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Story Idea:

It has been now been more than a month and a half since India is under a lockdown. Across the country, restrictions on mobility and suspension of work, to curb the spread of the COVID-19 virus, have distressed countless people. Amongst them, the plight of the migrant labourers has caught our attention in significant ways. Disturbing images of thousands of stranded migrant labourerstrying to escape to their native homes from cities like Mumbai, Surat, Chennai, Gurgoanetc have forced us to take notice of this 'invisible' multitude.

In towns and cities across the country, the migrants live in cramped, congested and unventilated dwellings, which often lack basic sanitation facilities or running water. This negates any possibility of social distancing or preventive measures like regular hand washing. Predominantly residing in rented accommodations, the migrant workers and their families are at the mercy of the landlords who threaten eviction when they were unable to pay rent. Themigrant workers seldom possess sufficient savings to withstand weeks or months, without paid work. Their precarious condition in alien lands is further exacerbated by the meagerness of relief measures undertaken by the state governments and the companies they were employed with. Linking relief with the possession of ration cards has only intensified the difficulties in accessing the near negligible relief.

Consequently, the migrant working masses in the towns and cities, without income and food, trapped in unhygienic and unhealthy dwellings, have been rendered only more susceptible to an infection of COVID-19.

Taking such factors together, it would not be a stretch to deem the lockdown as not only unsuitable to the migrant workers, but also particularly dangerous for them, from a material perspective as well as in terms of health. Consequently, it made them desperate to escape to their native states, at times even risking their lives.

Migration from West Bengal has increased manifold during the past one decade. According to 2011 Census, there were about 454 million migrant labourers in India. This had risen by 139 million from 315 million in 2001and by 220 million in 1991. In other words, the numbers have doubled between1991 and 2011. Data from the NSS sample survey (NSS) in 2007-08 reveals, about 28.3% of workers in India are migrants. There is no statewide

figure of migrant labourers available. There is also no data available on migrants from Bengal in public domain.

We rarely engage in public debates or discussions related to migrant labour in our social and political discussions. Recently, they have caught our imagination precisely because they came to represent the face of a catastrophe. They become important to political parties, once in every five years, at the time of a general or Panchayat election.

In media, migrants attract headlines only during drop in percentage of male voters in some rural constituency; dearth of agricultural labourers in rice-bowl districts of the state; or natural disasters like Aila in Sundarban or floods in host state, like the one in Kerala in 2019; witch hunting in the name of illegal Bangladeshis in the slums of Bengaluru, Pune or Delhi. One can keep on adding to these instances. Through such news, we come to know about their existence and become aware that Bengali speaking migrant labourers are spread all over the country, from Kashmir to Kerala.

The mass exodus of migrant workers triggered by Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown brought their existence to our notice. Ramjeet, a migrant labourer, rightly said, during his journey on foot to Gorakhpur from Delhi, "May be when Modiji decided to do this [lockdown] nobody told him about us. May be he doesn't know about us."

Against this background, I want to focus on the phenomenon of migrant workers leaving the cities and returning back to their places of origin, focusing on migrants workers from two districts of West Bengal – Bankura and Malda. The attempt will be to try to understand what made them migrate in the first place and what factors and circumstances compelled them to come back. Is this reverse migration just a temporary phenomena or there is something more to it.

Resource persons/organisations to be interviewed

1. Bangla Sanskriti Manch.
2. Migrant Labour Solidarity Network.
3. wbtrackmigrants.
4. Gana-Tadaraki Udyog.
5. Social scientists, Labour leaders and concerned government officers.
6. Individual volunteers working with above-mentioned organizations