

“62 Days and Counting: Migrant Workers in the time of Covid-19”

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Introduction

In these recent days of lockdown, we have witnessed a lot of things. The most important one is that Indians have a really creative mind, whether it be conducting family house through Zoom and WhatsApp or be it creating slogans and poems. I also came across with one of the slogans in my family WhatsApp group which forced me to think about a lot of things. The slogan was “गुनाह पासपोर्ट का था, सजा राशन कार्ड को मिली” which simply means that “the crime was of passport, punishment was given to ration card”. If we go a little deep in the slogan, we can clearly see that it is talking about the outsiders that brought the virus into the country and now it is the migrant workers who are majorly suffering because of this pandemic (Covid-19). The question is why it takes a WhatsApp slogan or a pandemic to make us understand the importance of workers. If we look at the data of pre-covid period, then also the situation of workers was bad. Earlier they were suffering because of exploitation and poorly paid jobs, now they are suffering because of this pandemic and they will continue to suffer if the government does not take the situation seriously.

Nowadays everyone is aware of the condition of migrant workers. Some people are watching in the news and some are in their villages that the migrant workers are carrying all their belonging on the head and walking on the empty highways. Now if you are from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh or any other state from where the workers migrate to metropolitan areas then you will be able to relate a bit more from the rest of the country. These bone-chilling pictures are more than enough to give goose bumps to a normal citizen.

Now that the whole country is under lockdown, it is important to think about the worst-affected social group that is workers, majorly the migrant workers who left their home in search of job or livelihoods. Because it is the migrant workers who are at the extreme peril due to this pandemic. This research paper will cover the problems that the migrant workers are facing due to covid-19. It will also focus on the capitalist idea of exploitation of workers and how a few laws can be improvised by the government during this lockdown period to help the workers.

Migrant Workers

Migrant workers are commonly described as those workers who migrate within their own county in search of work but with no intention of living permanently at that place. Now these migrant workers are stuck at different places because of the sudden lockdown.¹ People with higher-income and stable jobs does not have any problem during this lockdown and are enjoying comfortably. Whereas these migrant workers are the one who are really suffering

¹ Siby Tharakan. (2002). Protecting Migrant Workers. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(51), 5080-5081. Retrieved May 25, 2020, from www.jstor.org/stable/4412979

and losing their lives. The announcement of sudden lockdown by the government caused a lot of trouble but only for the migrant workers. At one point, the government uses the problem of labours and workers to generate their vote bank and at another point they announce rules which are majorly problematic for the workers, whether be it demonetization or the current lockdown. Due to the lockdown the daily wage workers have no job, they are unemployed. Many other works who worked in factories or offices are also unemployed. Unlike others they cannot do work from home because their job requires physical presence like serving tea or cleaning the cabins. All the construction projects are also on hold and because of this the demand for physical labour has fallen. The absence of employment has cut off their income and livelihood. Due to their daily paid and low-income job they barely have any savings to count on during these hard times. Amid these existential perils, other problems surround these migrant workers. For example, the problem of travel. During this pandemic almost all the workers prefer to go home but with lack of savings and travel restrictions they are forced to walk to their native place. The situation of the workers is so bad that one of them lost his lives 11km away from his home. This is really a topic of concern. The government is conducting 'Vande Bharat' mission in which they are organising flights for those who are stranded abroad but in our own country millions of the migrant workers were left to fend for themselves within the inter-state boundaries. 'Shramik' trains were provided to them but the number of trains are way less as compared to the number of migrant workers.

