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Work, Life & Salience of  
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**COVID-19 and After:  
Work, Life and Salience of Primitive Accumulation**

**Ronak Chhabra**

**2021**



# COVID-19 and After: Work, Life and Salience of Primitive Accumulation

Ronak Chhabra \*

The dominant trope of recent times has been labour. Historically, since the beginnings of the wage-labour economy, the spectre of unbearable distress within this class returns with every recession and depression. The present-day downturn in the Indian economy and the subsequent predominance of labour in the official and unofficial discourses is thus, no outlier, for the former marks the overwhelming return of the unemployed, the pauper, the starved - all reeling under the pressure of a decrepit economy, conjecturally disrupted by a pestilence.<sup>1</sup>

Today, in this context, varied attempts are being made by economists to characterise work and life under the contemporary capitalist imperatives. Notwithstanding the creditable endeavours in doing so in the past, these recent efforts are partly necessitated by the growing need to conceptualize the pandemic in the form of Covid-19 from the point of labour. Moreover, as the news of the infectious disease entering into a stage of endemicity here in India is doing the rounds lately,<sup>2</sup> a critical account of living and making a living in the present times also tells about what the post-pandemic future portends for the country's working population.

It is around this same period that Calcutta Research Group (hereafter *CRG*) takes up a commendable initiative of building an online living archive to help those engaged in research. A collection of news clippings, videos, interviews, among others, the archive is a digital repository of various aspects of migration and forced displacement, with a particular focus on the issues faced by the migrants and refugees in the time of Covid-19.<sup>3</sup>

This report is the result of analysing the content available on the said digital archive. It is a commentary on the sufferings encountered by the Indian labourers in general, and migrants in particular, post the imposition of restrictions on their mobility last year. Further, as we are told that the pandemic has left a lasting impact on the economy and consequently, on the labour market,<sup>4</sup> hopefully, at the end of this explication we shall get a sense of these marked effects. I shall also briefly reflect upon the significance of the Marxist concept of primitive accumulation while disinterring the pandemic-induced changes in the organisation of the Indian economy. In this way, the report is also an attempt by this author to record the contemporary circumstances, as we live through it.

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## Before Covid-19: Understanding India's 'Structural Crisis'

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the malaise of the neo-liberal global order.<sup>5</sup> The case in our country is no exception. At the start of the previous decade, the working population in the Indian economy was recorded to be at 472.5 million.<sup>6</sup> This figure, however, shrunk by 15.5 million within a span of the next six years, in what came as a shock to the ruling government at the time.<sup>7</sup> And why not? It was the first time in the history of employment measurements that a decline was registered in the absolute number of workers in the country - to make it worse, the shocking figures were accompanied in the 2017-18 National Statistical Office (hereafter *NSO*) survey report by an unprecedented increase in the unemployment rate.

Discerning commentaries by economists, decoding the essential fine prints in the annual Periodic Labour Force Survey (hereafter *PLFS*) of 2017-18, which carried the said estimates, followed after the report was published in 2019. While these analyses carried different estimations of the reduction in employment in the six years after the last quinquennial employment-unemployment survey round in 2011-12, the conclusion reached by them was more or less the same: the movement of India's economic growth is such that which can be denominated as "from jobless to job-loss".<sup>8</sup> This was arguably among the first forewarnings in empirical terms of the simmering distress in the Indian labour market post the introduction of neoliberal policies in 1991.

It is worth mentioning here, among the myriad evaluations that had surfaced at the time, the 2019 working paper authored by Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati K. Parida. The authors had argued that the unprecedented downfall in the total employment in the country, also suggested that the process of structural transformation, which had gained momentum post-2004, has stalled since 2012. This was due to a decline of employment particularly in agriculture and manufacturing, that is accompanied by the slow growth of construction jobs. It led Mehrotra and Parida to conclude: "Mounting unemployment of educated youth, and poor quality of non-farm jobs have caused an increase in the disheartened labour."<sup>9</sup>

The significance of this observation, based on the national data collected in 2017-18, lies in the fact that it precisely captures the sentiments within the working quarters in our times too - after a broken-down Indian economy was further ravaged by a pestilence.<sup>10</sup> Thus, it only underscores the need to take a look at the pre-existing labour dynamics in the country before moving ahead to understand the true impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the Indian labour force.

About 45.6 per cent of the total workers in the country in 2019-20 were already employed in agriculture.<sup>11</sup> This was a sharp 32 million rise as compared to the previous year, making it to be the period that saw for the first time in five decades in the country an augmentation in the share of workers in the relatively low-productivity farming sector. In comparison, according to the corresponding period's PLFS, the sectors losing employment included manufacturing, construction, and transport, storage and communication - with the former registering the biggest fall.<sup>12</sup> Remember that the first three of the four quarters of 2019-20 labour force estimates were unaffected by the non-pharmacological measures of the government to arrest the spread of the Covid-19 disease.<sup>13</sup> Suffice to say then, the shift of labour in favour of agriculture can best be understood in terms of a "structural crisis".<sup>14</sup> Casual labour, the type of employment provided by agriculture, occupies the bottom of the income distribution. In 2019-20, the average daily earning of an agricultural labourer was Rs. 291; of a salaried worker was Rs. 558; and, of a self-employed worker was Rs. 349. By all means, this means that the labour would not voluntarily shift to the lowest wage-rate sector unless there are no better options.<sup>15</sup> In any case, the data shows us that the incomes of the vast majority of workers in the country were paltry when the pandemic arrived.

