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Media on Migrants: Reports from the Field-II

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Media on Migrants: Report from the Field-II

**Amit Sengupta
Abhijnan Sarkar & Swati Bhattacharjee
Geetika Mishra**

2020

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Forced Migration and Dalits: A Case Study of Delhi, Noida and Western Uttar Pradesh

Amit Sengupta *

In the past two months we have all responded with horror and grave concern to the images in the media of migrant families trudging back to their villages. Watching them from the comfort of our own homes has been conscience pricking as most of us have been able to do little for them. As an artist I ceded to a need to paint their images, knowing fullwell that I will inevitably aestheticize the image. The aesthetic impulse is a positive force, but if it masks reality and merely makes it palatable, then it becomes a problem. To guard against this one must be able to give the subject a presence and a voice and hope that the image will then carry some of the redemptive power of the aesthetic. It is a humble recognition of other lives.

— Artist and painter Sudhir Patwardhan, June 2020 (Courtesy: Vadehra Art Gallery, New Delhi, Newsletter, July 2020), *Migrant Workers Discourse: Histories. Humanities, Arts and the Pandemic!*, an ebook by film historian Amrit Gangar.

Spanish artist Isabela Llio, living in a remote island in Spain close to nature and working with ecological products derived from nature, was shocked to see the exodus of the poor migrant workers and their families on various highways in India. Her peaceful existence and synthesis with nature were bitterly shattered. So she started making sculptures inspired by COVID-19 and migrant workers in India, especially women and mothers: solitary women with sacks on their heads — walking; women labourers with sad eyes — walking; mothers holding babies — walking; women holding their children's fingers — walking.

Amrit Gangar wrote: "I had never imagined that the muted sighs of a poor migrant worker woman walking miles upon miles, holding a baby in her arms and a bundle of belongings on her head, would reach in the distant Spanish Mallorca Island, in the studios of the eminent sculptor Isabela Lleo. They are indelible instants of human history, of the pandemic and the pain that a woman could bear!"

While much of the mainstream media, especially the television media, remained largely untouched by this gigantic mass suffering unfolding on the streets like an infinite cinema of endless tragedy and helplessness, most news reporters and editors chose to stay indoors, and as the people residing in multi-storeyed apartments on highways watched from their balconies this tragic spectacle, the social media was replete with haunting images.

A child pulling the saree of a dead mother on a railway platform. A young worker crying on a mobile phone. A mother with kids refusing biscuits from a girl distributing water and biscuits: we

* Amit Sengupta is the Executive Editor, Hard News Policies and Practices, Issue No. 116, December 2020

have enough, she said, give it to those who need it. A letter from a worker to his employer that he has stolen his cycle because that is the only way he can reach his town in distant Uttar Pradesh. A man distributing buttermilk to workers on a highway near Bangalore, giving Rs 400 to a solitary walker, who calls him back after reaching his village in Madhya Pradesh, promising to return the money and inviting him as a guest to his home in the village. People sprawled under a flyover, no mask, no physical distancing, no food or water, because they were rendered homeless like thousands of other workers whose small-scale industries had shut, or whose owners told them to leave since they could not pay rent anymore. A mother holding a child trying to climb a truck loaded with human beings compressed and pressed into each other — no masks.

The most heart-rending image, which shook the national conscience, of course, was the blood splattered along with chapattis on the railway tracks near Aurangabad. Workers, tired, thirsty and hungry, had slept on the railway tracks in the night when a train arrived in the darkness and crushed them.

Artists and photographers documented the reality with deep, disturbing and enduring sketches, paintings and pictures. For instance, Labani Jangi, a young artist in Kolkata, painted several extraordinary works of art depicting this long journey of homeless workers. With their offices shut due to the pandemic, some brave reporters, photographers, citizens and writers moved into the open terrain to document and record the unfolding stories on the highways. Philanthropists, students, citizens, doctors, Sikhs in gurudwaras moved into the heart of the tragedy with relief and food — in the virtually total absence of any government support, either in terms of food, transport, shelter, cash, or health facilities.

Artists and sculptors have made a sculpture of a woman holding a baby for a Durga Puja pandal in Kolkata this year. The young mother is looking straight at the audience, her eyes asking a question, while narrating her own invisible story of abject silence. The only bitter realism here is that her story, despite the essential invisibility and the ghettoization of her life, is no more so definitely invisible. It was out there on the streets, under the flyovers of cities, on highways under a scorching sun in a cruel summer, on crossroads and borders of states, on crowded bus stations and railway stations with packed trains many months later, on trucks and matadors piled up with human bodies.

She was out there, holding her baby, and a sack on her head, a Dalit, poor Muslim, Adivasi, or extremely backward-caste migrant worker, outside the realm of constitutional justice or fundamental rights, outside the dynamics and principles of organized labour and trade unions with their essential rights, outside the realm of social and political paradigms of mainstream progress and development, trapped in the primitive and cold-blooded logic of free market liberalization, neither a human being nor a citizen.

And she was out there walking the long walk to her home, as the sudden lockdown was imposed by Prime Minister Narendra Modi with hardly four hours' notice on the night of March 24. Next day onwards, tens of thousands of migrant workers started moving from big cities to their distant villages, almost all of them on foot, because everything was shut, markets, shops, construction projects, offices, railway stations, bus stations and airports. All transportation, including railways and buses, were shut due to the lockdown. The streets in towns and cities became empty of people; curfew hours were imposed and extended everywhere. Only medicine shops and essential commodities shops opened for a few hours. It was like a war zone.

A deadly and deathly epidemic and a mass killer viral and infectious pandemic, which apparently started from Wuhan in China and spread through international flights and airports all over the globe, marked a historical and epistemological rupture in all societies across the global landscape. Tens of thousands were dying in America, especially in New York, especially Latinos and Blacks.

Thousands were inflicted with the disease in China, Italy, Iran and Spain. There was no news from Africa, as usual. It had yet again been rendered dark, the entire continent.

In India, the government was initially in denial, with the prime minister celebrating with a huge crowd and no physical distancing at a fancy cricket stadium in Ahmedabad, welcoming the US President Donald Trump, who chose to quote Vivekananda, not pronouncing his name correctly. In the sleazy internal political dynamic, Parliament was running, even as the BJP spent a lot of time and energy in toppling the elected Congress government in Madhya Pradesh. Except for Kerala, which geared up with the first case from China in January and quickly activated its entire administrative, civilian and health machinery from the top to the lowest rung of civil society, the Centre in Delhi chose to be lazy and lackadaisical, non-committal to take on the pandemic head-on and on a war-footing, unable and unwilling apparently to activate its health and social security apparatus, in virtual denial mode. Even airports were not shut.

Earlier, Narendra Modi had asked people to bang thalis and clap in praise of the health system and frontline medical workers, doctors and nurses etc. Scores of doctors, nurses and medical workers have died since then—but the government has disclosed that it does not have any data on them, nor on the millions of migrant workers who walked on the highways. Scores of Indians banged their thalis and clapped on a certain day at a certain time. At that time, the government seemed content that a miracle would happen, especially in India. Nothing of that sort happened.

The prime minister announced the lockdown on March 24. He said, “These 21 days are crucial. If we are not able to curtail this in 21 days, then the country will go back 21 years. Hence, forget moving out of your house for 21 days. The only thing that people have to do onwards is to stay at home.”

Since then, the country seems to have moved back many more years than the prime minister’s prophecy of 21 years. With four hours’ notice, and no preparation whatsoever, the country was locked down. That is when the exodus started happening in waves, from the unknown and silent margins, in wave after wave, from Bangalore to Bhopal, from Delhi in tens of thousands to UP and Bihar, from big cities in the South to the tribal areas of Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. In no other country such a scenario had occurred, not in the South Asian neighbourhood, not in populated China, not in war-torn Middle-east, not in Kurdistan or Syria, nor the poorest countries in the world. It was unique, the mass exodus of the unorganized working class in India, especially from urban habitats and big metropolises, hidden, isolated and ghettoized by the highways, flyovers, five star hotels, airports, high-rise apartment buildings and gated societies of the upper middle class and the upwardly mobile, which they had built living in shanties and tenements, and which they nourished and sustained as the vast service industry of faceless workers.

Delhi: Riots, Deaths and Displacement

Almost 93 percent of migrant workers in India belong to the unorganized and informal sector. Majority of them are Dalits, extremely backward-caste, poor Muslims and Adivasis. Almost half of them are women who are mostly paid much less than men. They are outside the structures and paradigm of trade union politics. They have no fundamental rights, no trade union rights, no job surety, no fixed wages, no social security, no housing or basic and safe shelter with water and electricity, no provident fund or pension or gratuity etc., no maternity leaves or crèches for their children, no political party or social formation to protect them. They are out there among the sharks of the vast urban paraphernalia which we call as great metropolitan expanse of buildings, shopping malls, highways, gated societies and swanky cars.

The draconian new labour laws will further impoverish and degrade them, whereby hire and fire and unstipulated, long working hours will become a general rule among large numbers of the migrant workers, especially in construction projects, real estate, or, where they work on contract or for temporary projects.

These workers also constitute the large mass of the unorganized and invisible ‘service industry’: maidservants, *presswallabs*, *dbobhis*, plumbers, people selling street food, momos, chaat, *pakora*, vegetables, fruits and other sundry goods on carts, teasellers, rickshawpullers, e-rickshaw and three-wheeler drivers, flowersellers, construction workers, chowkidars and private security guards, cobblers and small-time tailors, mechanics, peons and attendants, daily wage workers in small-scale factories and units, among others. Their daily and monthly income is very low or just about average, and they generally live in clusters, with relatives and friends from the same region, in slums or bastis, mostly with no pucca housing, or seven people in a small room with a common toilet shared with other residents.

