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# Insight, Legitimacy and Politics of the Plight of Migrant Worker in Lockdown

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## ABSTRACT

*Migrant labourers have been amongst the most awfully affected people in India due to the lockdown. As the manufacturing and building activities are at a standstill, lack of money and food has compelled lakhs of distressed, abandoned, deprived and desolate migrants across India to reach for their homes on foot in the nonexistence of apposite conveyance. The current attenuation in labour laws has led to a decisive shift in the way the plight of the worker-migrant has so far been implicit in the foreground of the COVID-19 prompted lockdown.*

*In India the State has principal duty to shield the right to live with human dignity as fundamental rights of each citizen. Constitution has not given any unambiguous provision about human dignity. Article 21 of Constitution of India the right to life it has wider meaning which includes the right to life with human dignity. Where is the dignity? Why they are treated worse than beasts of burden? Where is the Right to Equality (the prohibition of discrimination), Where is the right to Protection of Life and Personal Liberty? Where is the right to practice any profession or occupation? Where is the Right against Exploitation?*

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*And miles to go before I sleep,*

*And miles to go before I sleep*

*~ Robert Frost*

Migrant labourers have been amongst the most awfully affected people in India due to the lockdown. As the manufacturing and building activities are at a standstill, lack of money and food has compelled lakhs of distressed, abandoned, deprived and desolate migrants across India to reach for their homes on foot in the nonexistence of apposite conveyance. The current attenuation in labour laws has led to a decisive shift in the way the plight of the worker-migrant has so far been implicit in the foreground of the COVID-19 prompted lockdown.

*“Walking back home’ from urban and industrial centres, which has been widely called ‘reverse migration,’ allowed the worker-migrants to script themselves back into the narrative of the nation. This crisis is a product of the immediate concern due to the pandemic, but it exposes long-term patterns and some structural fissures that remained hidden under the powerful narratives of ‘development’ as encapsulated in political campaign phrases such as ‘Shining India,’ ‘Achche Din (Good Days)’ and ‘Sabka Vikaas (Growth for All)’.”<sup>2</sup>*

An effortlessly understandable coherent move had turn out to be apparent by mid-April, the completion of the first phase of the lockdown. From a figure of eccentricity, the worker-migrant became the symbol of imminent starvation. An honest query ascends here: Why was a dedicated Vande Bharat Mission not adopted for these poor, helpless migrants? Is it for the reason that they are still look upon as a diminutively inferior to the other citizens of an India in which class outdoes the concept of equality?

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<sup>2</sup> Nitin Sinha, ‘Walking back home’ from industrial centres has let the labour force script itself back into the nation’s narrative’, <https://thewire.in/labour/migrant-worker-crisis-lockdown> accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

A historic ‘reverse-migration’ of millions on foot to rural areas is in process: This situation leads to an apprehension that ‘a dormant volcano waiting to explode’ at least from social and economic point of view. This reverse migration could be seen as a mode of esprit de corps and confrontation. Is the contemporary ‘walking back’ an act of ‘face-off’ of this nature? As a consequence the question comes into mind: if we have to read confrontation in ‘walking back,’ who are the workers fighting? Is it the administration? Is it the Entrepreneurs? Is it the Metropolitan civic bodies? Currently, the answer seems to be none. They are fighting with their ill fate and starvation.

A clear apathy is visible when we talk of these stranded migrants. ‘*I can’t breathe*’ the last words of George Floyd are echoing in the air of America. The voices and protests against this barbaric act forced the American president to hide in the bunker. ‘*Wearing a face mask helps protect me against Covid-19, but not against racism,*’ is the mood of Americans. They showed solidarity and posed resistance. In Kerala the killing of a pregnant wild elephant has triggered a nationwide outrage. Such incidents prove the humanity is still alive. But an unfortunate apathy towards the plight of migrants’ raises a doubt, is lives of our artisans worse than beasts. No major voices, strangely no major voices against the plight of millions of migrants.

The words of Sir Walter Scott are ringing in my ears:

“Breathes there the man, with soul so dead,  
Who never to himself hath said,  
This is my own, my native land!

*“Our army of pot-bellied, pan-chewing omnipotent government functionaries may well interpret ‘migrants’ to mean those who are still limping home, without getting killed en route, and exclude those who have already returned to their villages with giant blisters on their feet”.*<sup>3</sup>

Distressingly now a new blame game started between the centre and the states to swift the onus on to each other. How low, one can throw oneself to the ground, just to satisfy some ulterior motives. “*Article 217 read together with ‘list 1’, under the seventh schedule clearly mentions ‘item 81’, namely, “inter-state migration and inter-state quarantine” to be a power of the centre. The central government alone is empowered to deal with this in general, and inter-state migrant workers are surely a part of the ‘power’ and the*

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<sup>3</sup> Jawhar Sircar, ‘A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers’, <https://thewire.in/labour/lockdown-migrant-workers-policy-analysis>, accessed on 5<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

*responsibility. The list of states' powers and responsibilities clearly do not mention 'interstate migrants' but that does not absolve them totally, as they are both recipients of such labour and exporters as well".*

*'Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code' which was introduced in the Lok Sabha in July 2019 and cleared in this year seeks to incorporate thirteen old labour laws, including the terribly ineffective 'Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979'. Surprisingly there is no effort to discuss this by calling an urgent session of Parliament. All the same such codes assure additional rights to migrant workers than the former law, but we must recognize that the whole shebang depends on implementation and not on mere lip service or histrionics.*

The current misfortune of a train running over 16 migrant workers forces a rationalist to ask is the tale of a **'Novel India, Naya Bharat'** is going to be written in the blood of those starving. It's not the tale of a minority of migrant workers; it is the tale of our dying humanity. In the words of John Kramer *"Every war, every plague is God's judgment. But every man who rises up to stop the wars and the plagues is God's instrument. Human action is God's will, not blind indifference in the face of suffering."*

The current apathy reminds me the words of Abhijit Naskar *"People are suffering, what's that to us! Nation is suffering, what's that to us! Society is suffering, what's that to us! The world is suffering, what's that to us! Such mentality has shoved our entire human civilization into the abyss of misery."* Is humanity in deep slumber? Who will wake up these dead to the world souls? 'Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached' a call by Swami Vivekananda will it be of any use to wake up the contemporary youth.

The current situation can be best explained in the words of Bill Clinton, *"There are large numbers of people who simply don't have the values and vision necessary to be part of an inter-dependent world. They think their differences -- whether religious, political, tribal or ethnic -- are more important than our common humanity. They believe the truth they have justifies their imposition of that truth on other people, even if it takes them to the death of innocents"*. Wake up India, your fellow countrymen, our treasured artisans, whom you call labour, including concert workers, contract labour, migrants, farmers, women, the differently-abled, and marginalized communities need your attention, support and compassion. It is you who have to choose to stand by our nation at this time of crises or not. The choice is all yours.

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