Low wage levels combined with more supply of labour than the actual demand in the rural region also partly explains the surge in demand for work by households under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (hereafter *MGNREGA*) in the year 2019-20.<sup>16</sup> Worryingly, it was despite the fact that the payments, though fixed, under the employment guarantee scheme were less than the then stipulated minimum wages paid to an agricultural worker across almost all the States in the country.<sup>17</sup> In urban areas, the story was grimmer. The share of regular salaried workers, considered as a more stable and secure form of employment, registered a decline in the year preceding the arrival of the pandemic. More significantly, even amongst this category, the ones not eligible for any social security benefits increased from 51.9 percent in 2018-19 to 54.2 percent the next year - suggesting, in other words, a setback to formalisation. Parallely, in this period, the share of self-employment in total employment also witnessed a rise - with unpaid family workers in household enterprises contributing to the increase.<sup>18</sup>

Workers belonging to the younger age groups were more vulnerable, as also flagged earlier by Mehrotra and Parida.<sup>19</sup> The latest annual data only reinforces this actuality. Even the problematic calculations done by the government mandarins, who were flayed for presenting a misleading picture, couldn't hide the distress within this group. In 2019-20, the youth unemployment, with a reference period of 365 days preceding the date of survey, stood at 15 per cent.<sup>20</sup>

Without any surprise, in this scenario, the women continued to bear the burden of the invisibility of their work - a result of gendered occupational segregation<sup>21</sup> - as the data shows. The 2019-20 PLFS records a substantial increase in the share of rural women engaged in agriculture, which corresponded with a rise of the rural female workforce in the category of unpaid family workers. Crucially, with urban women's employment growing only marginally, the gap between the male and female labour force participation continued to exceed 45 percentage points.<sup>22</sup> What's more, if one looks at the sectors that were driving increased participation of urban women in India - trade, hospitality, hotels and restaurants, and construction - the signs of casualisation become clear, with the Indian women increasingly being pushed to riskier employment and precarious working conditions.

### **Against Forgetting: Remembering The Long Walk**

All this brings us to a crude reality of heterogeneity of labour before the outbreak of the virus. In developing countries, such as India, the labour also remains more heterogeneous "both in terms of its innate quality (efficiency) and in terms of the employers which use them".<sup>23</sup> This then gets reflected in terms of varying levels of income of workers, different provisions of social security available to them, disparate efforts by the employers to ensure occupational safety, and consequently in the nature of workers' living spaces and conditions in the city. It is here then that migrants, the wandering labouring population, appear as among the most vulnerable, pushed to the fringes.<sup>24</sup>

One can picture in mind, to understand better, the construction work sites, garment factories, waste processing zones, care industry, supply-chain industry, platform-based industry (colloquially known as the gig work industry) among others - all, based in the modern cities of our times, requiring more than ever the working hands of the dispersed labouring population. Undoubtedly, the figure of the migrant sits at the heart of the process of neo-liberal transformation of cities.<sup>25</sup> These restructured cities, as argued, retain strong continuities with the old urban space and its relations but at the same time contribute in the growing informalisation of work in the metropolitan hubs - the process is linked to the availability of migrant labour.

The PLFS reports, however, remain silent on them. Hence, there were no clear estimates available with us on the migrant workforce when the nationwide lockdown was imposed last year - the situation remains the same even to this day.<sup>26</sup> In the initial days of the lockdown last year, the Union Government took refuge in the estimates carried by the 2011 Census survey, and thus included in one of its submissions to the Supreme Court an outdated approximating figure of 4.14 crore migrants who migrated for the purpose of employment.<sup>27</sup> This was notwithstanding the fact that studies have repeatedly noted how even the Census surveys are not designed to measure all forms of varied work-related migrations that take place in the country.<sup>28</sup> There was also not much insight on the true magnitude of migrant workers in the country in recent times that one could have drawn from the 2007-08 NSS Employment-Unemployment, the last one to conduct a migration survey.<sup>29</sup>

In this context, it is worth recalling Ranabir Samaddar's comments in an interview last year on the dynamics of the visibility and invisibility of migrant labour. He had said: "The migrant workers are visible in the economy; they are invisible in politics. In many cases they have no right to vote in municipal polls, no social entitlements. They are not allowed to disturb the civil society-centred politics. But they must be available as a ready labour force..."<sup>30</sup> Yet come March last year, and there they were: set on a journey *en masse* from the cities, carrying their scanty belongings on their heads, babies in arms, and desperate to reach their home villages miles and miles away.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, distressing accounts, accompanied by heart-wrenching images, of the long trudge took to the front pages of national dailies.

The nation was taken unawares as the "sudden visibility" of the migrating workforce dawned upon those in power.<sup>32</sup> As for the migrants and their families, according to one report, it was the coming together of humiliation and death. Remember that many were detained at the borders of cities, towns and states while others were doused in disinfectant; some faced unbearable hunger while others, in panic, called helplines, as the State machineries followed the directions that they had received to strictly enforce the restrictions on mobility that was imposed ostensibly to restrict the spread of Covid-19.<sup>33</sup> Come to think of it, against this background, the travelling migrants were indeed looked upon as nothing but the "suspected carrier of disease", reduced to mere biological bodies.<sup>34</sup> Hence, the inhuman treatment, roots of which could have been found in the fear of getting sick.

Notably, two things stood out when the second surge in Covid-19 cases triggered a fresh round of restrictions on mobility - though intermittent and not nationwide - earlier this year. First, a sense that the 'worst' concerning the pandemic is now over, prevailed among majority in the country especially after we were told that the peak in number of infection cases was reached in September in our country<sup>35</sup> - the latter eventually played a key factor in spurring a pickup in the economic indicators at the time. Large swathes of the crowd at election rallies and a dip in the Ganges by hundreds of thousands by devout pilgrims among others further bolstered this impression.<sup>36</sup> Consequently, precautions went for a toss and the fear of contracting the disease seemed to have been ameliorated. But more importantly, the imposition of lockdown by different State governments this year hinted that a lesson was learnt: the inter-state transport facilities by and large were allowed to operate. It thereby ensured that even as migrant labourers responded in a similar manner to these measures, by leaving the cities, the episode was not captured as a 'crisis'.<sup>37</sup>