They constitute the vast underbelly of millions of landless labourers and marginal agriculturalists in often stagnant agricultural societies who routinely migrate to cities and towns to enhance their incomes, or just about survive on a hand-to-mouth basis. Many of them go to the fertile farmland of Punjab, Haryana and Western UP. The entire affluent geography of Delhi and Noida is replete with gated societies or palatial bungalows surrounded by urban villages, slums and ghettos, with dingy by-lanes, which supply the ‘labour’ to their homes, including cooks and maid servants, and servants who walk their dogs.

These are the people who have left everything, and, with their little belongings and savings, started walking to their distant villages and towns with stagnant economies and no employment to escape the sudden lockdown and the pandemic. This is because this city had no use of them anymore, even while almost all of them were suddenly rendered homeless or jobless, including maid servants and cooks in affluent and middle-class homes. Almost 80 percent of the maidservants were not paid their salaries during the lockdown, it has been reported. Their children abandoned their schooling because they can’t do online classes —no one has a computer. Most men became ‘car-washers’, even skilled workers, in Delhi and Noida.

Almost 60 percent of the population in the capital of India comprises workers and migrant workers, mostly slum-dwellers, or people sharing little rooms in the vicinity of upper-class residential areas and gated societies. They also constitute the votebank of the Aam Aadmi Party, since significant work has been done in the educational and health sector by the AAP government in Delhi for the poor. For instance, the efficient and free Mohalla Clinics and primary and secondary education in the public sector has improved drastically in Delhi, for both teachers and students in government schools, especially poor students. So much so, they have done better in exams than the elite private schools of the rich.

Trilokpuri in East Delhi has small tenements and slums which are, by now, settled and authorized. The inner lanes stretch across miles with people living in close proximity amidst bad sanitation and filthy conditions. Free water and electricity by the Arvind Kejriwal government in Delhi has been widely appreciated, including the end of the ‘atrocities’ by the police on ‘*thelawallas*,’ people who sell stuff on carts. In 1984, the Sikhs in Trilokpuri, especially in Block 32 and 34, suffered the most at the hands of murderous mobs allegedly led by the Congress leaders who burnt, looted and killed scores of hardworking Sikhs living in humble homes here in early November 1984, after the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Many of them were ‘lower-caste’ and Dalit weavers from Rajasthan.

The exodus from Trilokpuri has been marginal. Collectively, there have been old social security systems here, and people had jobs. The lockdown period was tough, but they were able to manage. Very few migrated, according to locals.

In Northeast Delhi, which is a sprawling and unwieldy urban landscape with uneven architecture and is largely driven by refugees or migrants, with certain middle and upper classes in-between, it's a different story altogether. In what were riots directed largely against the Muslim community even as the peaceful Shaheen Bagh protests near Jamia Millia Islamia in South Delhi had spread to some areas in Khureji and Jaffrabad in Northeast Delhi, the brunt of the killings, looting and burning was reserved for the Muslims. In many parts the police and mobs were working in tandem, as many videos and ground reports have proved. Even ambulance services were not allowed for injured victims, until the Delhi High Court intervened on the petition of well-meaning citizens.

The Dalits in this huge area, which also comprises Shahdara, Bhajanpura, Seelampur, Babarpur, Karawal Nagar, Jaffrabad and Geeta Colony, consist of Class IV government employees, *safai karamcharis* with pucca homes, basic salaries and a better lifestyle, and a large number of poor Dalits who are outside the government system, who live in *jbuggi jhonpris*, tenements and makeshift homes near the railway tracks, residential areas and elsewhere, and who are daily-wagers, or working in small factories and enterprises. Due to the proximity of the area to Western UP, Dr Umakant, a Dalit scholar, informed that there is some involvement and influence of the Bheem Army in this area among the Dalits. The Bheem Army has done exemplary work in education and social mobility in Western UP where it is very strong politically, especially around Saharanpur district. Indeed, its leader, Chandrashekhar Ravan, had given a call for protest in this area too, especially Jaffrabad, though he himself was not physically present, nor did his outfit play a major role in the anti-CAA protests here.

Says Dr Umakant, a senior Dalit scholar, formerly from JNU: "Certainly, some Dalits were targeted in the area because of the call of the Bheem Army, some posters of Babasaheb was burnt. It was a Hindutva project to polarize." Locals however say that the main target were Muslims, especially at the hand of 'outsiders' who came from nearby areas, especially Western UP.

According to Dr Umakant, and locals, there were slogans in some areas against both Muslims and 'Chamars'. An activist recounted that one BJP leader, who had incited the mobs earlier in Jaffrabad, was instrumental in instigating the mobs against the Dalits as well in other areas. Dalits were branded as Bheem Army supporters, according to Dr Umakant. Vehicles were checked by mob and Dalits and Muslims were targeted.

The Quint reported that there were inflammatory slogans against Muslims and Dalits, according to certain complaints filed. On February 23, violence broke out and Dalits too were attacked. "*The Quint* has accessed several such complaints related to the Northeast Delhi riots which indicate that the anger of one section of the pro-Hindutva side wasn't just towards Muslims and anti-Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) protesters, but the Dalit community as well. The complaints detail how the mob targeted Dalits, used casteist slurs and even attacked Babasaheb Ambedkar's posters." It was also alleged that a speech was given in which it was said that those who clean our toilets cannot sit on our heads.

According to Dr Udit Raj, former BJP MP from Northwest Delhi in the last Lok Sabha, now with the Congress, and convener of the All India Federation of SC/ST employees: "Most Dalits live in mixed colonies in the vast Northeast Delhi, especially in Hindu areas. Their relations with Muslims are not at all hostile, though there might not be great interaction. They work in all kinds of unorganized sectors. The Dalit migrant workers who left the place after the pandemic and lockdown have largely still not returned. They are scattered across Bhajanpura, Loni, Karawal Nagar, etc. Surely,

the current economic collapse has hit them hard, because many factories and other places where they worked are still struggling. Most of them are from Western UP and also Poorvanchal in the Hindi heartland.”

He agrees that many attackers, of Hindutva affiliation, arrived from neighbouring areas, including Western UP. He does not agree that there were major attacks on Dalits, especially migrant workers, though there was hostility against the slogan of ‘Jai Bheem’.

He says that the migration of Dalits from Western UP, especially from Bijnore, Saharanpur and Bulandshahar, has been on in this area since the 1970s. This is a new generation of Dalit workers. Most live in the mixed residential areas comprising Hindus. Few live in *jhuggi jhonpris*. Some are trickling back, trying to gather some sanity in their lives, because there are practically no jobs back home. Demonetization and GST hit the Northeast Delhi’s sprawling small-scale industries and factories hard, and they are still trying to redefine their economic lives.

In their intensely caste-ridden villages replete with upper-caste oppression, Dalit migrant workers have little or no work, lacking even a semblance of social dignity. In invisible urban spaces of the cities, where caste identities are not so visibly important, they are part of the huge army of the unemployed which runs into millions in India, mostly affecting Dalits, poor Muslims, extremely backward castes and Adivasis. There is no survey which can prove that, but sociologists believe that the mass unemployment will impact these poorest sections in the social hierarchy, who are at the bottom of the economic ladder with no social support or social security, and part of the massive, fluid, fragmented and undocumented narrative of the unorganized sector without stated rules, conventions or fundamental rights. The apparent ‘reverse migration’ to the cities and towns for livelihood is loaded with uncertainty in a jobless market.

Many workers are returning with their contractors on very bad terms and conditions. Most of them have no choice because there are no jobs and their financial situation is on the brink. In many ways the forced migration is leading to another form of forced bonded and exploitative labour.

“Bonded labour does not exist anymore in its old forms. It has now found new forms and characteristics,” said senior journalist Ramsharan Joshi. He was the founder-secretary of the Bandhua Mukti Morcha with Swami Agnivesh. “A large number of Dalit and Adivasi migrant workers from Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh returned to their impoverished villages and homes because the lockdown had rendered them in dire straits. While East UP and Bihar contributed to the bulk of the migrant workers from Delhi, let us not ignore the plight of those from central India. Most of these workers are Dalits, poor Muslims and those belonging to the Extremely Backward Castes.”

Noida: Life is Not Elsewhere

Hidden within the super expressway, highways, the metro, palatial houses and residential areas of the rich, there is a small ghetto called the Harijan Basti (now, Ambedkar Vihar) in Noida, near Sector 30. When she was chief minister, Mayawati had created this enclave for the Dalits. Currently, the ‘basti’ is a typical urban village, with a mix of people from the cow belt, and, significantly, a huge population of Bengalis who work as domestic servants, pull rickshaws, sell vegetables, fish and chicken, and also have ‘exclusive’ shops selling Bengali delicacies, including *‘mishti doi’, jharna ghee* and Bengali sweets. Most of the Bengalis have arrived from Malda and Kolkata have strong community relationships. Others are Indian citizens with roots in Bangladesh, or, part of their family resides across the border. Interestingly, most of the Bengalis are from the Scheduled Castes, largely belonging to the community of Mandals. The men and women are hardworking, dignified, and seem to be closely united as a community.

