

THE SOUND OF SILENCE, THE FACE OF FACELESS: THE ORDEAL OF MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA DURING THE FIRST WAVE OF COVID-19

DR. NUZHAT F. RIZVI^{1*}, DR. AARTI KALNAWAT² MR. RAKESH NAIR³

^{1,2,3}Assistant Professor, Symbiosis Law School Nagpur, Symbiosis International (Deemed University), Pune
Maharashtra, India

*Email nuzhatrizvi@slnagpur.edu.in

Abstract

In May 2020, when the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic was galloping at a high rate and the entire world's economy was brought almost to a standstill, there was fear and confusion all over. During the ongoing lockdown in India, a newspaper report published in the Hindustan Times shook the hearts of Indians. A small toddler tried in vain to shake up his mother who died on a railway platform in Muzaffarpur Bihar, India. She was a migrant worker, trying to return to her hometown due to the lockdown. (Singh, 2020). Such migrant crises and tragic stories were reported daily. The report posed a big question mark on the law and administration. The present study tried to capture the disaster and migrant crisis that unfolded since the implementation of the first nationwide lockdown in India with effect from March 24, 2020. The study also investigated the role of government agencies to curb the Exodus and provide relief to the millions and millions of interstate migrant workers. It aimed to figure out the reasons for the inefficacy of the government schemes and to understand the role of NGOs and locals who contributed to the relief measures. It also reveals that the worst-hit people due to the lockdown were the undocumented workers of the informal sector. It highlights the short-sightedness of the administration and the apathy shown towards the migrant crisis. The study also brings forward the commendable role of the NGOs and the locals who provided relief to the underprivileged section of the Indian economy. It demonstrates how at times even small efforts can go on to bring huge relief and encourages the participation of common citizens in times of crisis. It also foregrounds the fact that in India, among these migrants the fear of uncertainty and starvation was greater than the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, migrant workers, exodus, economy, law and administration, relief measures, lockdown, migrant crisis.

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The first cases of COVID-19 were detected in Wuhan, China during December 2019. The further development was fully comprehended only in retrospect. The World Health Organization declared the corona outbreak a Public Health Emergency of International concern on January 30, 2020. (WHO, 2020). and a pandemic on March 11, 2020. (WHO, 2020).



1. Background to the Lockdown in India

The Indian government confirmed the very first case of COVID-19 on January 30, 2020, from Kerala, where a student returned to Kerala from Wuhan. (Ward, 2020). Gradually but steadily the tally of confirmed corona cases increased close to around 500, the Prime Minister, Mr. Narendra Modi advised the people to follow 'Janta curfew' on March 22, 2020. (Business Line, 2020).

2. Lockdown in India

It was on March 24, 2020, that the government of India, imposed the first lockdown throughout the country for 21 days, thereby limiting and confining almost 1.3 billion people of India. This was a precautionary step to fight against the deadly epidemic in the country. (Gentleman & Schultz, 2020) This total lockdown was later extended to May 3, 2020, and May 17, 2020.

3. Prohibitions

The lockdown curtailed and confined the Indians to the places they were at that time. It prevented people from moving out of their places. All transportation facilities were brought to a standstill, barring those for essential commodities, fire, and emergency services. (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020) It was declared by the Home Minister that those who don't abide by the guidelines of lockdown, may face a year in prison. (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2020).

4. Effects of the Lockdown on Migrant Workers during the First Lockdown.

This sudden lockdown casted its shadow most adversely on the migrant workers in India. These migrant workers are generally the daily wage workers who work in factories and construction sites. They had left their native places and migrated to urban parts of India in quest of livelihood. While 1.3 billion citizens of India slowly understood the concept of social distancing and forced on them, 40 million migrant workers had an entirely different set of problems to deal with. (BBC 2020). These Migrants are from the lowest paying and the most unstable jobs. Owing to the nationwide lockdown, the workplaces and factories were shut down and as a result, thousands and thousands of migrant workers were rendered jobless, without food and security. Unable to take the hunger and uncertainties, thousands of them started their return journey on foot as there was no means of transportation. (Rashid, Anand & Mahale, 2020).

The World Economic Forum gives a figure of 139 million internal migrants in India. (Sharma, 2020). Moreover, as per the prediction by the International Labour Organization (ILO), around 40 crores of workers will be rendered extremely poor due to the pandemic. (Nair & Verma, 2020).

