that they have to brave on their own.

**Mitigating the Crisis and Its Challenges**

As the country witnessed the misery of the migrant workers, more and more humanitarian aid was provided by non-government organisations and individuals. Meanwhile, the government also took initiatives to ease the situation. The central government of India announced approximately 350 schemes describing the relief measures for the migrant workers (COVID-19 Government Order Tracking, 2020). These included: (a) arrangement of buses and special trains to help the migrants to reach their destination, (b) arrangement of temporary shelters, food, clean drinking water, and other medical facilities for those who were travelling on foot, (c) instruction to the employers of the workers not to deduct their wages as they are not working and (d) welfare funds worth ₹31,000 crores to support the building and construction workers registered with their employers.
Recently, the Supreme Court of India has asked the government to drop all charges against the workers who were charged to violate the lockdown during their journey home (Vaidyanathan, 2020). It has asked the government to collect substantial information about the migrant workers regarding their place of birth and the kind of work they do and to generate employment opportunities at their native place. The court has also instructed to arrange counselling services for those who are willing to go back to their work in the host culture.

**Combating the Challenges**

The Indian government is trying to come up with more pragmatic solutions through which the distress of the migrant workers can be alleviated, however, allocating the resources to the needy would be a herculean and complicated task particularly because of the lack of systematic and realistic scheme for providing support. For example, in order to avail the supportive facilities, the workers must have a valid identity proof, that is, ration card, Aadhar card, or they must be enrolled under a particular government scheme, as a result of which the unregistered migrants or workers lacking valid identity proof will remain stuck in the blind spot (Kapur, 2020). Let us also consider the forum of workers such as Building and Other Construction Workers (BOCW). There is adequate support to the workers who are registered in BOCW. However, a survey done by Jan Sahas¹ (2020) found that out of 3196 migrant workers who were eligible to be registered, only 18.8 per cent was registered in the BOCW. Furthermore, the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act 1979 (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) gives some protection, such as minimum wage, free travel to their home if their employment is terminated, to the interstate migrants who are brought by the contractors. However, in most cases, the contractors do not register the workers officially. Also, the act does not cover those migrant workers who set out on their own to another state. To make the matter worse, even today the government has no systematic data regarding the number of internal migrant workers moving from one state to another (Karat, 2020).

Similarly, to avail the special trains that were meant to take the stranded migrant workers to their destinations, they had to book the tickets via online mode. The assumption behind such move was that all the migrant workers have smartphones (which is not true), they are well versed with the online ticket booking process and have access to the online payment modality (Sainath, 2020).

The final challenge is to motivate migrant workers to return to the cities. Because the assistance for the migrant workers was delayed, a majority of them had already decided to return to their native place and were determined not to return to the cities. They said that the city has disowned them and treated them in a bad way (kharab vyavahar), due to which they lost trust in the government. Disheartened by the way he has been treated in the city, Kailash Yadav, a migrant worker from Uttar Pradesh mentioned, ‘Ab Delhi kabhi nahi jayenge. Yahin khetibaadi karenge, noon-namak khaenge’ (‘I will not go to Delhi again. Will pursue farming here, live on salt’) (Pandey, 2020, para. 10). Another migrant worker,
R.S. Tripathi, a textile worker from Uttar Pradesh, has decided not to return to Surat (Gujrat). He was travelling via bus with his co-workers and was sent back (by police) to Surat from Dahod. Mr Tripathi said, 

*Hum ko kutto ki tarah bhaghaya gaya Dahod se* (We were chased like dogs from Dahod). He further says that we spent money from our own pockets to reach our native places. Still, we faced humiliation and were sent back. Our crime is that we want to go home. (*Times of India*, 2020, para. 21)

One of his co-workers, Mr G. Mishra, a migrant worker from Bihar emphasised that if this is the treatment we are getting in Gujarat, we will not return. We had a very humiliating experience at Dahod. They (cops) treated us like terrorists (*Times of India*, 2020, para. 22).

This is the agony of millions of migrant workers who feel that they are betrayed by the city. The sense of abandonment, rejection, and anger of these workers is going to cost the economy. Soon, the country is going to face the labour shortage and, probably, workers will be in a better position to negotiate with their employers and the businesses will be compelled to offer various incentives in order to retain the labour force (Chaudhary & Kotoky, 2020).

**Future Plan of Action**

Given the above-mentioned adversities or humiliation faced the migrant workers, the following short-term and long-term strategies may help to improve migrant workers’ condition in India.

**Short-Term Intervention Strategies**

**A Universalised Food Distribution System**

As mentioned earlier that allocating the resources to the targeted community is a difficult task as there is no record of the number of internal migrant workers and not every migrant worker holds a valid identity proof or is registered under a particular scheme. There is no scheme for the inter-state portability of ration cards. In this scenario, the central government can provide food, such as food grains, pulses, and other essential items, to those who are still stuck in the cities, until the lockdown is completely over and the workers resume their jobs. The scheme can be availed via self-attestation and self-identification regardless of their domicile-based identity (Mander, 2020).

**Financial Support**

Under the Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana, the minimum wage for the next three months can be transferred to those who are still stranded in the city and have
accounts in the bank. It would help the workers to meet the ends (SWAN, 2020). Also, those who have gone to their native places and are not working, they can be paid the wages under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA).

**Continuation of Shelters in the City**

The shelters in the cities that are meant to provide cooked food and roof over the head of the workers should not be closed immediately, as, amidst scarcity of job and lack of money, the workers cannot live in the rented rooms. Hence, cooking food will not be a feasible option for them (SWAN, 2020).

**Long-Term Intervention Strategies**

**Registration of the Migrant Workers**

Ensuring the registration of the migrant workforce as they arrive in another state and issuing them the *Universally Valid Shramik Card/Number*, regardless of the fact that whether they are coming with the help of a contractor or on their own. The issuance of the card will not only help the migrant workers to avail the entitlements offered by the central government, but also help the central and state government to keep tabs on the number of people arriving in a state.

**Eradicating the Duality and Segregation of the Labour Market**

The government should gradually try to eliminate the division of formal and informal sectors (IHD-ISLE, Webinar, 2020). Often, workers belonging to the informal sectors are more vulnerable to exploitation. Hence, in the long run, the preference must be given to a unitary labour market. Furthermore, there must be a direct relationship between the employee and employer, and the role of the middleman (contractor) should be minimised. Sectors, which necessitate the role of a middleman, their roles must be comprehensively reviewed by the competent authorities.

**Incorporating the Migrant Workers into Mainstream**

This can be achieved by including the migrant workers as beneficiaries into the health care system, by providing them social, legal, and occupational security. However, for this, there is a need to officially register and avail some universally accepted registration number/card. Last but not least, the government can facilitate the small-industries, particularly, in the rural areas to generate more employment opportunities for the rural people so that they do not feel compelled to come to the
city in order to earn their livelihood. This strategy is too important to be ignored, even if mention this is a cliché.

### Conclusion

The pandemic has given us a graphic description of how, by not celebrating one of the most industrious and hardworking class and by compromising their dignity, and life, we have failed as a society. The resentment and sense of humiliation of migrant workers, will work as a huge impediment to resume the economy. Hence, we need to start including the migrants in our mainstream society rather than maintaining their status as a secondary citizen.

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### Note

1. Jan Sahas is a civil society organization that works for the human rights of the socially marginalised communities. It surveyed 3,196 migrant workers across central and northern India, during the period of 27–29 March 2020.

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