Another important issue with the migrant workers is their children. Now to understand this point the children are divided into three categories. First, those who are left behind at their native place. Second, those who migrate with their parents. Third, those who are still stuck at their workplace.² Usually what happens that migrant workers send money to their hometown for their parents and children after keeping a little for themselves. So, their family is also dependent on the workers. Now when the workers do not have any employment, they cannot send money for their children. So, the effect on parents wage directly affect the children. Just a few days back, Satvir a migrant worker was stopped at Delhi-Noida highway when he was trying to go to Noida at his uncle's farm to work as a daily wage worker. Cops thrashed his kulfi cart and now he is left with a wife, two children and 100 rupees in his pocket. He does not have any money to feed his family. The only option left with him is to return to his village where he does not have any livelihood.³

The Heartless Capitalists

The problem does not stop here. It is true that in a post-covid world, the industries will need workers to resume the production. But because of this we cannot violate the fundamental right of every citizen which is granted by our constitution: the right to life and livelihood. We might say that everyone is equal in the eyes of law and we do not discriminate or exploit

² Dutta, P. K. (2020, May 11). Migrants and governments: A Covid-19 story of mismatch. Retrieved from <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/migrants-and-governments-a-covid-19-story-of-mismatch-1676753-2020-05-11>

³ [TheQuint]. (2020, May 22). Cops Heckle Migrant Worker, Seize Kulfi Cart at Delhi-Noida Border [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6tg9XD6DmAQ>

people. But this is not true as George Orwell once said in his book *Animal Farm* that “All animals are **equal**, but **some** animals are more **equal** than others.”⁴ This is a harsh reality in real life too. In the book it was the pigs who were controlling the government and in real life it is the capitalists who are controlling it. For example, in Karnataka the government had to shut down the trains because businessmen and builders were giving pressure as they wanted the workers to stay but a day later, they have to reverse the decision because of public protest.⁵ Again, the same question arises that why we need such pandemics to see the problems of the migrant workers. The capitalists are not missing a single chance to exploit these labourers during the lockdown. The ministry of home affairs made it mandatory to provide salary to the workers in this lockdown time. But many of the heartless capitalist did not even consider this idea. Not only this they did not even pay the salaries for the month of March. According to a survey, in Tamil Nadu almost 63% labourers did not get the wages for the days they worked before lockdown.⁶

Now in the post covid time when these heartless capitalists will face labour shortage then only, they will realise the importance of migrant workers or maybe they will never realise at all. Another important question is what happens to these capitalists when they face a problem. For example, when the Goods and Service Tax (GST) stalled the Indian economy. The capitalists cry about it with single malt in their hand at night and donate money to political parties in the morning. The government also is not concerned for migrant workers and that is already clear by looking at the current situation. As the workers does not affect the morning at 7, Race Course Road. It is high time to realise the importance of migrant workers for capitalists as well as the government.

Neither One Ration card nor One Nation: Migrants between the Crack

In many rallies and speeches, the political party has referred to the idea of “*akhand bharat*” (one nation). However, this lockdown has exposed the true meaning of these words. The majority of workers that are stranded are from small and poor states like Jharkhand, Bihar, Assam, West Bengal and Odisha. These are the states which supply labours to all over the country. These migrant workers are now stranded in rich cities like Maharashtra and Karnataka. But none of these cities helped the migrant workers it was Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and few others only who helped ‘their people’ who are stranded in other places. Now the slogan of one nation is more of my state my people because it is the home states that are launching app-based programs to transfer cash for “their people”. During all these times the central government choose to be silent on this issue. When the Bangalore municipal corporation distributed the ration, they checked the ration card and rations were distributed

⁴ Orwell, G. (2014). *Animal farm*. New York: Spark Publishing.

⁵ Vij, S., Vij, S., Deshpande, H., & Posner, G. (2020, May 12). India's heartless capitalists deserve the labour shortages they are about to be hit with. Retrieved from <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-heartless-capitalists-deserve-the-labour-shortages-they-are-about-to-be-hit-with/418845/>

⁶ Vij, S., Vij, S., Deshpande, H., & Posner, G. (2020, May 12). India's heartless capitalists deserve the labour shortages they are about to be hit with. Retrieved from <https://theprint.in/opinion/indias-heartless-capitalists-deserve-the-labour-shortages-they-are-about-to-be-hit-with/418845/>

only to those people who have ration cards within the state. So, the people belonging from Bihar and UP does not have ration card of Karnataka as the ration card bore the address of home town.⁷ The officials denied rations to them. Now does this justify the concept of one nation or it is just my state my people. One of the workers also said in an interview that “they gave it to two people and clicked photos with ten.” In another instance, the Pradhan of Guhana (Haryana) distributed grains to the migrant workers and told them that “in exchange of the grain, you will clear the drains in the villages”.⁸ This all shows that everyone is trying to exploit labourers in every possible way.