One of the biggest festivals they celebrate is a three-day collective celebration of the cult of Chaitanya, with dance and musical troupes from Bengal performing till the wee hours of the night. Many of them are Vaishnavites, as in Bengal. This three-day festival, with a big budget, is celebrated in an open-air community building in the neighbourhood. Collective food is organized with men and women dressed in their best clothes. The special attraction of this festival are the music and dance troupes, including women, who arrive from Bengal, especially from Nabadwip, the birthplace of Chaitanya. They sing and dance till the early hours of the morning. Last year, the loudspeakers were not used because March was exam time for children.

“This year we can’t celebrate Durga Puja due to the pandemic. But we are waiting for March next year. We will surely celebrate the Chaitanya festival,” said Minto Mandal from Kolkata, a flower-seller at a roadside corner in Noida. There are other flower-sellers in the area who are also from the Mandal community, a scheduled-caste community in Bengal.

During the entire period of the lockdown, Mandal and his family had no earnings. But they did not migrate back to Bengal. “We lived on our savings,” he said. His business is still floundering and, with the festival season going blank, few are interested in his flowers.

Many Bengali workers in Ambedkar Vihar or in nearby Nithari in Noida did not migrate back to Bengal. Many of the women were maidservants who got paid by their employers even during the quarantine and lockdown period. The unlucky ones would start begging on the streets and market places, including very old women, with their children. Those who were fired because their employers did not want to pay them during the lockdown were in dire straits, especially because their husbands, all daily wagers, had no earning.

Beena was worried because of the fear of the pandemic, no work, and the education of her daughter. “From where can we get a computer? We can’t even buy eggs,” she said. Her husband would do work of a kabari, but that was no more possible. So he started washing cars in the morning in the residential areas.

A poor community of Muslims, who live near the Som Bazaar close by, come from Faizabad in UP, close to Ayodhya. They are all flute players, and sell flutes, balloons and toys for children on the roadsides. As they play popular Bollywood songs on their flutes, Ahmed says that the last few months were hard because the streets and markets were empty. Most of them don’t wear masks. The community of about 50 families who live in makeshift tenements somehow survived by helping each other. They did not migrate. Now, their wives and children sell ballpoint pens on the streets and markets, and they sell flutes and balloons. How much money do they earn, I ask Ahmed and his friends. “If the entire family, including the children, pitch in since morning, by evening we make about Rs 200, if we are lucky. Somehow it seems the people don’t like to buy flutes and balloons for their children,” says Ahmed.

Now, life seems to be coming back to Ambedkar Vihar which used to be full of hustle and bustle before the lockdown, with a mix of north Indian and Bengali languages. The fish and chicken market used to be full of customers from the neighbouring colonies, but they were all shut. Now they are slowly reopening. The *pakora* and momo-seller is back, the mutton shop is open, the workers gather in the evening for chit-chat, the teashops are full of people, and the by-lanes are happy with life. There is no clue about how many cases of COVID are here, because there is no survey available. There is no physical distancing here, the lanes are crowded, and the majority don’t wear masks, or, if they wear them, they are hanging on their necks.

Amit, a young vegetable seller says the workers are slowly coming back, including painters, construction workers, rickshawpullers. The rickshawpullers say there is very little money because despite the metro running again, there are few passengers. A golgappa-seller said that his business is

flourishing.

Western UP: Dalit Assertion and Migration

Along with Punjab and Haryana, Western UP is also the green revolution agricultural belt of India. There are organized canal systems here in this fertile and green landscape, sugarcane is one of the main crops in the area surrounded by sugar mills and cooperatives, the crops, vegetable and mango mandis have been flourishing in the past, including in prosperous Saharanpur and Meerut nearby with the local market economy always in boom traditionally. The long rows of bullock carts with sugarcane travelling slowly but steadily over long distances in the night on empty streets is a memory from the past etched on people's consciousness here. In many places, often, the memory returns as a reality.

The green and fertile landscape smelling of sweet jaggery during the changing seasons had never had any communal rift or rupture in the past. Dominant communities of rich farmers in both the Muslim and Jat communities lived in harmony under the banner of the Bhartiya Kisan Union, once led by the formidable kisan leader Mahender Singh Tikait.

Politically, the BJP was never a factor in the green rural hinterland in Western UP or in the bustling and populated towns, including in Baghpat, Barot, Shamli, Muzaffarnagar, Meerut and Khatauli. Politically, this was the original bastion of Jat leader Chaudhury Charan Singh, which has now splintered in favour of the BJP. In the towns, the BJP has been traditionally strong among the banias, shopkeepers and the trading community.

Before the 2014 Lok Sabha polls, after the 'socially engineered' riots that followed on the fake propaganda of 'love jihad', that displaced 60,000 Muslims into refugee camps with scores of allegations of rapes as documented by women's groups, journalists and fact-finding teams, for the first time perhaps in post-Independence history did communal polarization happen in this region. This region was otherwise once infamous for its crime record and upper-caste goons and 'bahubalis', as depicted in the film by Vishal Bhardwaj, *Omkara*. Also, for the first time, there was vertical Hindu consolidation across the caste spectrum, from the Jats to the Dalits, against the Muslims. No wonder, the BJP won massively and gained huge ground, perhaps for the first time in Western UP in 2014.

Since then, the BJP graph has fallen, and the graph of the Bheem Army has risen in the area. Despite upper-caste attacks and jail terms for their leaders, the movement for Dalit assertion here, with Dr Ambedkar and Kanshiram as icons, continues to consolidate.

Since it is a prosperous area, some Dalits too here are reasonably well-off economically. "In the rural hinterland near Saharanpur, surprisingly, they even own land," says a documentary filmmaker who works in the area doing news clips, discussions with farmers and short films. "This is not so in nearby Shamli, where many Dalit workers work in brick kilns."

"The Bheem Army has created a sense of dignity and assertion among the Dalits in Saharanpur and Shamli districts and around. Their work in the educational sector has been socially uplifting. Young Dalit girls and boys are now educated, urbanized, confident, going to college. Their movement has been joined in this area by JNU, Jamia and Delhi University Students many times in the recent past. They are connected across the hinterland in solidarity networks. Hence the 'Great Chamar' is reaffirming and reasserting the Dalit identity in a truly transformative manner in this region," said a Bheem army activist in Saharanpur. The role played by Bheem Army leader Chandrashekhar Azad 'Ravan' after the Hathras rape has boosted the morale of Dalits here.

"Even during the lockdown some landless Dalit workers were able to find work in the fields of Jat and Muslim farmers. However, even our mango farms suffered due to the lockdown since the

mandi was shut and the police did not allow us to move,” said a farmer. Many of them would go to Punjab, Haryana and Delhi, and others worked in the brick-kilns nearby, informed a forest rights activist in Saharanpur.

“With the sugar factories closed during the lockdown, and trapped in a major economic crisis due to huge pending arrears in crores still unpaid by the mills and the government, and small-scale industries in the area badly hit post-demonetization and GST, many workers, especially Dalits, have been pushed to the brink,” says J. Hooda, leader of the Bhartiya Kisan Union. “Farmers are thereby hiring a lot of unskilled farm labourers, and skilled professionals like tailors, mistris and plumbers —because they have no work. In my own land, many such skilled professionals from Haryana came to work, because everything was shut down after the lockdown. With the opening of the lockdown, work is returning, slowly, in towns like Saharanpur and Meerut. But it is a tiring and long process. Surely, Dalit workers who don’t own land and property, are suffering.”

A House for Rashida: Where do Migrant Workers of Kolkata Live and How?

Abhijnan Sarkar * & Swati Bhattacharjee †

As India entered lockdown on March 23, 2020, Rashida Bibi, 46, started sleeping on a pile of buffalo hide. She was among the dozen women who stayed back in the factory in a slum in Park Circus, Kolkata. The factory receives supplies of tanned leather and does the final drying and processing. It then sends off truckloads of leather, ready to be made into shoes and bags. Rashida has never touched a processing machine, though. The women do the heavy work, loading and unloading leather, several times a day. It is a back-breaking job, which earns them less than Rs 200 a day. But it is a job they dare not lose. In the last six months, Rashida has visited her home in Ghutiari Sharif, about 40 km from Kolkata, only twice.

The factory was never meant for living in, and the owner, who also lives in the same slum, has done nothing to make it liveable. The slum around the factory, known as Char Nambor Bostee (Slum No. 4), has about 500 small and medium leather processing units, and nearly four thousand residents. Most of them are migrant labour from the neighbouring state of Bihar. They are Dalits of the Chamar caste, bearing surnames like Jaiswara, Das and Ram. They live in dilapidated apartments, one- or two-storeyed houses, and *kutchas*. Many have lived here for several generations. The women of the Chamar families are married off early and stay at home. The women labourers of Char Nambor Bostee are Muslims from the districts adjoining Kolkata. They used to travel by local trains or buses all these years.

Now women like Rashida Bibi, about fifty of them, find themselves living on the shop floor, among piles of hide. They cook in a makeshift stove and use the factory toilet. The smell of drying hide is thick inside the factory. Outside, garbage is littered all around and clogged drains overflow on the narrow streets. Does it make sense to ask them if they maintain social distancing or wash hands frequently?

Hygiene and health were never a part of the plan for slums in Kolkata. Since the 1930s, the slums grew mainly as residences for migrant workers. During India's Partition with Pakistan (1947) and again during the Bangladesh Liberation War (1971), refugees poured into the streets of Kolkata. They lived in railway stations, on pavements, and lands adjacent to canals and highways. Indeed, homeless families squatted on every bit of unoccupied land in the city. The homeless migrants were, and still are, seen as a problem with no solution. The middle class and the rich continue to ignore their plight and generally regard them with suspicion and disdain. The migrants are feared for being

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‘rowdy’, as they fight from time to time with the police to resist evacuation. Forced to live amidst squalor and filth, the migrants themselves have come to be regarded as a ‘polluting’ presence. They are also entrusted with the job of keeping the city clean. They collect garbage from homes and roadside garbage dumps, load and unload garbage trucks, clean sewers and septic tanks, sweep streets and mop homes.