Stranded Workers Action Network (hereafter *SWAN*), a coming together of researchers and volunteers, did a commendable job in reasoning the coming out of the migrant workers from the cities during the lockdown restrictions in both years. As per the distress calls that the group received in the first 21 days of the nationwide lockdown, 72 percent out of the 11,159 stranded migrant

workers claimed to have enough ration only for two days. Four out of every five of them were left with Rs. 300; only one out of every ten of them was paid by their employers – that too “partially”.<sup>38</sup> The group's second report focused on the lack of assistance those in distress received from the State agencies. According to it, even after 32 days, more than 97 percent out of 10,383 migrants had not received any cash support; 82 percent out of 12,248 had not received any rations.<sup>39</sup> Other surveys too pointed towards the lack of ration cards, bank accounts of the migrants.<sup>40</sup>

Likewise, a study published in April 2020 exploring the exclusion faced by circular migrants employed in the informal labour markets of Ahmedabad and Surat pointed out the poor working and living conditions that are experienced by these workers. It is a result of the urban agglomerations in the post-liberalization period in the country that are “based on the dual processes of dispossession and exploitation”, the study noted.<sup>41</sup> Incidentally, both the cities, with their respective set of industries that require a steady supply of casual and irregular workforce, are the poster child of the ‘Gujarat Model of Development’. As factories downed their shutters following the nationwide lockdown, these cities also saw the maximum exodus of migrant workers in the State.<sup>42</sup>

When its helplines were relaunched in April this year following the second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, SWAN found that the distress experienced by the workers was similar in one way to that of last year, but also “exceptional as it has compounded the problems of workers who now have little savings and limited access to safety nets.”<sup>43</sup> The fact that, by this time, two vaccines were available in the country to provide protection against the Covid-19 infection brought little solace to the working population.<sup>44</sup>

Besides all this, there also remained a temptation in few political quarters to read resistance in the act of ‘walking back’ of the migrants – on the lines of overt forms of protest by the workers in the factory-based production setup that include breaking machines or withdrawing from work.<sup>45</sup> Equally, soon after the nationwide lockdown was announced last year, migrants-led demonstrations too were documented across the country. On this, consider the following observations from the report by Migrant Workers Solidarity Network that have collated a map of 158 such protests:

“The protesting migrant workers did not have a charter of demands but not all protests are represented in the media as protests just because they have a charter of demands. Many protests are represented as ‘resistance’ without a formal charter. But migrants protesting and demanding rights neither got registered as resistance for the corporate media, nor in the larger public perception. Even when we spoke to many labour union activists in states where many migrant protests were happening during the lockdown, many activists too, who were otherwise engaged in relief work among migrants and in mass movements, who keep track of news in their districts or states, were also not aware of instances of resistances or protests. This surprised us, while we were mapping the resistances and following up on it.

“... When we started a social media campaign called #MigrantLivesMatter, it was picked up by several quarters. Do migrant lives still matter for the public discourse of the country? Will they remain as the subjects of compassion and perpetual victims in need of aid or will they win recognition as active makers of our society, as rightful citizens and resisting political subjects who can challenge the oppressive conditions surrounding them and transform them. Only time and active efforts will determine.”<sup>46</sup>

## **On The Growing Precarity since Lockdown**

The Union Government told the lower house of the Parliament in its monsoon session, held in September last year, that over one crore migrant labourers returned to their native home states on

foot during the March-June period that year.<sup>47</sup> One may look back at the time and ask: What did this “spectral” appearance of the migrant as a worker inform us about the crisis?<sup>48</sup> There was, of course, a pandemic-induced conjectural crisis, the source of which can be traced back to the threat of novel coronavirus. Yet, as argued, there was, in fact, a coming together of the acknowledged crisis in the interrelated domains.

“The crisis concretises and has concretised now generating a force of its own. There is a mutation of the economic into the pathological, epidemiological into the human rights crisis of the migrants and vice versa, and the issue of public health into one of law and order.”<sup>49</sup>

Thus, while looking back, what sense can we make from the vantage point of labour of the said crisis that had emerged as an all-round one? To begin with, all the published statistics point towards the worrying rise in informalisation of labour. This was worrying for a country where employment was already marked with deeply entrenched problems.<sup>50</sup> The State of Working India 2021 report (hereafter *SWI*) highlights that about 100 million jobs were lost during the first two months – April and May – of the nationwide lockdown. Most of these jobs did come back later, however, not for about some 15 million workers who remained out of work even by the end of last year.<sup>51</sup> More precariousness and informal forms of employment marked the labour market in the post-pandemic period. According to the *SWI*, nearly half of formal salaried workers moved into informal work, either as self-employed, casual wage workers or informal salaried workers.<sup>52</sup> The tense labour market was further hit this year. To put it in perspective, the second wave of Covid-19 led to the loss of over 7.5 million jobs only in April itself.<sup>53</sup>

Other studies conducted during this period concluded with similar results. For example, a survey of about 2,000 workers in Delhi and neighbouring Uttar Pradesh’s Ghaziabad found that two-thirds of them had lost their jobs in April and May this year.<sup>54</sup> The pressure on the labour market was felt by the working class in other ways too. Cries of “horrible” work conditions were heard within the industrial towns in the country.<sup>55</sup> In particular, the management became keen on ousting the ‘permanent’ workforce in these manufacturing quarters. As one union leader at a Manesar-based auto component manufacturing facility put it, the exit of permanent employees would allow the companies to explore options to employ a cheaper and pliable workforce.<sup>56</sup> Evidently, the IT employees too weren’t left untouched by this onslaught.<sup>57</sup>

The worrying trend in loss of employment was further accompanied by the diminishing incomes of the Indian working population. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), last year, had pegged the potential of the Covid-19 pandemic to push around 40 crore Indian informal sector workers deeper into poverty.<sup>58</sup> Media reports in May this year, in a startling revelation, carried the headline about 97 percent of Indians having been left poorer by the pandemic.<sup>59</sup> An analysis by Pew Research Center, published earlier this year, also found out that the number of poor – in other words, those with incomes of \$2 or less a day as per the World Bank’s poverty line – in India was estimated to have increased by 75 million because of the Covid-19 recession.<sup>60</sup> Meanwhile, the *SWI* also showed that the first wave of Covid-19 pushed the earnings of 230 million individuals below the national minimum wage threshold – Rs. 375 a day as recommended by the Anoop Satpathy committee.<sup>61</sup>

