THE LONG ROAD HOME

How the Lockdown Has Affected Migrant Labourers

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A group of migrant labourers leaving Delhi, trying to reach Greater Noida through Noida Express Way, after hearing rumours that buses would operate from there.

On March 27, 2020, a unique scene was unfolding near the Kaushambi-Delhi border. A stream of humanity, a rag tag bunch, had hit the road close to the Ghazipur mandi, walking with just the clothes on their backs. The hope of reaching home, in nearby districts or in other remote corners of the country kept them going. Men could be seen carrying worn out backpacks while women were walking with young children. They were part of the approximately 120 million migrant labourers in India (according to the migrant advocacy NGO Aajeevika Bureau), who were caught unawares when, Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on March 24 that, "to save India (from COVID-19),' the entire country is going into lockdown for 21 days, with every citizen banned from leaving home."

According to the 'Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker' created by researchers from the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford, India has the strictest lockdown in the world.[1]

Experts have weighed in on the drastic toll this lockdown will take on the migrant. In fact economist Chinmay Tumbe, author of *India Moving – A History of Migration* and an Assistant Professor at IIM (Ahmedabad) spoke about the severe fallouts for the migrant labourer who has decided to walk back home in the wake of the national lockdown in a media interview. "Migrants' health takes a huge beating in

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A migrant labourer family stranded in Greater Noida in Uttar Pradesh.

this process. That the already-malnourished will suffer immensely... And that for a few who may test COVID-19 positive, the fatality rates may be higher, only because of the long walk back home," he says.[2]

It is not surprising that this category of the population is paying a very steep price. The precariousness of their lot cannot be stressed enough. The UNESCO research paper *Social Inclusion of Internal Migrants in India* says that internal migrants, of which 70.7 per cent are women, are excluded from the economic, cultural, social and political life of society and are often treated as second-class citizens. It goes on to list the constraints faced by these migrants, including lack of formal residency rights; lack of identity proof; lack of political representation; inadequate housing; low-paid, insecure or hazardous work; extreme vulnerability of women and children to trafficking and sex exploitation; exclusion from state-provided services such as health and education and discrimination based on ethnicity, religion, class or gender.[3]

In the backdrop of the lockdown the helplessness of this group was for all to see. Most had no clarity on how they would earn, feed themselves, and even pay room rent.[4] The situation became so dire for these hapless souls that food and residence in shelter homes and camps provided by the authorities became their only recourse.[5]

The purpose of the lockdown was to contain the spread of the virus and data shows that the lockdown has helped in restricting the number of cases. The Ministry of Health and Family Welfare had earlier said that India went from 100 cases

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to 1,000 cases in 12 days. In comparison, COVID-19 cases in other developed countries rose between 3,500 and 8,000 in the same time frame.[6]

However, there's another pretty grim statistic. A dataset created by researchers Thejesh GN, Kanika Sharma and Aman narrates a different story about the lockdown. As per the dataset, at least 195 people have died in the first phase of the national lockdown. Of these, at least 35 migrants were accidentally run over on the highways while walking back home. An important point that needs to be considered while looking at these numbers is that the dataset is a compilation of credible news or social media reports. Therefore, the number of deaths mentioned is just the reported deaths and the real numbers are likely to be much higher.[7]

The ordeal for migrant workers who chose to reach home by foot is endless. Some have lost their lives while undertaking these long treks. Thirty nine-year-old Ranveer Singh was employed by a restaurant in Delhi as a food delivery worker. He walked for almost 200 km but collapsed in Agra and died. The autopsy revealed heart attack as the cause of his death but police assume that exhaustion caused by the long walk may have triggered his existing heart condition.[8]

The lot of those who manage to reach their villages is equally devastating. Many of them faced the wrath of local authorities because of the panic caused by the COVID-19 outbreak. Roshan Lal, managed to go back to his village, Fariya Pipariya in Uttar Pradesh on March 29 from Gurugram, where he used to work as a daily wage worker. On April 1 he committed suicide after he was allegedly humiliated and beaten up by the local police.[9]



The wife of a migrant labourer sitting on a Greater Noida pavement with two of her children, unsure how they would reach their home in Mathura.

Partha Mukhopadhyay and Mukta Naik, from the Centre for Policy Research (CPR), New Delhi, wrote: "At the heart, their (migrants') walking conveys a deep distrust of the state, especially when it promises assistance." "As a country, we have not succeeded in making people believe that the state is there for them, that it will have their back for as long as it takes — that it is their right as citizens of India. The poor see and experience the state often through a lens of violence and control, as evidenced in the recent orders, and rarely through a prism of care," they add.

Reports on incidents of police brutality abound.[10] In some cases growing frustration brought the workers on the streets not to quietly walk back home but to put their demands in front of the authorities which later resulted into violent clashes between them and the police.

On April 10, a few days before the conclusion of the first phase of the national lockdown, Surat witnessed protests from migrant workers. They demanded their salaries and wanted to go back to their native states. They torched vegetable carts and vandalised properties and shops along the road in Lasanaka area, a migrant hub in the city.[11] Similar scenes were seen near Bandra bus depot in Mumbai. On April 14, the ongoing national lockdown was extended to May 3. The announcement brought labourers from a migrant colony in Bandra

on the streets. Thousands of migrants gathered with one demand: "we don't want rations, just send us back home." The police finally lathicharged and dispersed the crowd.