5. Indian Migrant Workers' Crisis during the First Wave of COVID-19 Pandemic

The city of Delhi and the financial capital of India i.e. Mumbai attracts the highest number of migrants. Moreover, the migrant workers originate mostly Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh etc. Workers who work on daily wages in various construction sites and factories, constitute a major chunk of this section. It is observed that these workers are generally deprived of proper health care, hygiene and sanitation, nutrition and housing facilities. (Nair & Verma). Most of these are attached in the informal sector. (Bhowmick & Khandelwal). Moreover, it is sad to state that there is no central registry of such workers, although we have the Interstate Migrant Workers Act, 1979. (Shrivastava & Nagaraj, 2020).

The humongous figures of these migrant workers were severely hit by the COVID-19. Most of these migrant workers are interstate workers. Moreover, as per the report, India's structure of capitalism and social reproduction among the upper class has mostly depended on these uncertain and unstable workforces which circulate between the lesser developed parts and the urban informal sector. These migrant workers belong to the underprivileged and historically subdued castes and class. Besides these migrants get low-paying jobs, stagnant wages, moreover they do not have any official contracts, moreover they are rendered beyond the reach of the law. Although they provide the significant labour that holds the Indian economy, they remain at the tenterhooks. As it is they are leading an uncertain existence, the sudden lockdown led to the huge migrant exodus. (Deshingkar, 2020).



An infant's futile effort to wake up his dead mother from the deepest and everlasting slumber on a railway platform in Muzaffarpur (Bihar, India) on May 27, 2020, projected and foregrounded the utmost poignant image of the huge migrant tragedy which covered the various parts of India. The mother lay still and the toddler made vain attempts to wake her up. Little did the kid realize that the sheet with which he was playing is now the shroud of his beloved mother, she passed away due to four days of hunger and thirst. (Singh, 2020).

This human disaster and crunch were unfolding with each passing day on highways and platforms. It throws light on disconcerting and saddening tales of hundreds of families walking their way back to their hometowns and villages, walks spanning hundreds of kilometers with little kids on foot and seemingly unending journeys to escape hunger. People have been traveling and migrating during the lockdown. It was a tragic scene to watch daily on news/television reports, a huge sea of faceless migrants on foot, marching back home. With factories and mills shut down, construction sites deserted, daily wages working on a standstill, they had no option but to return home.

I refer to an article published in the national geographic, which foregrounds the plight of the migrant workers who have been left stranded. The report talks about the migrant workers, who started from Jaipur on cycle to reach Bihar, which is around 600 kilometers far. These were construction workers working on minimum wage. Initially, they stayed back during the first phase of lockdown in March, but when the lockdown was extended, these men, like millions of those stranded, decided to go back to their hometown on bicycles with no proper food and money. By the last week of March 2020, when all the interstate borders were sealed and public commutation came to a halt, hundreds of thousands of workers started their reverse journey, walking along the railway tracks, facing police brutalities, fighting the harsh summer sun, fathers with children on shoulders, mothers with belongings on the heads. (Bhowmic & Khandelwal).

As mentioned earlier, a nationwide lockdown was enforced in India by the Prime Minister on March 24, 2020. The citizens were given only four hours to get ready for a rule which will keep them confined to the places they were at that time. Although hundreds of flights were arranged by the government in its "Vande Bharat Mission", to bring back scores of Indians from their convenient comforts abroad to their homes back in India, the poor migrants were stranded to arrange for themselves. (Shah & Lerche, 2020).

With literally no money and without work due to the lockdown, these migrant workers started their backward journey. Most of them even without food. Even worse was that as these workers traveled in large groups, there was no social distancing even. (Sharma, 2020). With no arrangement to go back, this was the biggest disaster. The apathy and callousness of the government could be clearly figured out. The premise behind the lockdown was to stop the transmission of the infection, but with such huge migrants in groups, implies that the virus will surely steer its way to the poorer parts of the country where it will be more of a potential threat and damage. The government should have taken care to prepare the people and itself for the lockdown. The administration should have realized that the people whose livelihood is dependent on daily wages will not have been able to survive in the cities and will be forced to leave. One reason might be that these faceless, unregistered migrants, although very crucial to the economy, have always been invisible to the state. There are welfare schemes targeting farmers, workers in formal factories and so the relief packages announced were meant for the documented migrants only. These sections of migrant workers who leave their native villages where they vote and receive food rations were deprived of such welfare relief packages due to the lack of documentation. (Sharma, 2020).