It is to be noted that historically in India, there has always remained a hesitation within the ruling political circles to acknowledge the country’s poor, let alone address the issue relating to the widespread poverty.<sup>62</sup> To give one example, the last Consumption Expenditure Survey data is only available for the year 2011-12. Nevertheless, commendable analysis of other available datasets by careful researchers show a rise in the absolute number of poor after 2012 itself.<sup>63</sup> The woes of the large population due to the diminishing incomes were compounded since last year by the fact that

they were now reeling under the additional strain of paying for the Covid-19 treatment – the bills covering the cost of medicines, oxygen cylinders, hospital beds, among others were exorbitant in most of the cases if not all.<sup>64</sup> A study of workers in Delhi and Ghaziabad cited above, too pointed towards the same. Add to this, the sharp rise in prices of edible oils, petrol, and diesel in the first half of this year which led to a cascading effect of making most of the essentials increasingly unaffordable.<sup>65</sup>

Some commentators thus viewed this as an event that united everyone through their experience of the pandemic.<sup>66</sup> Clearly, the ground realities were far from this. When it came about bearing the brunt, workers belonging to Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Muslim religion were more vulnerable. The population in the latter group stood out with the starkest impact in terms of losing employment, both in rural and urban regions. They also recorded the maximum decline in average earnings right after the nationwide lockdown in rural India. Whereas, in urban areas, the maximum loss was suffered by the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes community.<sup>67</sup>

Households, experiencing the job loss or at least the spectre of it and consequently dwindling incomes, inevitably coped by cutting back on their food intake. To be sure, India already had at least 189 million people who suffered from serious hunger, according to 2020 estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organisation.<sup>68</sup> In the same year, the Global Hunger Index had placed our country at 94th rank among the 107 others afflicted with mass hunger.<sup>69</sup> Little wonder then that in the early days of nationwide lockdown last year when the country was still struggling to come to terms with what lies ahead epidemiologically, fear within the working quarters was that, “hunger may kill us before coronavirus.”<sup>70</sup> As the pandemic raged from thereon, the food security situation in the country too turned for worse. To provide just a hint of it, over 200 individuals reported having lost their lives in the first four months only of the nationwide lockdown last year due to “starvation and financial distress.”<sup>71</sup> Most recently, the United Nations’ State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World report concluded that India has added 9.7 crores since the outbreak of Covid-19 in the list of people facing moderate to severe food insecurity.<sup>72</sup>

This worsening food scenario, particularly, had a negative impact on women’s nutrition in the country, as one study conducted in one economically backward district each of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and two of Odisha indicated.<sup>73</sup> Children too weren’t left unspared. As per one estimate, 115 million of them are at risk of severe malnutrition as result of “the current situation”.<sup>74</sup> It is another thing that even before we arrived here, over 35 percent of children up to 5 years of age were stunted and 17 percent of them were wasted in the country, according to one government survey carried out between 2016 and 2018.<sup>75</sup> How devastating they may look, pointing towards a bleak reality, these are mere figures. However, behind each of them, lay an excruciating experience of an individual, of a family. One can thus only imagine the pain and anguish that the 45-year-old Sheela Devi must have gone through while watching her youngest daughter Sonia become progressively weaker. The 5-year-old girl in Uttar Pradesh’s Nagla Vidhichand village died in late August last year. On paper, the immediate cause of her death was the development of severe diarrhoea. But as Pooja Kumari, her sister recollected: “For eight days, there was not a single grain in our house to eat...”<sup>76</sup>

What happened to the migrants who trudged back to their homes in native villages precisely to avoid this ordeal? The 45-year-old Jamal Mondal, who had returned from Bengaluru to Gosaba in West Bengal’s South 24 Parganas district, probably had the answer. When asked by a television channel in May last year, he said: “... when I reached home, I thought my sufferings were over. But I was wrong. The lockdown took away my job and the cyclone took away everything I was left with...”<sup>77</sup> He was alluding to the Amphan cyclone, which was among the most devastating ones to hit the nation in 2020 - it had left behind a trail of destruction in West Bengal.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, as the

media reports show, Mondal also spoke for other migrant workers, most of whom remained in a bind even as their reasons may vary.<sup>79</sup> Given this, was MGNREGA able to cushion the blow of the pandemic to the migrants who left the cities? To put it straight, not necessarily. As one study based on phone interviews with returnees in Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand, Odisha, Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal concluded, less than eight percent of the migrant workers were provided employment in the rural areas.<sup>80</sup> The rural employment guarantee scheme, even otherwise in the past years, had been oversubscribed due to the economic condition in the rural regions - hinting that not all of the households which demand work under the scheme are provided with it.<sup>81</sup> Suffice to say then that this trend only continued during and after the lockdown, if not gotten worsened.