The threat of COVID-19 brought home the fact that domestic maids, delivery boys, taxi drivers, plumbers, electricians and vegetable vendors were no longer ‘safe’ for the people they served. These workers lived in conditions where maintaining hygiene was impossible. The administration was also worried. Studies had found that slum populations can have a significant effect on influenza transmission in urban areas. “Improper specification of slums in large urban regions results in underestimation of infections in the entire population and hence will lead to misguided interventions by policy planners,” wrote researchers in the *British Medical Journal* in 2016, after applying a model of transmission to Delhi slums).¹ But for the migrant workers, their health was not the only concern for the migrant workers. Most of them are illegal tenants and have no recourse but to vacate their premises once they default on their monthly payments. In May 2020, thousands of migrant workers hit the roads, walking for days to return home. The nation woke up to the shameful truth that its migrant workers, at least 150 million of them, had no place in the cities they helped build. Kolkata was no exception.

Kolkata gets 2.2 million migrant workers a year, some from the neighbouring states, and the rest from West Bengal’s own districts. Some of them enjoy the status of renting houses in legal settlements. An arrangement called ‘thika tenancy’ had originated in the colonial times. The thika tenant took a piece of land on rent from the land owner, and collected house rent from the dwellers. In the Seventies, the land owners wanted to demolish the slums to build large apartment buildings, which led to frequent conflicts with the slum dwellers. The state government intervened to pass the Thika Tenancy Act of 1981, asserting government ownership over privately owned lands with slums. However, the government merely replaced the landowners. It continued to collect rent from the middlemen — the thika tenants — instead of making a direct arrangement with the slum residents. Nevertheless, the Kolkata slums, from which the state collects rent, enjoy a legal status. This means that these have legal access to civic amenities like water, electricity or sanitation. These may be grossly inadequate, and quite costly, but the presence of these amenities signal the validity of the settlement to all, including the police. This gives a measure of security to migrant workers who rent a house in these slums. Alongside the legal slums are many illegal ones — settlements on public or private land without municipal sanction. In some of these, the residents manage to negotiate with local political leaders, market committees and other organizers to get informal but reasonably secure access to electricity and water. Where the slums are illegal and these amenities are completely denied, the residents live in incredible hardship and constant fear. The illegal slums of Bidhan Nagar (also called Salt Lake) are an example.

There are No Slums in Bidhan Nagar

Bidhan Nagar is named after the first Chief Minister of West Bengal, Dr Bidhan Chandra Ray (1882–1962). Unlike Kolkata, which grew in spurts for 300 years, its many winding roads bearing testimony to lack of planning, Bidhan Nagar in Eastern Kolkata (then Calcutta) was a planned township. It was developed between 1958 and 1965 as a satellite city to Kolkata. Its wide, straight roads are laid out in a grid, and its broad pavements are lined with large trees. Each major crossing is marked by an island of greenery. This meticulously planned city has zero space for any settlement of domestic maids,

vendors, transport workers, shop assistants and others who provide essential support services. Its houses, markets and businesses are serviced mainly by three large slums located at its periphery (Keshtopur and Dattabad slums, and some settlements along the Eastern Metropolitan Bypass).

However, a few settlements of squatters are tucked away deep inside the various blocks of Bidhan Nagar. We visited one such settlement of about 40 houses in DD block, only a stone's throw from a large mall, the City Centre 1. It is known simply as Bostee Number 1. The houses are plastic sheets spread over walls of corrugated tin and woven bamboo sheets. The first few gusts of the Amphan cyclone, which struck Kolkata on May 20, collapsed them into a pitiful heap. But even on 'normal' days, life is exceptionally harsh for the dwellers. Minati Subba, who sweeps and cleans the glittering City Centre, can light up her own house only with a solar lamp, or a kerosene lamp. Sometimes the women cook and serve in the light of the torch on their mobile phones. They get their phones charged for Rs 10 from a local shop. The slum has no electric connection, no toilets and no water. The dwellers have dug a well and fitted it with a pump, which runs on a generator. This water is for washing only. For drinking water, they have to walk for more than a kilometre to a municipality tap.

Subas Debnath, a leader of Busteebasi Sramajeevi Adhikar Raksha Committee (Committee for Protecting the Rights of Slum-dwelling Labour) moved into Bostee Number 1 four decades ago. Nothing has changed since, he explains. The municipality believes that sanctioning any amenity to the settlement would amount to giving it validity. For the same reason, says Subas, the local councillor refuses to provide them with a proof of residence. This means that even after living and working here for decades, the slum-dwellers are not local voters, and cannot access any civil amenity (such as subsidized grains from the local outlets of the Public Distribution System). There are eight such illegal settlements in the DD block alone. In about 70 blocks of Bidhan Nagar, there are at least 10,000 migrant workers spread over various slums, says Soumya Chattopadhyay, who works for the committee. Most of the migrant workers are from the districts of West Bengal, but are de-facto non-citizens. Their presence, and the presence of the slums, are simply not acknowledged. "After the Amphan, we tried to get the compensation for the ruined houses of Bidhan Nagar slums. The local councillors flatly refused, saying that Bidhan Nagar had no slums. After much effort, we could manage to get only a partial compensation." While the full compensation for houses ruined by Amphan, as declared by the state government, was Rs 20,000, the slum dwellers received only Rs 5,000.

Even so, the slum-dwellers have to fight hard to hold on to their rickety huts. The threat of eviction hangs over their heads. "In 2009, the Left Front government tried to throw us out. For 90 days, there was a bulldozer parked in front of our *bostee*. Again and again it rolled over our huts, but we refused to move. It was a nightmare," says Subas.

Again in 2017, when the Under-19 Football World Cup was held at a stadium in Bidhan Nagar, there was a demand for the demolition of the local slums. The members of the Residents' Welfare Association, an organization of homeowners, took out a procession in support of the demolition. The slum-dwellers put up a united fight, supported by human rights and labour rights groups. The ramshackle houses survived. But attempts at demolition of workers' settlements in the wake of a big sporting event are quite common in the Third World – it was seen before the Beijing Olympics (2008), Delhi Commonwealth Games (2010), and the FIFA World Cup (2014) in Brazil.

No Country for Labour

Professor Nirmala Banerjee, who taught Economics at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Kolkata, says, “In the Fifties and Sixties, first Kalyani and then Bidhan Nagar were planned. Neither city allotted any space for the working population. Bidhan Nagar, for example, was mapped into blocks, and all the plots in each block were allotted for three-storey bungalows. Not a single plot in any block was allotted for workers’ residences, not even a space near the markets. Such a city cannot grow. We found Kalyani stagnating precisely for this reason. Bidhan Nagar thrived only because the state and central governments moved many of their offices there, necessitating a well-functioning transport system.”

Kolkata, on the other hand, provided some informal space for migrant workers up to the mid-seventies, says Professor Banerjee. “The open government lands were available to migrants. They made slums and lived beside the waterbodies scattered all over the city. The situation changed after the Left Front came to power in 1977. Strongmen with political support filled up the waterbodies, and occupied all the pieces of available land, to develop real estate. The workers were pushed out of the city.”

Professor Banerjee points out that nearly 35 lakh commuters come to Kolkata every day. “A large number are workers, who cannot afford a living space in or around the city. Think of the domestic maids, who have to travel for three to four hours every day just to reach their place of work. Their needs are ignored by planners.” Indeed, some of the early morning trains from the districts into Kolkata are jokingly called the “Jhee Express” (Maid Express) as these are availed mostly by the domestic helps.

The imbalance in urban planning has continued. Anita Agnihotri, a retired IAS officer and an author, wrote after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic that only one–two percent of a city’s space was ever allotted for 80 percent of its poor. On top of that, most common spaces in Indian cities, such as the playgrounds, parks and waterbodies that allowed swimming, have been put behind gates. The housing projects for the poor are usually located far from the city. Quite often the low-budget apartments are sold out to the rich by the real estate developers. The latter find it profitable to avail of soft government loans to build ‘LIG’ (Lower Income Group) residences and then to sell these at market value. During Narendra Modi’s first term as the prime minister, the idea of developing ‘Smart Cities’ were introduced. The proposed plans from various states included many exciting ideas — from cycle tracks to free Wi-Fi zones, but contained practically nothing for the poor workers.²

Politics and the Slums

Gopal Pradhan works in Bidhan Nagar but lives in a slum bordering a canal, known locally as Khalpar Bostee, near New Town. He had ‘bought’ a small piece of land for Rs 30,000, and has lived there ever since. Who took his money? The local committee of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), which was in power then. Did the committee members give him any document of ownership? Of course not. No one in this illegal slum has any paper to prove landownership or right of residence. But they all confidently claim ownership, and, despite a change of political regime (the Trinamool Congress came to power in 2011, ending 32 years of Left Front rule in West Bengal), the slum-dwellers of Khalpar Bostee do not seem to fear eviction. A part of that confidence is drawn from the fact that they are now voters of the area.

