

Media Workshop: a Concept Note

Calcutta Research Group

General Idea:

The idea and concept of Migration and Migrant Workers do not need any further introduction to the media persons, thanks to the arrival of COVID-19 pandemic and its fall outs that played havoc with the life of the Migrant workers in India. While it is true that the sudden appearance of the migrant workers in the public space from their otherwise invisible existence was initially received by the mainstream media with dismay, fear and hatred keeping in line with the established narrative of the State, gradually the travail of the Migrants captured the public imagination and media persons started to voice concern about their fate and the peril in which they have been forced to be pushed by the State's sudden imposition of indefinite Lock Down.

However, a lot remains to be understood about the life and livelihood issues related to them. In the prevailing debate in the mainstream media it was found that the migrant workers remained not only invisible to the media gaze till the epidemic induced lock down destroyed their life and livelihood, even the basic data about the Migrant Workers in India is absent. Even the State is not in a position to offer a clear picture on the subject. For example, when the union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced a food assistance programme for 8 crore of migrant workers, she affirmed that the government did not know if that covers the entire community of migrant workers. She admitted that the union government had arrived at the figure after collating all the data given by various state governments. Some researchers, trade union leaders give different figures varying from 10 to 12 crore of the population. In other words, the absence of real data about the migrant workers indicates apathy in the administration to face the grave situation and formulate a proper policy to resolve that.

Talking of policy for the migrant workers, one is shocked to note that the existing law for the protection of Migrants, i.e., Inter- State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979 is already there wherein it is made mandatory for both the state of origin and the host state to maintain a proper record of the arrival and departure of the migrant workers, with their term of employment, job conditions including wage, working hours, condition of housing etc. However, it is an established fact that no state has maintained such record. The fault line lies with the mainstream trade unions too, as they did not pay any attention to the migrant workers and never came forward to protect their basic labour rights.

It is also imperative to study the role of social media during the pandemic. The Quarantine Student Youth Network, Gana Tadaraki Udyog and Migrant Workers Solidarity Network actively used Whatsapp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter to track the needs of migrant workers, to crowd fund ration and to transfer money directly into their accounts and to book tickets for their return. Gana Tadaraki Udyog itself has done a direct cash transfer of 3,73,643/- to 1826 migrant workers across India. Their incessant highlighting of the distress of the migrant workers has also been taken up by mainstream media houses, both print and web based. CRG's media workshop will address the pivotal role played by social media users in this juncture.

The uproar caused by the some of the reporting in mainstream media (print, TV and digital) and social media forced the hands of the governments, both union and the states. The government has formed committee to look into the conditions of the migrant workers and recommend some measures to alleviate that. The industry and the State have at last admit that the migrant workers are playing a crucial role in the industry and they are integral to the economic activities in the country.

The Questions

In such backdrop, one would like to raise some questions and seek answer to that. These are as follows:

- a) What sorts of measures / initiatives are needed at the government's level to offer protection to the migrant workers?
- b) Is the existing law for the migrant workers (1979 act) sufficient to protect their interest? If not, what should be needed to be done?
- c) How much of the media report influenced the government's present policies towards the migrants?
- d) With the present initiative of One Nation, One Ration Card, should we not have One Nation, One Voter Card to empower the migrant workers with the power to cast their votes while staying away from home in host states?

The structure of the Workshop:

Considering that the workshop will be held on a digital platform, we should think of two sessions of three hours each spread across two days (around 8-10 October, 2020). There should be no more than three broad themes related to the issues of migrant workers, one general introduction and one public lecture.

The first day should begin with an introduction of themes involved and the purpose of holding such workshop with the media persons. Then it should be followed by a Public Lecture. After the lecture (should we have a question answer session here?) we should go into one of the themes where three-four participants would offer their considered opinions/observations and then it will be an open house for discussion. The session will come to an end with the customary thanks giving.

The second and final day's session will discuss the other two themes. Here again the chosen speakers will initiate the discussion with their opinions/analysis and observation and then the floor will be thrown open to other participants.

The workshop will also accommodate four media fellows who are at present working on issues related to the Migrant Workers at the behest of CRG.

The number of participants: I am hazarding a guess that it should be around 50.

Who will be the participants? The main speakers are to be a balanced mix of senior journalists and scholars. We need to encourage participation of journalists from all three formats of media (i.e., Print, TV and Digital)

Deliverables: The outcome of the workshop can be turned into a book. This may include the following:

- i) General Introduction
- ii) Public Lecture,
- iii) Three /four papers from the participants' (the speakers)
- iv) An essay giving shape to the discussion leading to some definite focus