This is not to say that things were in any better state back in the cities in the early days of when the restrictions on economic activities gradually started to be lifted. Let us take a look at it industry-wise. As we know, construction is the second-largest employer in India after the agricultural sector, employing over 50 million workers.<sup>82</sup> It is also the sector in urban areas that absorbs a significant portion of all the internal migrants that move out of the farming sector in the country.<sup>83</sup> Almost all of these workers work in an unorganised setup within this sector, as the government's estimates show, with a large number of them depending upon daily wages.<sup>84</sup> Data that came out from various metropolitan cities, soon after the construction activities were allowed to resume post nationwide lockdown last year, showed a dip in the average incomes of the unorganised workers engaged in the sector. For example, a field study of daily wage workers in Lucknow and Pune pointed towards an alarming fall in the overall wage rate for construction work.<sup>85</sup> Similarly, reports from *labour chonks* last year had carried painful testimonies of construction workers returning to their homes "empty-handed".<sup>86</sup>

More or less, other unorganised workers in the cities - domestic workers, street vendors, home-based workers, waste pickers, among others - went through a similar ordeal during this period. A study, conducted to assess the impact of the pandemic on these groups of workers and their households in the national capital, pointed towards the same.<sup>87</sup> According to it, 80 percent of waste pickers, 42 percent of domestic workers, 53 percent of street vendors, however, only 25 percent of home-based workers, managed to find work in the month of June soon after the lockdown restrictions were eased. This is notwithstanding the fact that workers in all the above sectors reported fewer working days per week. Consequently, 97 percent of all the surveyed workers reported a reduction in their monthly incomes. This finding turns more dismal when one considers the fact that the lives of all these workers are marked with hand-to-mouth existence. Moreover, with these informal employment opportunities largely concentrated by women, several assessments also brought to the fore the "gendered impact" of the pandemic.<sup>88</sup>

Given the available literature, one can, with not much hesitation, assume that most of the above mentioned works attract migrants in large numbers. Another such work in the urban cities that is growingly providing employment to migrant workers is the platform-based employment, that is in common parlance known as to be part of the burgeoning Gig Economy.<sup>89</sup> In fact, as one report noted, it is the movement of migrant workers towards the on-demand work in the city, the type of ones provided under the gig economy, that had ensured a steady supply of workers to the platform-based companies and thereby, led to the consolidation of their presence in the Indian service industry.<sup>90</sup> However, the seemingly novel labour arrangement is not without any cracks. Come 2020, these cracks became fissures. Soon after the inter-city mobility was allowed last year, that basically translated into the resumption in delivery business, three major metropolises in the country saw city-wide protests by the food delivery workers, following a cut in their incentives by one Bengaluru-based unicorn.<sup>91</sup> Similarly, a non-unionised workforce of delivery personnels, employed by a USA-

based e-commerce firm, in Pune staged a work strike earlier this year over a new delivery charge policy which was feared by the aggrieved workers for resulting in reduction of their monthly income.<sup>92</sup> These spate of protests, while raising their immediate demands during the pandemic, also brought to the fore the inhumane work conditions prevailing within this arrangement of labour. It thereby prompted many to question the status quo, calling for an immediate move by the governments to address the outstanding issues.<sup>93</sup>

The means of livelihoods of the migrants in the city were clearly continued to remain affected by the spectre of lockdown, even as it was eased. To make it worse, the dispersed labourers also faced demolition of their homes and forced evictions at the hands of the local municipal authorities in the metropolis during this period. Most of the temporary and semi-temporary migrants live in slums across major cities.<sup>94</sup> While always remaining at the receiving ends of the construction and infrastructure projects and thus facing demolition, these informal settlements were not even spared during the pandemic. At least 83 incidents of home demolition and forced evictions, affecting over 54,000 people, were recorded by one Delhi-based network between 15 March 2020 and 31 October 2020.<sup>95</sup> These eviction drives also included those carried out in the major cities that invariably affected the migrants residing there.<sup>96</sup> After all, how can one forget the cries of the migrants from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, residing in one of Faridabad's urban settlements that faced eviction not long after the second wave of Covid-19 was receded.<sup>97</sup> In one sense, their ordeal exemplified the experience of a crisis, as described at the beginning of this section, that was not just epidemiological.<sup>98</sup>

### **The Curtain Rises on Neoliberal Reforms**

The harrowing chronicles of death, hunger, and loss of livelihood tell us that the doom, triggered by the pandemic-induced crisis, still hangs over the working population, and in particular, the migrants, in the country; it wouldn't be erroneous to argue that the future looks equally bleak. Maybe the labour, guided by its life experiences, always had an inkling of the same; hence, they just walked off the cities, rejecting the assurances offered by the State<sup>99</sup>, simply in a bid to escape the terrible fate. The Union Government, on its part, had viewed that "there was no necessity for migration of workers to rush to their villages," and so it claimed, in its March 31 Status Report to the Supreme Court. The report, mentioned here, outlines the measures taken by the Union Government in the initial days of the nationwide lockdown to deal with the movement of the migrants. It also delineates the directives issued at the time by the Union Ministry of Home Affairs that had empowered the State Governments to ensure that the lockdown restrictions were strictly enforced and that the inter-district and inter-state migration of, "any population including the migrant workers who are *en route*," was prohibited.<sup>100</sup>

In many ways, as has been noted, the situation seemed reminiscent of how the 1896 plague in colonial Bombay was managed. Historian Sheetal Chhabria has provided a tormenting account of the period while drawing comparisons with contemporary times. "... a thousand people were fleeing the city each day, spreading the disease throughout colonial India. Residents in central Bombay locked themselves up in their flats afraid that plague officers would come knocking. Children were rounded up in ambulances if they seemed ill, often against the will of their relatives. By 1921, the plague would kill 10 million people throughout India."<sup>101</sup> Indeed, met with the Covid-19 pandemic, the Union Government revived colonial laws.<sup>102</sup> Everyone saw, as has been described in the preceding pages, what that led to.