The politics of vote-crunching determines the fate of the migrant worker in search of an address to a large extent. Take the case of the families that lived beneath the Tallah Bridge in north Kolkata, a major connector of the city. Their slum of over three decades, which had about 60 houses, was razed to the ground in November 2019. The bridge is under repair. The evicted families now live on a pavement (in Ward 91) or on a canal side (near the Kolkata railway station), under black plastic sheets. These locations have no electricity, public toilets or drinking water, and some streets get waterlogged after a shower. The relocated families cannot access basic civic amenities unless facilitated by local elected representatives. The committee members made several attempts to hold a talk with the local MLA. “But his men made it clear that being allowed to stay on in the area was about all that non-voters could expect,” says Chattopadhyay.

That slum-dwellers make “instrumental use” of their voting power “to negotiate their claims in a political terrain” was pointed out by political theorist Partha Chatterjee in 2004. In his definition, “political society” is made of groups “which transgress the strict lines of legality in struggling to live and work. They may live in illegal squatter settlements, make illegal use of water or electricity, travel without tickets in public transport”.³ These groups, whose livelihood and habitation depend on violation of the law, enter into a negotiation with the government agencies on the strength of the latter’s obligation to serve and protect the poor and the underprivileged. The agencies, however, do not deal with them as associations of citizens but “as convenient instruments for the administration of welfare to marginal and underprivileged population groups.”⁴ Not having a local voter card is a serious disadvantage in strategic negotiations.

The promise of voter cards is therefore a common political strategy for gaining support. We found the BJP, which is now the largest opposition in the state, making the promise of enrolling the migrant workers in voter rolls in Khalpar Bostee. Some of the slum residents have lived there for decades, and have heard such promises from the Congress, CPM and Trinamool in the past.

Their non-voter status makes workers from other states particularly vulnerable. A group of middle-aged men we met in Burrabazar informed us that they were from Darbhanga, Bihar. They worked as coolies, loading and unloading items, earning between Rs 300 and Rs 600 a day. They had come to Kolkata decades ago, some as long ago as three decades, but have always lived on the pavements. No ‘night shelter’ had been offered to them after the COVID-19 outbreak. Migrants are a significant part, if not the majority, of Kolkata’s pavement-dwellers. They live in extremely harsh conditions and are frequently harassed by the police. During the lockdown, they were in dire financial straits. They could not hope for any help from their employers, as they did not have a steady job – they hired out their services as needed. Nor could they hope for any grant for the unorganized labour from the West Bengal government, as they were not residents of the state. The only help they received was the free food handed out by the police. Nor did they receive any support from the labour unions or political parties. They had walked in processions and attended meetings at the brigade parade ground on several occasions, but complained bitterly that no leader had ever raised the issues of their wages or benefits. Not a single leader visited them after the lockdown to see how they were doing. A coolie in Canning Street said, “Even crows have leaders and raise a racket when attacked, but the migrant labour have none.”

At least two pavement-dwellers tested positive for COVID-19 in April. The government provided shelter to the pavement-dwellers to check the spread of infection, but experts feared that the “safe houses” may turn into COVID hotspots.⁵

Access to Amenities

But even a proof of citizenship, or a rent receipt, cannot assure a reasonably safe and dignified dwelling place for the migrant worker. A slum close to the headquarters of the Kolkata Municipal Corporation near New Market has old, dilapidated houses with 6 feet by 8 feet rooms. The men are forced to sleep on the streets in summer. There are many unsanctioned, illegal multi-storeyed constructions inside the slum. For more than a thousand residents, there are just eight toilets, four for men and four for women. Similarly, in the sprawling slum opposite the Jadavpur University, there were just two sources for collection of drinking water. University students who visited the slum for relief work during the pandemic were appalled. “How is it even possible to maintain hygiene in this situation? We have arranged for some water filters for now, but the municipality must provide more taps,” says a representative of the Quarantined Students’ Youth Network. In another slum adjoining the Jadavpur railway station, an electric ‘subline’ is drawn from the nearby market, with a nod from the market committee. Each household has to pay Rs 1,000–Rs 1,200 a month for electricity. Drinking water sources are a kilometre away. Women are forced to visit the pay-and-use toilets at the station. Since they live illegally on railway land, the slum-dwellers have to pay small bribes to the Railway Police Force personnel every now and then.

Though access is not easy, water is free of cost in slums. The municipality outlets spout water several times a day. Slum residents either line up to collect water, or pay small amounts to local youth who supply water jars filled with tap water to their doors. More problematic is the access to toilets. A journalist visiting the slums in the Calcutta Port area in Ward 134 (Ramnagar Algara Majdoor Lane) found just two toilets for 1,200 residents living in 180 households. Young girls and women were especially at a disadvantage during menstruation. The local councilor blamed the Port authorities for not providing land to build public toilets.⁶ The cost of using pay toilets can exceed Rs 50 a day for a family with two or more women.

The Price of a Room

The overcrowded Tyangra Bustee still sees new huts coming up every day. Newly arrived workers have to pay a non-refundable deposit (*selaami*) of Rs 20,000 to Rs 50,000 to get a hut. The monthly rent may vary from Rs 100–200 (for those who had moved in decades ago) to Rs 1,500–2,000 (for recent tenants). The rent depends on the hut’s location (distance from the water source and toilets, or from the main road) and its build (whether it lets in some light and air). The residents who had moved in to Basanti Colony (a part of Ultodanga Bustee) three decades ago say that they had to pay Rs 10,000 to political leaders, their strongmen, and the local hooch den to be able to put up a hut. In the legal slums of Basanti Colony, Tyangra and Park Circus slums, it is quite common for long-term tenants to sublet their huts. There is a kind of mobility within the slums. Residents leave illegal, kutcha slums to move into legal slums with better amenities. In a slum, all the residents (two thousand or more) may have the same address on their voter cards, which is the plot number of the land on which the slum stands.

In illegal slums, putting up a new house is usually mediated by relatives or friends, who make an arrangement with the leader of the slum. The primary condition is a promise of allegiance to the leader’s party. To be able to hang on to one’s accommodation depends on one’s ability to shift allegiance when there is a change in political power. Usually, setting up a new house in the illegal slums does not involve any payment. The residents of Bidhan Nagar’s slums told us that they only had to spend on the bamboos and plastics to set up a house.

A third kind of residence for migrant workers does not involve any money or political connection. This is when their residence is provided by the employer. An example is Metiabruz. Located in the dock area of Kolkata, and popularly seen as a Muslim ghetto, Metiabruz is known for being a production hub of undergarments and children's clothes. There are approximately 15,000 manufacturing units around Metiabruz, 3,000 units around Maheshatala with around 5 lakh workers spread across the Metiabruz, Maheshatala and nearby villages.⁷ The expert tailors are known popularly as 'Ostagors'. Their manufacturing units have about eight to ten workers who stay on for several months. Those who do the 'washing' work have separate units, but with similar arrangements. Most of the other work is taken home, where women and children work on them.

We visited a unit where jeans clothes were dyed during the first phase of the nationwide lockdown. We found six workers from outside the state, four from Bihar (Vaishali district), and two from the districts of West Bengal (Joynagar, South 24 Paraganas and Tarakeswar, Hooghly). They all eat the food they cook together; the rice, vegetables and meat were being supplied by the owner of the unit. The reason was not entirely philanthropic. The owner admitted that if the workers went to the police to obtain a pass to return home, they might disclose the address of their workplace. Then the owner would be in trouble as the work unit was not legal. Keeping and feeding the workers also meant he had ready labour to start work as soon as the market reopened. He had already taken orders for Eid. He sat on top of huge piles of jeans, smoked and joined in the talk.

While the workers of Metiabruz have less uncertainties regarding their residence, and may have fared better during the pandemic, they remain virtually captive in the workshops. There are no labour unions, no awareness of labour rights in Metiabruz. The workers have 12-hour work days, and are paid between Rs 8,000–Rs 15,000 a month. All work is on the basis of verbal contracts. Many workers stay on in workplaces that were never designed for living, such as the stinking leather workshops of Tyangra, or construction sites completely exposed to heat and cold. Domestic maids who live in the homes of employers often face sexual abuse and other forms of harassment.⁸

Caste and Mobility in Slums

Workers migrate to urban areas from the villages not only to escape poverty, but also the social norms around caste and gender, which tend to limit their choice of occupation and social mobility. Do the big cities offer the migrants a chance? If we look at the settlements of migrant workers, we find that it is possible to 'map' these by caste-based occupations. For example, the coolies living on the pavements of Burrabazar are mostly Muslims from Bihar, Orissa, Jharkhand and UP. The migrant workers living in the huge clothing industry of Metiaburz are also Muslims, some from Bihar, others from the neighbouring districts, especially the North 24 Paraganas and South 24 Paraganas. Park Circus slums have Dalits from the Chamar (Ravidas) caste from Bihar, working with hides. In the north, the 'Dhangor' (Sweeper) Colony of Aravinda Sarani are also Chamars while the Safai Karmacharis who live in the slum behind the New Market are 'Doms' from Jharkhand and Bihar. The Rajabazar slum has a large congregation of Dalits, mainly Muchi (Cobbler) and Chamars (who work with hide). In the Pikhana area in Tyangra, near Bengal Pottery, there is a sizeable settlement of Dalits of the Chamar, Haari and Dom (Mallik) castes, who rear pigs, do leather work, pick garbage from the large dumping site of Dhapa nearby, and also engage in sweeping the streets. In the south, Jadavpur rail station and the adjacent slums on the sides of the railway harbour large numbers of women who work as domestic maids and nursing aids (ayahs). The men drive cycle vans or rickshaws, work as daily labour, or do some small work in shops.