Various news reports have highlighted the constricted living conditions of these migrant workers. In Bandra West, where a lot of migrants reside, 13 – 14 people have been sharing a single 300 sq ft room in some cases. The onset of summer has simply worsened their plight. With some of them having less than Rs 300 in their pockets, migrant workers in this area are dependent upon the government or NGOs for food.[12]

It's the same refrain among labourers who have left home to fend for themselves and their families in unknown lands. Poor living conditions, no work and no money are disheartening for them. A research report published by Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), a group of volunteers mostly from the Right-to-Food and Right-to-Work civil society groups echoes the hopelessness.[13] SWAN volunteers interacted with 640 groups of stranded migrants and surveyed over 11,000 workers from March 27, 2020 to April 13, 2020. Most of the workers surveyed were from Jharkhand (28%), Bihar (25%) and Uttar Pradesh (13%).

According to the report, around 89% had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown and roughly 78% workers had less than Rs.300 left with them. The report also highlights that the rate of hunger exceeded the rate of relief. The percentage of people who said they have less than one day of rations increased from 36% to 50% in the third week of lockdown while the percentage of people who received government rations increased from 1% to only 4% in the third week of lockdown. In total, nearly 96 % had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received cooked food. The report also reveals that the figures of 0.6 million migrants who are in relief shelters and 2.2 million migrants who have been provided food, mentioned in the status report filed by the government in the Supreme Court are just another indication of gross under provisioning for migrants during the lockdown.

After reflecting on the report's key findings, SWAN has made categorical recommendations on food security, wages and income support, social security, shelters and housing, and transport facilities for migrants of different categories.

From the bouquet of news reports, research reports and visuals of migrant workers taking to the roads, one thing is clear. The return to a safe haven, their home, is the only hope that migrants harbour. Tumbe has spoken in a media interview about how for the circular migrant worker, "the city is seen as a means to an end of providing for the family back home. In times of distress, whether a recession or a pandemic, 'home' is the native place and migrants set off. The economic dimension comes from paying housing rents which one can save on, if one leaves the city. But more than that, it's a natural tendency to be with parents and extended family back home, during times like these."[14]

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Scholars have been arguing for several years that government data tends to underestimate the flows of seasonal/circular migration. This could also be a prominent reason behind the chaos, since the government couldn't estimate the real extent of internal migration in India.

According to the Economic Survey 2016-17 (released in January, 2017), the first-ever estimates of internal work-related migration using railways data for the period 2011-2016 indicate an annual average flow

of close to 9 million migrant people between the states.[15] This estimate is significantly greater than the annual average flow of about 4 million suggested by successive Censuses and higher than previously estimated by any study.

More importantly, domestic migrants have a bevy of woes to contend with and their deprivation seems to know no bounds. In fact the concept note for the national seminar *Contesting Spaces & Negotiating Development: A Dialogue on Domestic Migrants, State and Inclusive Citizenship in India,* organised by Tata Institute of Social Sciences (Mumbai) underlined that domestic migrants, especially so-called un-domiciled domestic migrants, suffer from a lack of formal residency rights; lack of identity proof; lack of adequate housing; low-paid, insecure or hazardous work; no access to state-provided welfare services including denial of rights to participate in elections even though elections in India have acquired the mythical status of 'the greatest show in Earth.' Thus, these exclusionary practices lead to their disenfranchisement and treatment as second-class citizens.[16]

Not surprisingly, the ongoing epidemic has pushed them further downhill. Social activists Nikhil Dey and Aruna Roy have described their slide in excruciating detail in a recent article: "Millions of migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups, have lost their livelihoods, income security, and sense of dignity in three short weeks. They knew that they were vulnerable to the virus, but for them, the cure of an extended lockdown is already worse than the disease."[17]

To counter these situations of extreme deprivation, experts have suggested steps that need to be taken immediately and would provide some relief to stranded workers. Mukhopadhyay and Naik of CPR suggest that arrangements must be made to take all the migrants back home, but only if they came, registered and stayed in designated shelters. To control transmission, identification of migrants and their destination need to be done so that local governments can be informed. Such data can be collected from their Aadhaar cards at registration. Once they reach home, it has to be ensured that panchayats test a sample of returning migrants — they will know who they are, even if the Aadhaar database is delayed. The writers advocate that Panchayats need to be prepared to combat the epidemic.[18]

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Some states with a large number of migrant workers have indeed worked towards being alert and vigilant and their efforts have been applauded. What worked for states like Kerala are their robust public health system, and a culture of thriving grassroots democracy with power devolving effectively to the village councils. It helped in community outreach, rigorous contact tracing and mass quarantine.[19]

Experts have a slew of recommendations that can go a long way in making a difference to the lives of migrant labourers. SWAN, in its report recommends actionable measures such as doubling the PDS for three months, providing two cooked meals at conveniently located sites, minimum wages for 25 days per month to be released into Jan Dhan accounts of all urban residents, no closure of hostels, relief camps, and shelters, paying full wages of workers in the informal sector, etc. In addition, the report advocates measures such as no eviction of tenants by landlords as already mandated by the Home Ministry.

Photographs courtesy: StoriesAsia

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