While many migrant workers were battling starvation and summer heat, a large number succumbed to it as well. According to some of them, they would prefer to die from the infection at their home towns rather than starve to death in cities. (Dutt, Barkha). Dutt, states that it was tragic to meet the family of one 'Ranveer Singh' who died 80 kilometers away from home due to a heart attack. There was one Mukesh Mandal, who sold off his cell phone to buy ration and a fan, but later killed himself. The reporter informs that, in Mumbai, the police stopped a mini truck to find many workers stuffed in a small space. All of them were trying to reach Uttar Pradesh, their native state. When the reporter warned them of the dangers of crowding, one of them remarked and shouted that,

“I am a B.Sc., I am also aware of the coronavirus dangers, But I would rather die from the virus at home, than from starvation here.” (Dutt, 2020).

The migrants were forced to violate the guidelines of the lockdown as they desperately tried to reach their hometown/villages. They were crossing the state borders through rivers, forests, and along railway tracks. Mohammad Imran, a migrant, said that he began his journey back home on foot, with him accompanied by his expecting wife, kids, and old parents, from the state of Rajasthan to Uttar Pradesh which is at least 600 kilometers away. He started three days back and commented that ‘it’s better to travel than to die of hunger.’ Another by the name Neerav Kumar, cycled from Jodhpur to Uttar Pradesh, along with several other workers. He said that they registered on the official website but it was not responded to. (Babu & Swaroop, 2020).

These workers were facing the worst hardship, some of them succumbed to exhaustion, and others died in accidents. I refer to a report of the Gulf News, which reported the tragic story of a 12-year-old migrant Indian worker who died just 11 kilometers short of her home, after walking 100 kilometers. She was the single child to her parents and was sadly forced to work due to extreme poverty. It was in April that this little Jamola Makdam died, owing to losing her job during the lockdown. (Elsa, 2020).

The Gujarat police allegedly bashed around 120 migrants, they were forcefully stuffed in a transportation container and sent to Maharashtra, although they were bruised and injured. The workers complained that they were beaten up badly and stuffed in a truck. The Gujarat police had promised these workers that they would be sent to their hometown in Rajasthan but they were dropped in Maharashtra. ‘We were suffocating inside, children were howling and gasping for air’ as they were stuffed in a closed lid container. One of them, Praksh Bishnoi, shared his ordeal to ‘The Wire’. (Shantha, 2020).

In the city of Aurangabad, a goods train crushed around ten migrant workers, under its wheel, they were exhausted from walking on foot and fell asleep on the railway tracks. (Nandi & Bhaskar, 2020). In a ghastly mishap, 20 migrants were left dead on May 16, 2020. (Hindustan Times, 2020). The New York Times informed about a girl 15 years of age, who bravely cycled her sick father for 1200 kilometers from Gurugram to Bihar. (Gettleman & Raj, 2020).

The picture of a construction worker, Pandit crying in desperation because he could not see his dying son due to lockdown restrictions became a symbol of migrant tragedy. He was stranded 1200 kilometers away in Delhi when his son died in Bihar. (The Hindu, 2020). There was an outrage in Delhi when hundreds of stranded migrant workers were found to be dwelling beneath a bridge of the River Yamuna. The river looked more like a sewer and its banks were littered with garbage. (BBC, 2020).

These are just a few of the dismal accounts of migrant tragedy and suffering, which these underprivileged, neglected sections underwent during the initial lockdown in 2020 in India. Although relief operations, welfare schemes were implemented by the government, somehow due to the lack of policies and streamlining the benefits could not reach a major chunk of workers. The research tried to explore the efforts put in by the government to aid these migrant workers.

6. Discussion & Conclusion

Role of Government and Administration

As per the reports from the government agencies, there was sufficient food grains stored in the FCI godown to feed the poorer section for a minimum period of 1.5 years. (Singh & Parija, 2020). Although the schemes assured that additional rations would be given to the poor, never-the-less the distribution system was ineffective owing to the fact that the ration cards were area specified and other shops were mostly unreachable. Moreover, ‘the one Nation one ration card’ system was enforced only in a few states till mid of the month of April 2020. (Kumar & Raunak, 2020). Besides this scheme also had biometric authentication as a prerequisite but it was not continued due to preventive measures. A survey about the food shortage was published recently by The Hindu news daily, it mentions that 96% of the migrants were unable to get their rations from the government and around 90 percent of them went without wages. (The Hindu, 2020).