Moreover, there remained all throughout the initial days of the national lockdown, and arguably even later, a policy incoherence with regards to the labour between the different State machineries.<sup>103</sup> One could say this was due to the absence of any consultation with the stakeholders before announcing the sweeping restrictions on mobility.<sup>104</sup> With little understanding of ground realities, orders to keep migrants in shelters and quarantine them in the state of origin or along their routes were issued, but to no avail in stopping the walking migrants. It was only in this period that the Union Government, ostensibly under immense pressure, directed employers in all establishments to pay workers during closure in the lockdown<sup>105</sup> Spooked by it, some private companies knocked on the doors of the Supreme Court which in turn, batted for negotiations between establishments and workers on the full payment.<sup>106</sup> Reports by SWAN cited above show that realities on the ground were far different from this. What's more, a rift over wages in Rajasthan's Neemrana Industrial Town in the month of June that year, and many more that largely went unreported, showed why such negotiations were never a practical solution for the aggrieved workers.<sup>107</sup>

Yet, on September 16, almost half a year after the nationwide lockdown was imposed, the then Union Labour and Employment Minister of State (Independent Charge) Santosh Gangwar boasted about having to take "a number of unprecedented steps," for the welfare of labour in general, and migrants in particular, across the country.<sup>108</sup> The highlights of the press release, issued by the Ministry that carried the said comments, were the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (*PMGKY* hereafter) and Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Rojgar Abhiyan (*PMGKA* hereafter) among others. The former was a financial package announced by the Union Government as an aid to the poor and unorganised sector workers in the country to tide over the crisis. Under it, free additional food grains were announced for the 800 million beneficiaries under the National Food Security Act; later, as part of the Atma Nirbhar Bharat package (more on this below), free food grains were also allocated for the 80 million migrant workers.<sup>109</sup> The latter, as its name suggests, was an employment scheme for migrant workers who had gone back to their native States. Let us shift our focus at how much of these schemes worked.

Expectedly, more insistence was on scoring political points while scant attention was ever paid to the proper implementation of the announced schemes. Only a third of the total allocated foodgrains for migrant labourers could actually be distributed by the end of August, three months after the allocation was announced.<sup>110</sup> The main issue, as per the food activists, was that the "identification" of the beneficiary was conveniently left by the Union Government to the States; they instead called for universalisation of food entitlements.<sup>111</sup> Several media reports from the ground also showed how PMGKY was failing in making ration reach the households that need it. To give just one, a study conducted in six blocks of Rajasthan's Udaipur found that more than half of the respondents had no information regarding the said scheme.<sup>112</sup> Moreover, the food scheme for migrants was not reintroduced, even as PMGKY was, this year in the face of the second wave of the Covid-19 - the latter was later extended till 30 November this year.<sup>113</sup> Instead, the focus to solve the food security problems in the country has now been shifted altogether to the already delayed One Nation One Ration Card scheme.<sup>114</sup> This is, however, forgetting that the technical requirement to see the full implementation of the scheme on a nationwide scale will still take a long time, even if all the States come on board to join it.<sup>115</sup> Also, what about those needy households who still do not possess a ration card? After all, as pointed out, again by food activists, that the system of public distribution of ration in India currently excludes more than 100 million people from its reach. "The consequences of excluding millions of people from the PDS are taking a grim turn as the coronavirus crisis devastates livelihoods across the country."<sup>116</sup>

The employment scheme, even as it was limited in 116 districts of only six states, too turned out to be nothing but a repackaged programme.<sup>117</sup> Similarly, other measures announced under the PMGKY also fell short of their set targets. In March last year, the Union Government had directed the State Governments to provide financial assistance to construction workers through their welfare boards set up in respective States. Yet, the government estimates, a year later, show that not more than a third of all the workers in the construction sector had received the assistance last year; this figure was even lower during the resurgence in Covid-19 cases this year.<sup>118</sup> The scheme to provide collateral-free working capital loans to street vendors failed to cover even a fourth of their total strength in the country.<sup>119</sup> The wages under the rural guarantee scheme, though increased, remained significantly below the minimum wages.<sup>120</sup> What's more, academicians have noted that urban poor migrants are likely to remain excluded from the low-cost housing scheme that was launched last year, even as it was, precisely, meant to target them.<sup>121</sup> And once again, courtesy the SWAN, we now know that even the Union Labour and Employment Ministry's helpline numbers for migrant workers, were at best a "patchy afterthought", at least during the second wave of Covid-19 this year – the Ministry, on the other hand, claimed to have resolved over 15000 complaints of the workers last year.<sup>122</sup>

Here, the purpose in questioning these steps by the Union Government is not to deny any positive impact of the said measures, but to point out how these schemes, even if implemented properly, would have found themselves within the limits posed by the conjecture itself. The Covid-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the existing sociopolitical dynamics in India – even exacerbated, as often, correctly argued.<sup>123</sup> Come to think of it that way, the question of work, housing, food security, among others including that of life itself of the labour in general, and migrants in particular, merits a persistent discourse that must, to begin with, address the prevailing structural crisis of employment in our country.<sup>124</sup>

Against this, however, what the labouring population experienced, even in terms of the policies envisioned for them by the State, was quite the opposite. We have already discussed in the previous pages, at length, how the multiple efforts at ameliorating the lockdown-induced distress among the labouring population were largely poorly conceived, without accounting for the ground realities. What should we then make out of the apparent ad-hocism in the Union Government's plan to meet the crisis of Covid-19?<sup>125</sup> One must not shy away from asking: Was it in any way strategic?

The Irish hint to that effect came from none other than the Prime Minister of the nation himself.<sup>126</sup> Months later, it was indeed, followed by action. The monsoon session of the Parliament, convened for the first time under the shadow of Covid-19 last year, saw the passage of three major pieces of legislation on labour – The Industrial Relations Code, 2020; The Code on Social Security, 2020; and, The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020. Combined with The Code on Wages, 2019, which was turned into a legislature a year earlier – the other three were referred to the Standing Parliamentary Committee that year – the four legislations constitute what is being touted as the 'labour reforms'.<sup>127</sup> In other words, the said labour codes consolidate as many as 29 existing central labour enactments.<sup>128</sup> A demand raised every now and then by the industry bigwigs, the codification of labour laws goes back to the year 2002 when the second National Commission on Labour had suggested subsuming the regulations governing labour in the country – then, as now, this was seen as a prerequisite in achieving the "ease" of doing business in India.<sup>129</sup>