This ‘ghettoized’ housing pattern gives us a mixed picture of social mobility in urban slums. On the other hand, there has been a gradual expansion in the range of work available to migrants. As Ranabir Samaddar observes, “The scale and form of migration have changed...migration is not only a ‘construction industry’ phenomena... Scrap metal industry, waste processing, care, entertainment industry, it includes everything. All these make the neoliberal city.”⁹ This may lead one to expect that migrants would enjoy considerable fluidity between professions. But our interviews indicate that the lower-caste youth are often squeezed into scavenging or leather processing, the occupation of their forefathers. Despite better education, most of them do not get better opportunities. Vicky Das, 28, a resident of Aravinda Sarani slum, bitterly complained that he had no choice but to become a safai karmachari like his father even though he had completed the 12th grade. “Some of us went to the municipality officers, and even the local leaders, and requested them to arrange better jobs for us. We got no response.” Vicky is, in a sense, worse off than his father, who was a permanent worker with social security benefits. Vicky is a contractual employee, with no entitlement other than his wages. This non-mobility is reflected in their continued residence in one locality, as well as the poor housing conditions.

However, as we have noted earlier, we find evidence of another the kind of mobility: from rural to urban citizenship. On paper, an Indian citizen is free to migrate to any part of the country. In reality, access to subsidized urban services — so essential to the poor — is controlled through a set of identity documents such as the ration card and the voter card. Proof of residence can be an electric bill; an ID Card issued by the urban local government for those living in slums, a property tax payment receipt; or a letter of identity issued by the local elected representative. Urban citizenship is thus fluid and negotiable, through electoral clientelism, organizing, and contestations. In shelter context it means incremental housing. “It begins with gaining access to rental housing in an established low-income settlement or squatting on a piece of land, mainly public land, then negotiate collectively to get name registered in the urban voting list through getting an urban patron, and then on a gradual and patient march up the ladder to gain full citizenship through possessing a few of the above mentioned documents.”¹⁰

We find evidence of this process in many slums. In the slums on the side of the Jadavpur railway station, for example, many of the residents say that they had arrived from the North 24 Paraganas or the South 24 Paraganas, two to three generations earlier. They all now possess voter cards with a Kolkata address. Many women and men turned homeless by the supercyclone Aila in 2010 had made their way into Kolkata’s slums, and some of them have already acquired papers showing a local address. The Amphan supercyclone in May 2020 unleashed another wave of migrants upon Kolkata. Many of them are now patiently waiting to get a piece of paper showing them as valid residents of the city.

They wait, often for generations, in dark, crowded rooms beside open sewers, on pavements and under bridges, in clear view of all and yet unseen. When COVID struck, they became visible as ‘threats’. For once, the non-migrants of the city had to worry about its migrant workers. The problems of containing infection were apparent – same water source serving a large number of individuals, same toilet being used by several families, lack of water to wash hands and clothes, five to eight people crammed in small rooms. However, rather than outlining any plan of action for better housing and easier access to facilities to control the outbreak, the authorities flagged the strategies of micro-surveillance, contact tracing, early detection and quarantine.¹¹

The larger questions of affordable and safe housing in Kolkata slums remain exactly as before.

Notes

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Inspecting the Breach of Laws and Poor Policy Implementation for Indian Migrants

Geetika Mishra *

The ongoing pandemic and an abrupt, unplanned countrywide lockdown resulted in a tragic transfer of the migrant population. The dismal picture of these workers who set out on foot to travel thousands of kilometres at the cost of police excesses, with minimal or no resources to sustain, is much like the grave displacement in 1947.

Workers were thrown out of their jobs despite the Ministry of Labour's directive against their retrenchment. The situation of migrant workers was put on the backburner within days of Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on March 24. The initial 21-day national lockdown came into effect within hours to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The Government of India has, ever since, announced various immediate support schemes and relief measures to ease the desperate condition of migrants but the effects have not transpired on the ground. The catastrophic ground reality of the abandoned labourers looms over the government's contingency plans, policies and social security schemes to date in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Breach of Laws for Migrant Workers

Article 19 of the Constitution guarantees all Indian citizens the right to reside and settle in any part of the territory of India, subject to reasonable restrictions in the interest of the general public or protection of any scheduled tribe.

However, in the past three months, a very poor implementation of protections under the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979 (ISMW Act), has come forward. Issues like the lack of portability of benefits and lack of affordable housing and basic amenities in urban areas have contributed towards the migrants barely managing a hand-to-mouth existence.

The key challenges faced by migrant workers pertain to the following factors:

- Lack of social security and health benefits and poor implementation of minimum safety standards law,
- Lack of portability of state-provided benefits especially food provided through the public distribution system (PDS) and,
- Lack of access to affordable housing and basic amenities in urban areas.

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A makeshift settlement of migrant workers in Tilak Nagar, Bengaluru. Photo credits: Tejas Dayananda Sagar

Prime Minister Narendra Modi, post the lockdown announcement, emphasized a great deal on fulfilling employer responsibilities, especially the labour class or the unorganized sector. However, six months after the first lockdown, India is looking at recovering itself from the tatters of a grave economic crisis. The BJP-ruled states have initiated moves to attract investments and businesses and relaxed their labour laws and policies.

States such as Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka introduced ordinances related to minimum wages and limited work hours.

The Uttar Pradesh government was one of the first to pass an ordinance on May 6 as a result of which most of the labour laws in the state remain suspended for the next three years, in order to attract new companies to invest in the state amid the ongoing coronavirus crisis.

A total of 38 labour laws have been suspended and the only four laws that will continue to be applicable are:

- Section 5 of the Payment of Wages Act, 1936,
- Workmen Compensation Act, 1932,
- Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act, 1976,
- and the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1996.

An official statement said the decision to exempt businesses from the purview of almost all labour laws was taken as economic and business activities in the state have been badly affected by the coronavirus spread.

Meanwhile, the Gujarat government, the homestate of PM Modi, exempted its new industries from all labour laws apart from the Minimum Wages Act, Industrial Safety Rules and Employees' Compensation Act for 1,200 days. While, Madhya Pradesh, which saw the BJP snatching power from the Congress because of the discontentment of senior Congress leader Jyotiraditya Scindia just a day before the lockdown was announced, made the registration non-compulsory for

contractors with up to 50 labourers and allowed the companies that have less than 100 workers to hire as per their needs, which makes it easy for the companies to hire and fire.

These legal pronouncements related to the treatment of labour and luring newer investments and businesses at the cost of labour rights isn't limited to the northern and Hindi-speaking part of the country. Down south, the state of Karnataka crumbled under the pressure from the industries' body and not only relaxed the labour laws but also shunted out the labour department's principal secretary, Captain Manivannan, an IAS officer, for issuing notices to employers for not paying full salary or wages for April.

The Karnataka Employers' Association had written to the Chief Minister alleging that Manivannan's letter was threatening. The NAR is in possession of the letter. Karnataka Chief Minister B. S. Yediyurappa brought out an ordinance similar to UP and MP in the next one or two days.

Karnataka also amended the Land Reforms Act, 1961, under which the industries can now buy land from farmers directly without any interventions from the government, a move that will also lead to exploitation of farmland for big industries.

Arun Kumar, Malcolm Adiseshiah Chair Professor, Institute of Social Sciences, stated that the BJP wanted to change labour laws since 2014 and the COVID-19 pandemic gave the government the best chance to fulfil its long-pending dream.

"In 2014, the BJP government brought some labour reforms to allow fixed-term employment in all the sectors, EPF number portability and removing the arbitrary inspection system but the reforms have slowed down marginally in the last three years," he added.

Arun explained that the major reason for the slowdown of reforms was the pro-industrialist, anti-labourer behaviour of the BJP, which is criticized by all trade unions including the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh, which is affiliated to the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). Another reason is the slowdown of the economy because of demonetization, GST etc., and the unemployment related to it due to which the labourers and trade organizations lost trust in the government, he said.

The Indian states have justified this move, saying that it is to attract investments from the companies looking to set up their plants outside China but the trade unions believe this will deteriorate the condition of labourers.

H. N. Tiwari, general secretary of the Indian National Trade Union Congress, said this decision would create more unemployment in the country.

"The suspension of labour laws will lead to greater exploitation which will be more dangerous than the COVID-19 pandemic. The government cleverly chose this time when the entire world is reeling under the corona pandemic and we labourers are feeling helpless as we do not know how to gather on streets and protest against this draconian decision," he said, adding, "The government could have chosen a different way like decreasing various kinds of taxes, waiving interest on loans for the smaller businessmen and others."

The All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) staged a protest against this move in Bengaluru. D. A. Vijay Bhaskar, chief secretary of AITUC Karnataka, said that these reforms would increase the exploitation of the already-exploited labourers.

A majority of labourers in India already work for more than 12 hours without any extra income and, if working hours are increased, workers will be made to work for more than 16 hours without any income, which can increase unemployment as well, he added. He further said that the Centre should stop the states from bringing such 'inhumane' reforms as it will be harmful to labourers and will give liberty to employers.

Prem Nath Rai, general secretary of Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU), said the government has now found an excuse to do what it wanted to do for a long — crush labour rights. “The end product, after suspending the laws, will be underpayment to labourers, increase in the working hours, non-payment of gratuity, bonus,” he said.

Uma Shankar Mishra, general secretary of Hind Mazdoor Sabha, believes that the entire working class will be on the verge of becoming bonded labourers and it will lose its voice once the ordinance is accepted by the President of India.

Economist Arun highlighted that this will lead to more agitation of labourers as there are already many fronts open for them during the COVID-19 pandemic; the labour reforms have opened another front for them. At this point, there is a lot of confusion, the government should focus on maintaining a good lockdown and providing survival packages because no one is going to invest at this point of time, he said.