7. Relief Camps

In pursuance of the directives issued by the central government, the state government started setting up hundreds of relief camps to stop migration. Around four lakh people were provided with food daily in Delhi. Around 75 lakhs of people were being provided with food by April 5, 2020, across the country by the government and the NGOs. The research appreciates the Kerala state government for being thoughtful enough to change the menu for the North Indian workers as per their tastes and likings. They even made arrangements for recreation and phone facility for the migrant labours and they were addressed as 'guest workers'. Medicines and sanitizers were also provided to them. (Animesh, 2020).

8. Shramik (Labour) Special Trains

The Indian Railways were permitted to start the Shramik special trains on May 1, 2020, for migrant workers, however, it was too late by then and moreover, there were many political controversies involved with it. (Gupta, 2020). This train service involved extra fares compared to the normal ticket fare. The central government was criticized by the opposition and the Indian National Congress came forward to sponsor the fares for the workers on May 4, 2020. (Verma & Gyan 2020). However, the hardships of these migrants saw no end. They had to go without food and water. A train moving to Manipur from Goa was delayed by 58 hours, there was no food and sanitation (Haskar, 2020). As per the Railway Protection Force around 80 deaths happened on board between 9th to 27th of May 2020. (Dutta, 2020).

9. Government Schemes

Taking note of the unemployment and the migrant predicament, the Indian government hiked the daily wages rate under the 'Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Act' (MGNREGA), by 26% and invested \$ 5.2 billion to create more work. (Bhowmick & Khandelwal, 2020).

However, as the scheme provides work mainly in land development, irrigation and farming which generally peaks during the summer months before the commencement of monsoon. Hence the period of the lockdown was possibly the worst. (Dreze, 2020). The government also increased two fold the amount of food grain distributed under the Public Distribution System, PDS however about 1 million people were deprived of food and will not be benefited due to the lack of proper documentation. (Bhowmick & Khandelwal, 2020). Dreze remarked that if the government fails to increase the PDS and create more work under (MGNREGA) then we will soon have a high rate of poverty in rural India (Nanda, 2020).

10. Role of NGOs and Common Citizens in providing Relief

While the government agencies and the local administration were not fully capable of dealing with the migrant crisis, the common citizen and the NGO came forward to provide relief to the migrant workers. Hundreds of locals and many NGOs moved by the plight of these distressed people geared up to provide relief to them where the apathy of the government is revealed, it is also heartening to see the face of humanity irrespective of caste creed and religion coming together to help the helpless.

The Sikh volunteers of the Bangla Sahib Gurudwara, New Delhi, were feeding around one lakh people daily during the lockdown. (AP, India Today, 2020). In Mumbai where the COVID-19 was spreading like a Wildfire, community kitchens, NGOs and locals were working together to feed the migrants. The Rotary Club served over 60 lakhs and delivered food packets across Mumbai and adjoining areas. The hospitality industry also used their huge kitchens and workforce to cook food and relief packets. Many prestigious hotels like the Taj Group and Vedanta distributed meals to the frontline warriors and stranded migrants. Aamir Siddiqui from Project Umeed, commented that, we drop ration packages at the masjid as it is more comfortable to take from the leader of a mosque than to accept charity. (Goyal, 2020). Rahul George an entrepreneur from Bangalore formed the WhatsApp group loving the migrant workers on May 14, 2020. He was moved by the plight of the migrant workers who were stuck up there. To his surprise within a week, Christians from across 50 places in India became members of the group and started raising funds. They provided rations and shoes to the standard workers and helped them reach their homes. Thousands of migrant workers were helped from



around the country. Rahul was not sure in the beginning how he would help so many of them. He recalls the incident in the Bible when Lord Jesus provided food to 5,000 people with five pieces of bread and only two fish. (Kellog, 2020).

Moved by the plight of the migrant workers, Charanjit Kumar and his friends, all of them in their 20s, from Delhi came together. Their efforts helped around 4200 migrants to reach their homes besides making their travel arrangements the volunteers provided cooked food, juices, sanitary napkins and masks to the workers traveling back. (Krishnan, 2020). The Film industry of India that is Bollywood also came forward to help the migrant workers. Actor Sonu Sood deserves a special mention for his contribution and efforts put in to reach thousands of stranded workers to their native places. Acknowledging his efforts, the United Nations development programme (UNDP) honored him with the 'SDG Special Humanitarian Action Award'. (Shiksha, 2020).