Much has been written about the codification process marking it as the silent takeover of labour rights in the country.<sup>130</sup> Equally, the fact that these Code Bills were steamrolled in both the houses without any discussion last year hasn't gone unnoticed.<sup>131</sup> Let us then take a look at the Codes summarily. The Code on industrial relations deals with contentious issues of industrial disputes and terms of employment contract; it carries several provisions that are feared to dilute the protections

otherwise available to the worker under the Trade Unions Act, 1926 or the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The essence of the Code on social security lies in the fact that even while consolidating the existing legislations on social security – it includes those pertaining to provident funds, state insurance, gratuity, maternity benefits, among others – the Code shies away from emphasizing social security as a 'right' of the workers. The many branches of economic activities that are left outside the scope of the Code concerning the occupational safety and health of the labouring force strike one as noticeable – the most concerning is the exclusion of the agriculture sector that still continues to provide employment to nearly half of the working population in the country. Besides, a stipulated national minimum wage, as envisaged under the Code on wages that had also empowered the Union Government to fix a 'floor wage', remains to this day far off from reality.<sup>132</sup>

This is not to suggest that the existing labour provisions should have remained untouched. There is hardly any law that touches all the workers in the country.<sup>133</sup> This has been especially true earlier for the workers in the unorganised sector and now even for those who find themselves subjected to new forms of labour arrangement. Since Labour is on the concurrent list in the Indian Constitution, much of the central enactments were also amended by the State Governments in what became more like a race to the bottom in labour standards.<sup>134</sup> Moreover, the capitalist development that the country has witnessed in the past three decades, has rendered the labour regulations toothless.<sup>135</sup>

And yet, the laws are present, even though, only on paper for the overwhelming majority of Indian workers. Take, for instance, the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 (hereafter *ISMWA*). As one report noted, the migrant labourers, having lost their jobs and forced to dash back to their native villages amid the first and the second wave of Covid-19, might not have found themselves bereft of their rights, had the 40-year act been implemented. If registered as a migrant labourer in their home state or in any state where they had chosen to work, the dispersed labourers would be protected under the laws relating to minimum wage, safety and accident coverage; they could have claimed social security; their labour contractor would be mandated to pay them transport allowance for the journey back home. Additionally, the governments – both, State and Union – would have easily been able to identify the migrants post the nationwide lockdown to provide rations or any other assistance.<sup>136</sup> But then, there were only 33,776 migrant workers registered nationwide in the year 2019-20, indicating the scant attention the act has received.<sup>137</sup> It must be noted here, in this context, that the architecture of inter-state migration has undergone significant changes over the last three decades.<sup>138</sup> Drawing upon this, Piya Srinivasan in a working paper, while making a socio-legal enquiry into the ISMWA, notes that the failure to ensure the implementation of the provisions of the act thus, “goes back to the post-liberalization era and the increase in the flow of migrant workers, with the lack of state monitoring of migrant workers by states due to a deregulated labour market.”<sup>139</sup>

The ISMWA has now been subsumed by the Code on Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions; the latter, along with the other three Codes, is, however, yet to be rolled out.<sup>140</sup> Labour economists have pointed out certain provisions of the ISMWA that are feared to be diluted. The chapter on inter-state migrants under the Code will be applied to every establishment that employs ten or more workers while the ISMWA applied to those with five or more workers. This is a significant dilution, given that establishments employing ten or more workers accounted for only a minuscule percentage of the total establishments in the non-agricultural sector.<sup>141</sup> As one report noted, the Code also misses the opportunity to expand the protective coverage to intra-state migrant workers.<sup>142</sup> 2011 Census Survey tells us that 88 percent of internal migration in India is within the state boundaries, according to this report.

To give more examples of how the Codes assault the workers' rights, amendments are proposed to a law that was enacted to address the inhuman working conditions in the real estate industry thus, robbing the construction workers of their legal shield.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, we have been told much, ever since the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act came into effect in 2009, about the boards that are to be constituted to ensure that the unorganised workforce in the country is socially secured.<sup>144</sup> Yet, these have remained as only words with no action. There is much brouhaha now over the renewed efforts by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment to create a national database of unorganised workers. But, even that is not without any issues.<sup>145</sup>

It may be mentioned here that the signals of using the public health crisis as an occasion to relax labour laws were there months before the Codes were introduced in the Parliament last year. First, on May 6 last year, the Madhya Pradesh government brought an Ordinance that above all, exempted all new factories from certain provisions of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947. The Uttar Pradesh state government went one step further by exempting all factories and establishments engaged in manufacturing processes, subject to the fulfilment of certain conditions, from all labour laws for three years.<sup>146</sup> Finally, the number of State Governments seeking approval for changes in labour laws, particularly those pertaining to factories, industrial disputes and contract labour, had reached 15 by September.<sup>147</sup> Significantly, several of these states had already, in the initial months of the nationwide lockdown, passed notifications to increase maximum weekly work hours from 48 hours to 72 hours and daily work hours from 9 hours to 12 hours - for a period of three months then.<sup>148</sup>

The restructuring of how the labour is to be governed in the post-pandemic nation forms only one part of the story. Make no mistake: the main agenda remained as producing a reorganised economy. The latter was achieved through policy decisions, ensconced within careful usage of vocabulary – something in which the present ruling dispensation has more often than not proved its proficiency. The helplessness that the nation experienced at the hands of the pandemic was ingeniously juxtaposed with the idea of achieving self-reliance.<sup>149</sup> And so, we were sold the 'Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan', or self-reliant India mission – a campaign that was positioned to augment local manufacturing in the country.<sup>150</sup>

Many were quick to point out that, behind the buzzword that alluded to “freedom, autonomy and self-determination,” there was a thinly veiled blueprint to push forward the neo-liberal agenda.<sup>151</sup> The Finance Minister's elucidation of the mission showed that this observation was not unfounded.<sup>152</sup> It was announced that commercial mining will be introduced in the coal sector while private investments will be enhanced in the mineral sector; the Central Public Sector Enterprises, a reminder of the erstwhile dirigiste regime, in all but 4 strategic sectors will eventually be privatised; policy reforms will be brought in defence production, power sector, social sector, space activities, and atomic energy sector. The Fiscal Budget, presented this year, subsequently, carried the revised targets for the sale of stakes of the Government of India in public companies. Unsurprisingly, it left the public sector employees in jitters.<sup>153</sup>