Reasons Why The Government Should Be Blamed For The Crisis

- **Sudden announcement of lockdown-** in India, the first case was detected around 30th January 2020. From January to March, the government had a plenty of time to take the situation under control. But according to the officials it was not an emergency till 13th March 2020. On 18th March 2020, the government announced a self-imposed lockdown which was later followed by a whole nationwide lockdown from 23rd March 2020. Due to this sudden notice the migrant workers were stranded at their workplace with no other option.
- **Started trains but no management-** the government announced to give train to migrant workers but after five weeks. There is no explanation of this. In fact, they should have launched it in the starting as the cases were very low and would have caused no trouble at all. But as we say these workers does not affect the morning at 7 Race Course Road. Also, the government left it on states to coordinate with each other. This idea was a complete disaster as the states were keen to get limited number of workers so they delayed the process as much as they can.
- **Migration process or Punishment process-** on April 29, 2020, the government announced that workers will be able to travel once they are screened. So, the process has 3 steps. First, they need to register online. Second, they must get a medical pass stating that they do not have any symptoms. Third, report to police station to get the travel pass.⁹ Now the problem is that the online system does not work half of the time. Also, these are migrant workers, how can you think that making them fill online forms will make the work easier for them. They do not have any smartphones to do so and the authorities have not set up a help desk to assist the workers.

The government should try to make these process a little simple. There should be screening facilities near the border so that they do not have to spend money in medical certificate.

⁷ COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India. (2020). SWAN. Retrieved from https://covid19socialsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/32-days-and-counting_swan.pdf

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sharma, S. (2020, May 18). Six reasons why the Modi government is squarely responsible for India's worst migrant crisis. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/962223/six-reasons-why-the-modi-government-is-singularly-responsible-for-indias-worst-ever-migrant-crisis>

Recommendations

The situation of migrant workers is getting worse day by day. Its high time for the government to control this issue. It is time to understand what Marx was saying way back that “labour is the source of wealth and prime basic condition for human existence”. We need to understand that it is the labours who are generating wealth for the capitalists and if there is no labour there will be no capitalists. Now is the time to understand the importance of migrant workers. So, to protect them than government can improvise few things. Such as:

- Doubling the public distribution scheme ration for three months and providing them in advance.
- The government can do homedelivery of essential rations. They can also deliver pre-cooked meals for the migrant workers.
- The feeding centres which are currently serving few migrant workers should not be closed just after the lockdown. As it will take time for people to earn money in the first few days.
- Emergency cash (7000 per month) should be given to the workers for at least three months and while doing this there should be no authentication or complex process.¹⁰
- In the informal sector, the government should pay all the MNREGA workers full wages throughout the lockdown.
- The rule stated by the home ministry that no tenants should be evicted by landlords must be followed. Also, the hostel and relief camps should not be closed immediately. They should keep it open until all the migrant workers have reached safely.
- Also, there should be supply of clean drinking water and proper sanitation in all the colonies.

These are few small things that the government can do to alleviate the condition of migrant workers. This might not be a permanent solution but in the short term it will surely help them. Another thing that the government can do to stop the migration of workers is that they can boost employment opportunities in villages. As most of the migrants leave small cities to go to big cities in search of job. If the government can carter, the need of workers in small town then they do not have to go to metropolitan cities. Once again, the question remains the same that why we need a pandemic to realise the importance of labours. It is hard to imagine that the month which commence by giving tribute to labours (1st May – labour day) will end up taking lives of labours. At the end let us just pray that the government understand the importance of the migrant workers and they can finally see some light at the end of the tunnel.

¹⁰ COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India. (2020). SWAN. Retrieved from https://covid19socialsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/32-days-and-counting_swan.pdf