“The government is thinking that the investors will come leaving China but the United States of America, which is the biggest investor, is suffering from a growth rate of minus 40 percent and in such a great loss, who will invest? India is also suffering from a minus 75 percent growth rate. No one is going to invest now like an idiot and, putting no mind, the government is opening another front and not doing what needs to be done,” said Arun.

To Continue Living in the Village: Falling Back on Agriculture and MNREGA

On the other hand, more than 55 percent of 160 returned migrant workers in several districts of rural Bihar, Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh planned to engage in agricultural work in their respective villages, suggested survey findings.

Mobile Vaani, a voice-based participatory media platform, administered the survey through an Interactive Voice Response questionnaire consisting of multiple-choice questions.¹ The survey was conducted over the periods of April 22–May 5 and May 7–May 16. It recorded the responses of 160 migrant workers and 297 resident workers. The survey revealed that over 60 percent of migrant workers were surviving with no food or cash and desperately wanted to return to their native places.





Migrant Workers on the Move on Bicycles and on Foot at Bhadohi National Highway, U.P. Photo Credits: Anant Dev Pandey

Of the 160 recorded responses of migrant workers, 37 percent were engaged in manufacturing work in factories, while around 35 percent were engaged in activities like construction, agriculture, non-agriculture or daily wage labour. The loss of income remained a common issue amongst all of them.

The most significant highlight of the survey remains the respondents' inclination to not go back to work in the cities post the lockdown as factories resume work in diminished capacities. Only 10 percent are considering going back to the cities. The majority aims to fall back on farming, MNREGA, like non-agricultural work, and starting small enterprises of their own. This leads to the challenge of accommodation of surplus labour in the rural economies. However, the existing MNREGA employees have complained about the provision of insufficient or no work. Jai Prakash, a MNREGA cardholder, reported having earned only Rs 6,000 through the scheme which is highly inadequate to manage a household of five.



Migrant Workers Rushing near the Majestic Railway Station in Bengaluru. Photo Credits: Tejas Dayananda Sagar

The ‘Hire and Fire’ Trend

In order to expand the ambit of social security by including gig workers and inter-state migrant workers, the Lok Sabha cleared new versions of three labour codes — Industrial Relations Code Bill, 2020, Code on Social Security Bill, 2020, and Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code Bill, 2020. But the proposed guidelines also provide larger flexibility to employers to hire and fire workers without any government permission.

Employer obligations and responsibilities have always remained at the spotty end frequently resulting in violation of labour relations. Among many reasons why worker rights are often violated, a significant issue is due to gaps in worker documentation which effectively renders the workers invisible. This came up as a significant problem during the lockdown.

Employer obligations: Employers used the lockdown to skip on wage payments for many workers. This included not only skipping on the payment of wages during the lockdown as mandated by the government, but also the payment of pending wages for work already done. Among industrial workers in Gurgaon, 67 percent reported not having received their wages. While the enforcement of labour laws has been weak in general, one reason why employers are able to fallback on their commitments is that across factory units of different sizes, our surveys showed that 20 percent workers in large units and 50 percent workers in small units have no proof of employment (ID card,

payslip, offer letter, etc). This means that workers have no means to claim their rights if employers forego their obligations. The situation is even worse in the unorganized sector.

Worker documentation has always been poor because ‘most systems are employer or contractor originated, i.e. the employers or contractors are expected to declare their workers for various social security schemes’. Employers, however, have a clear incentive to underreport their workers. This has partly to do with employee-count thresholds imposed in the industrial sector for categorization of factory units at different levels, which have different degrees of compliances and costs, and a variety of practices have emerged among employers to stay under the thresholds, including by bringing on undocumented workers. In the unorganized sector, like construction work, the reasons are similar for chains of contractors and developers to expose as little as they can for fear of government inspections, rent-seeking, and additional costs, plus complex registration processes for enrolment.²

These gaps arising from a lack of worker documentation are, of course, over and above other violations that take place when labour laws are not enforced or when workers are simply defeated by procedures. For example, documented workers like those registered for PF face issues in withdrawing funds from their PF accounts due to an over-dependence on the employers for approval of data amendments. Incorrect spelling of names³ or date of birth or even gender, cannot be corrected by the worker directly! Everything has to be entered by the employer, along with other data like the date of joining, Aadhaar number, mobile phone number, etc., and employers or ex-employers often do not respond in time. Further, many workers are unaware whether their PF is being deducted,⁴ or what is their PF account,⁵ or the procedures to withdraw funds.⁶

A Hand-to-Mouth Existence

Even though cash transfer benefits were announced by the Centre and many state governments to assist the stranded workers, most of the respondents have not availed of such benefits. Initially, around 41 percent labourers wanted to stay in the cities of their employment fearing the loss of jobs and income. But as the lockdown extended further, their hopes dashed and they started to seek desperate measures to get back home.

Rupam Devi, a migrant worker from Bihar struck in Sankhol, Haryana along with her four children, sought assistance from Mobile Vaani to get back home. She alleged that the Haryana government had provided little assistance with food and made no travel arrangements for people like her.

Around 23 percent of the respondents were returned migrant workers who reported to have travelled on foot to their destination states during the second lockdown period. Pankaj Manjhi was on the move from Patna, along with 20 other labourers, to reach Sultanganj. Manjhi pointed out that the reason behind their move related to the inadequate measures provided by the government. Only 20 percent of the respondents undertook their journey via government or private buses.

As the government has set up the National Migration Information System (NMIS) to monitor the movement of migrant workers, it requires the registration of labourers under the same. Although, 29 percent migrant workers who travelled back home reported not having undergone any registration process. Arun Kumar, a migrant worker in Manesar, Haryana, revealed to have no information at all about any governmental procedures as he waits to travel to Bihar.

During the third lockdown, only a small fraction of the respondents, as low as 10 percent, was able to travel by the government-issued Shramik Specials. Although, with the provision of special trains, migrant workers found themselves surrounded by another array of confusions

related to timings, ticketing, registrations etc. As some state governments stepped forward to sponsor the tickets of stranded workers, 28.2 percent of the respondents claimed that they bore their own ticket expenses. The negligence of social-distancing norms was another concern as thousands of migrants set out to return home.



Migrant Workers Presenting their Temporary Travel Papers to Travel via Shramik Specials in Bengaluru. Photo Credits: Geetika Mishra



Migrant workers waiting at Majestic Railway Station to travel via Shramik Specials. Photo credits: Geetika Mishra

Almost 81 percent of the returned migrant workers reported having faced no discrimination on arrival at their destination locations. Ten percent responded that they were forced to undergo a coronavirus check-up while around 8 percent reported discrimination on the basis of caste, religion and other reasons. The returned migrants in the Munger district of Bihar reported to have been living in adjoining jungles as they were not allowed to enter their villages and faced harassment from the locals. Respondents also attested that they were subjected to police brutalities.

As for those who travelled back, only close to half stayed at the government isolation centres while the rest self-quarantined. The isolation centres were reported to be in a bad shape by around 24 respondents, who cited reasons like poor food quality, cleanliness issues and mistreatment by the staff. The remaining 62 percent portrayed the centre well.

Long Journeys and Alleged Police Brutalities

Heeding the allegations of police excesses during lockdown, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) had asked the Union Home Ministry to see to it that the law enforcers treat people with dignity.

The NHRC sent a two-page letter to the Home Secretary in this regard. It asked the Home Ministry to instruct all the states and Union Territories (UTs) to issue guidelines regarding how the police force ought to handle people, particularly the working class, during the lockdown.

The NHRC shot off the letter a day after receiving an appeal from one of its Special Monitors, Maja Daruwala. She is a veteran human rights activist and a Senior Advisor at Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), an international NGO. In her letter to the NHRC, Daruwala cited visuals of policemen's aggressive behaviour—in words and action—that have been

doing the rounds. She wrote that she feared the Prime Minister’s call for stricter enforcement of the lockdown might be interpreted by the police as a nod to get even rougher.

She acknowledged that the men and women in khaki are under strain but called for a display of empathy, especially towards the poor. “The police are doing many good things but those that are using this time to be cruel and harsh must be stopped and you are the agency that can make this happen,” her letter to the NHRC read.

Acting on her letter, the NHRC wrote to the Home Secretary: “The Commission finds it appropriate that the issues raised by the complainant are brought to the notice of the central government through [the] Union Ministry of Home Affairs.”

The NHRC asked the Home Ministry to issue guidelines/advisory/standard-operating procedure (SOP) to all the states and UTs, asking police—and public servants in general—to deal with the vulnerable classes of the society “in a sensible manner respecting human rights relating to their life, liberty and dignity.”

The commission asked the Home Ministry to respond to the letter and send an action-taken report within two weeks. The Union Home Ministry controls the police in UTs whereas, in states, the police department comes under the state government.

In her letter to the NHRC, Daruwala suggested the CHRI-recommended guidelines to govern policing during the lockdown. Some of the suggested measures were:

- Minimal use of force
- Devise and follow a protocol to stop, verify and assist people on the streets
- Devise and follow guidelines on arrests and detention in case of lockdown violation
- Fix accountability for police misconduct
- Devise and follow special measures to protect vulnerable groups
- Ensure a non-discriminatory response
- Communicate regularly with the public about the lockdown management plan
- Ensure access to essential services and according full cooperation to service providers

Long Journey

On May 5, several migrant workers, travelling from Bengaluru to Hyderabad, were stopped near Kurnool,⁷ the judicial capital of Andhra Pradesh, for checking the e-pass required for further travel. These workers had travelled over 350 kilometres without any masks, gloves or sanitisers. Most of them hailed from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Bihar.