These are only a few examples of the efforts of the NGOs and the locals. Acknowledging the commendable efforts of the NGOs and people who donated and played significant roles in reaching out and helping the standard migrant workers, The Supreme Court of India lauded the commendable efforts of non-government organizations and individuals provided by them to help the migrant laborers in these difficult times. (The Hindu, 2020).

Conclusion

The migrant workers (including the undocumented migrants) are an integral part of the Indian economy. They had a harrowing time, trying to reach their native places during the lockdown, moreover, there was apathy displayed on the part of the Indian administration while implementing the lockdown restrictions. As these migrants are slowly reaching their native homes, their problems will be more complicated. Around two-thirds of the Indian population lives in villages where the economy has always suffered due to frequent droughts and other calamities. Besides, the farmers' suicide rate in rural parts is high. As per the author's report, the National Crime Records Bureau observes that 10349 farmers committed suicide in 2018. The exodus of migrants will make the condition worse. (Bhowmick & Khandelwal, 2020). This will also create an increase in unemployment. The lockdown and the problems of the migrant workers will lead to huge unemployment in rural India as per Jean Dreze. (Nanda, 2020).

According to the survey conducted by sedex.com, most of the migrant workers who are rendered jobless might not qualify for getting assistance from the government schemes and might not be eligible for getting unemployment benefits. Scarcity of food and homelessness will thereby increase and will result into to the potential threat of modern slavery. (Sedex.com, 2020).

There had been widespread protests reported across the country by hundreds and thousands of migrants against the government apathy and restrictions laid on them to go back to their homes. (Ahmad, 2020). The Nationwide protest was organized by the labour Union to register protests against modifications done in the labour law. The centre of the Indian Trade Union and all India trade union Congress organized protests on May 22, 2020 (Mukherjee, 2020). Noted senior journalist, Shekhar Gupta expressed his disappointment over the Prime Minister's approach which hinted at the discrimination between Indian migrants struck abroad and the poor helpless migrants that were stranded within the country. (Gupta, 2020).

The opposition parties also criticized the central government for not being able to handle the migrant crisis. Moreover, it was accepted by Mr. Amitabh Kant, CEO of NITI Aayog, India, that the migrant workers should have been properly looked after and mentioned that it was actually the duty of the administration to do it. (Roy, 2020).

Jean Dreze, remarked that the lockdown was 'almost a death sentence' for the downtrodden of India and further commented that the policies overlooked the weaker class (Nanda, 2020).

As per the BBC reports such incidents have brought the spotlight to the distress of millions of underprivileged Indians. The predicament of the migrant might not be exclusive to India, but the sheer figures of around 40 million migrants in India makes it challenging. One of the critics, as per the report, remarked that the mishandling of the migrant problems and the apathy shown to its poor inhabitants at the time of lockdown can be India's shame. (BBC, 2020).

On May 26, 2020, the apex court of India, accepted that the issues and predicament of these migrant workers still remained unsolved and it observed that there have been lapses and certain mistakes on the part of the government. It directed the Centre and the state government to arrange for free food shelter and transportation facilities for the migrant workers.

There is no denying the fact that the whole world today is grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic. The world's economy has come down to frightening figures and uncertainty looms large over the globe. The research also understands and acknowledges the challenges which come across for the Government and administration. Nevertheless, one cannot ignore the fact that the government and the administration in India were myopic. Ahead of implementing such a stringent lockdown, the administration should have taken care of the humongous figure of migrant workers and their fate. The research also brings to light the contribution of the NGOs and the locals, who tried to provide relief to the distressed people. The migrants were more concerned about unemployment and hunger which the lockdown brought. The fear of starving to death was far greater than the fear of the virus. These migrant workers are underprivileged and weak but they are an integral part of the Indian economy. The research calls for attention that, due care and proper measures should be implemented at least at the time of reverse exodus which will also happen as and when the economy will start limping back to normalcy. As of now, the factories and construction sites are reopening slowly but surely, there will be a shortage of manpower in the urban areas, and definitely, there will be a reverse exodus back to the cities and urban parts of the country.

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