Kurnool remained the only checkpoint in the stretch from Bengaluru to Hyderabad where a proper screening of the passengers was being carried out under the guidelines issued by the Ministry of Home Affairs. These workers had walked hundreds of kilometres to search for a means of transportation, without food, water, money, resources, and crossing borders with a fear that they might be quarantined before reaching their home destinations.



Migrant workers gathered to travel from Bengaluru to Hyderabad without following social distancing norms. Photo Credits: Geetika Mishra

Devesh, a migrant from Madhya Pradesh, who works in Bengaluru, hunted for transportation to return to his native Lakhnadon, a small town in the Seoni district of Madhya Pradesh. “We don’t know when we are going to reach our home. We have to go to Madhya Pradesh. We started from Bengaluru four days ago. We haven’t eaten anything for hours,” Devesh added, before jumping into the vehicle arranged by the police, for the people travelling to Madhya Pradesh.

With Madhya Pradesh migrants now gone, it was the turn of migrants from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar to wait for the vehicles arranged by the police.

The Kurnool police claimed helplessness due to the pandemic. A senior police officer, who had been monitoring the situation at Kurnool checkpoint, stated, “The migrant workers sat here for three days. I tried to arrange vehicles for them so they could at least reach the railway station in batches of four to five.” The police personnel also mentioned a meeting to be held in the capital city of Telangana regarding the safe evacuation of migrant workers to their respective states.

The influx of migrants at Kurnool was from the states of Karnataka and Tamil Nadu which rank among the top 5 in the highest number of COVID cases. The police personnel at Kurnool also pointed towards the hunger-stricken conditions of the migrant workers as they arranged both food and transportation.

This incident dates back to before the institution of ‘Shramik Trains’ by the Indian government. Nonetheless, Kurnool did not remain the only place that witnessed the dashed hopes and plight of migrant workers.



Migrant workers travelling to Hyderabad in a truck via Kurnool checkpoint. Photo credits: Geetika Mishra

In Madhya Pradesh, the Deen Dayal bus station in Jabalpur district received a huge influx of migrant workers coming from different states, waiting to return to their homes. Most of these migrant workers came from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Kerala, Goa and Haryana, and travelled to Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Chattisgarh, while a few belonged to MP itself. “It is really difficult to estimate the number of migrant workers who arrived. Every day we received around 500–1,000 migrant workers at this particular busstand, and the same situation existed at other bus stands,” stated the revenue inspector of Deen Dayal Bus station.

The official further added to have assisted the labourers with food and water. The workers were screened as they arrived and boarded the buses. Medicines were provided in case of medical emergencies. Yogendra Kumar Bisht, 70, a construction labourer in Panipat, Haryana, who waited to catch a bus for his hometown, Bilaspur, reached Jabalpur only after walking for four days on foot. He asserted that he has refrained from undergoing any medical examinations to date as he works as a daily wage labourer and does not enjoy off-days without the deduction of wages.

Immunocompromised Migrant Workers Stand at Higher Risks to Contract COVID-19

Suffering from health hazards to immunocompromised diseases, the migrant workers faced a new threat as they rushed back home in cramped-up transportation.

Experts point out that as migrant workers geared to rush back to their native places, often violating social distancing norms, the ones who were immunocompromised are to be severely impacted by the conditions and the lack of food and water. A study analysing the potential impact of

the COVID-19 response on tuberculosis in high burden countries, especially India, Kenya and Ukraine, estimated that an additional 4,685 deaths might take place between 2020–2025 because of COVID-19.⁸

Dr Mahima Sadanshiv Sonwani, who has been actively participating in creating awareness about COVID-19 amongst the rural population in the Betul district of Madhya Pradesh, stated that the scope of COVID-19 amongst the immunocompromised migrant workers who have tuberculosis or other diseases is more. She highlighted that migrant workers are already amongst high-risk patients as diseases such as tuberculosis, diabetes, anaemia or heart diseases remain unnoticed.

In April, the Centre had informed the Supreme Court about the possibility of one-third of the migrant workers getting infected by the coronavirus, *Hindustan Times* reported.⁹ The report stated that three out of ten migrant workers could be exposed to coronavirus.

Exposure to Deadly Diseases

A study called ‘Young Lives at Worksites’, carried out by the Migration Information and Resource Centre, stated that with the constant movement from place to place, migrant workers are often neglected in getting health benefits.¹⁰ Lack of awareness, procedural gaps in the procurement of documents, high work demand, no health benefits in the workplace, no sanitation facility, inadequate quality and quantity of food and water and lack of immunisation render these migrant workers into the path of getting exposed to the deadly diseases, it added.

The study also revealed that almost 38 percent (of the surveyed 3,553 migrant households) of migrant workers do not have a BPL (Below Poverty Line) card and hence shy away from getting the benefits of the healthcare system and Public Distribution System (PDS) facilities.

Migrant workers employed in the unorganized sector are more prone to suffer from health diseases such as dermatitis, heat stress, respiratory conditions, musculoskeletal disorders, traumatic injuries, pesticide toxicity, increased risk of lung cancer, mesothelioma, Bagassosis, silicosis and tuberculosis, which often remain untreated. While Malaria, hepatitis and typhoid fever are some of the diseases that are prevalent in the unhygienic conditions that the migrant workers live in, the study added further. “With already weakened lungs, in diseases such as tuberculosis, silicosis, and asthma, migrant workers are more prone to contracting the virus considering that COVID-19 is a result of acute respiratory diseases,” Dr Sonwani asserted.

Migrant Workers and an Improved Welfare Delivery System

According to the Chief Labour Commissioner’s office, Chhattisgarh (10,85,828), Kerala (2,86,846) and Telangana (1,84,006) recorded the highest number of stranded workers. As of 2011, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were the largest sources of inter-state migrants while Maharashtra and Delhi were the largest receiver states. Around 83 lakh residents of Uttar Pradesh and 63 lakh residents of Bihar had moved either temporarily or permanently to other states. Around 60 lakh people from across India had migrated to Maharashtra by 2011.

The total number of stranded migrant workers is 26,17,218 and most of them (46 percent) are in localities where they’re usually ‘clustered’. Forty-three percent are stranded at their workplaces and only a small minuscule 10 percent are staying at actual relief camps or shelter homes.

There have been several gruesome instances when the state was expected to supply help but did not facilitate any assistance. For example, when migrant workers on the road were crushed by a

train, rammed by trucks and the disheartening picture of a kid trying to wake his mother's corpse that shook all of the nation.

Results from a Gram Vaani community survey (with over 1,700 respondents) reflect the grassroots reality. Some of the key highlights are:

- Over 60 percent of the respondents did not receive the free ration to which they were entitled. The Anganwadi-linked distribution was marginally better.
- At least 1 in 2 respondents did not receive the financial assistance promised to them.
- The majority of respondents reported positively that the police and local officials were not stopping them from availing essential services. Twenty-five percent, however, did report high-handed behaviour by the police.
- Over 50 percent of the respondents reported that they can manage household expenses for just a week if the lockdown were to be extended; one in four had no idea how long they would be able to manage.

The abovementioned points provide a clear picture of the violation and enforcement failure for millions of migrants who contribute to 10 percent of the country's GDP. Hundreds of migrant labourers who can be still seen in the clustered area of big cities or taking refuge on the roads have no work to do. They are just sitting idle. "We do not have work and are also not hired by anybody. We were daily wage earners and used to charge Rs 500 for a day. But now, no one hires us for even a single day. Sometimes the people do come to hire us and just quote Rs 200–250 for a day. Despite being unwilling to go, we have to go because we are not left with any work here now apart from going at a lower cost. We have families and kids as well," said Suraj Chandoli from Bihar who lives in Gurugram. These provisions withhold the lack of ability of migrant workers to take any remedial action as they battle with job insecurities, proper employment and identity proofs, lowered wages and overtime payments in addition to no benefits from the social security schemes designed for them.

Notes

¹ "Gram Vaani". https://gramvaani.org/?page_id=15

² Shamindranath N. Roy, Manish, and Mukta Naik, "Migrants in construction work: Evaluating their welfare framework", *Centre for Research Policy* (12 June 2017). <https://www.cprindia.org/research/reports/migrants-construction-work-evaluating-their-welfare-framework>

³ "How Mobile Vaani Works". https://gramvaani.org/?page_id=15

⁴ "Recordings", <http://voice.gramvaani.org/fsmedia/recordings/1129/3884020.mp3>

⁵ "Recordings", <http://voice.gramvaani.org/fsmedia/recordings/1129/3865283.mp3>

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⁷ "Kurnool District", <https://kurnool.ap.gov.in/>

⁸ "The Potential Impact of the Covid-19 Response on Tuberculosis in High-Burden Countries: A Modelling Analysis", *Stop TB Partnership* (1 May 2020), http://www.stoptb.org/assets/documents/news/Modeling%20Report_1%20May%202020_FINAL.pdf.

⁹ "One-third of migrant workers could be infected with Covid-19: Centre tells SC", *Hindustan Times* (1 April 2020), <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/one-third-of-migrant-workers-could-be-infected-with-covid-19-centre-tells-sc/story-bwKnI2oBI5tFoXlPvP0n7M.html>

¹⁰ Ratikanta Behera, Umi Daniel and Roshan Minz, "Young Lives at Worksite", https://www.researchgate.net/publication/261921759_Young_Lives_at_Worksite

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