These measures are further accompanied by the dramatic embrace of privatisation by the Union Government in other social spheres. Hence, national assets are being put up on sale;<sup>154</sup> private trains are being discussed with much enthusiasm<sup>155</sup>. The energy security of the nation is being compromised while the largest life insurer in the country is further getting exposed to the vicissitudes of the market.<sup>156</sup> A new vision of India's education system, tailored to discriminate against the poor and the oppressed in the post-pandemic period, is being thrust upon us.<sup>157</sup> Add to all these, the fears of the protesting farmers at the borders of the national capital against the 'corporatisation' of Indian agriculture.<sup>158</sup> We have already discussed the comparisons that are drawn of the present situation

with the Bombay Plague of 1896. That said, consider another one from a report cited previously: “Then, as now, only one out of a handful of deadly afflictions, the one that most directly threatened commerce, trade, and the accumulation of capital—was identified as a ‘crisis.’”<sup>159</sup>

## To a New Regime of Capital

Ritanjan Das and Nilotpal Kumar in an article published last year had urged us to place the conjectural crisis of the Covid-19 amidst a context of chronic and persistent social crises. The authors drew upon Walter Benjamin’s work where he argues that the ‘present’ of the oppressed is never an ‘exception’, in other words, is not disconnected from his social past. “Analogously,” Das and Kumar observed, “the current state of exception facing the migrant workers in India is barely an exception. Rather, it is temporally connected to – i.e., forming a ‘tradition’ of – multiple and ever-deepening fractures of lived spaces, histories, and livelihoods in their everyday existence.”<sup>160</sup> Published around the same time, another article begins the story of the Covid-19 crisis from the vantage point of the capital. The financial crisis in 2008, we are told, drove the capitalist world economy to the brink of collapse, “and it was caused specifically by inherent contradictions in the system.”<sup>161</sup> To further illustrate this, more recently, economist Michael Roberts in an interview while dwelling upon the reasons behind the pandemic-triggered recession in the economy, pointed towards the “economic Achilles heel of capital”: the basic contradiction of capitalism between raising the productivity of labour and sustaining profitability.<sup>162</sup>

All this gets at something which comes in handy for us to capture the contemporary imagination of the struggle of labour against the conditions of work and life forced on it by the regime of capital. Thus, at the risk of simplification, what we see around can be best understood through the theoretical categories of the political economy that emerges from the oeuvre of Marx’s work.

We are told that the capitalist process of production is essentially a process of accumulation – this is among the main exposition of Marx that appears in the third volume of his magnum opus *Capital*.<sup>163</sup> Subsequently, Marx shows that the productivity of the labour grows with the development of capitalist production, of which the capitalist process of accumulation forms one facet. The augmentation in labour productivity can further be understood by progression in the value of ‘constant capital’, that is, the means of production (machinery, technology, among other resources) – the latter, too, is directly proportional to accumulation. Finally, an increase in the value of ‘constant capital’ more rapidly than that of the ‘variable capital’, in other words, the living labour, leads to an increment in the ‘organic composition of capital’, which eventually results in a progressive tendency for the rate of profit to fall.<sup>164</sup> Put differently, this means that the process of capital accumulation, which improves the productivity of the labour under a capitalist arrangement of production, also leads to a tendential decline in the rate of profit. Hence, the contradiction, as mentioned above, between the development in labour productivity and maintaining profitability. Notably, the latter drives the investment in the economy.<sup>165</sup>

The political economy from the point of view of the labour has more implications in terms of accumulation. For as Marx wrote elsewhere: “... it is capitalist accumulation itself that constantly produces, and produces indeed in direct relation of its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant population of labourers, i.e., a population of greater extent than suffices for the average needs of the self-expansion of capital, and therefore a surplus population.”<sup>166</sup>

This proves extremely significant for us to put into perspective the experience of the Indian labouring population in general, and that of the migrants in particular, in the months following the

nationwide lockdown since last year. The CRG's living archive helps us in this endeavour; an account based on its content is described in the preceding pages. The Indian worker has suffered months of distress, confined in their homes or shanties or rented rooms due to locking down of the economy, only to return where they were before the pandemic at their worksites, except even poorer and more precarious. However, more importantly, what the description tells us is that an overwhelming majority of workers in the country face permanent informal conditions of employment. In other words, these are the unorganised workers, segregated in the bourgeois conception of labour, that together form a part of the surplus population, "to be used at will whenever the need for labour in an expanded economy (nationally or globally) arises."<sup>167</sup> We may, quite justifiably, then ask what explains the response of the Indian State to the pandemic-triggered 'crisis' when looked at from the point of view of labour? Can it be comprehended using the Marxist concept of "primitive accumulation"? What connection does it have with the unorganised workforce? And, finally, where does the migrant situate amidst all this? Let us address these questions, one by one.

Marx began telling us about the "secret" of primitive accumulation by referring to the story of "original sin" in theology.<sup>168</sup> Consequently, in the traditional reading of primitive accumulation, the concept is predominantly seen as a historical phase that led to the creation of the preconditions for the development of capitalism, as noted by Rajesh Bhattacharya, to which he then presents a critique in one of his papers. He writes:

"When capital cannot create its own supply of labor-power, it turns primitive—it resorts to dispossession; for example, in the colonies, exclusionary land regulations were passed to enforce the separation of direct producers and means of production. Primitive accumulation is not limited to the origin of capitalism; it comes into play whenever the conditions of existence of capitalism start unraveling. Extending it further, we can say primitive accumulation is constitutive of capitalism."<sup>169</sup>

Undoubtedly, the supply-side shock induced by the Covid-19 is one such moment. Stoking economic worries, the pandemic has indeed exposed the vulnerabilities in the modern global order in a stark manner.<sup>170</sup> But more importantly, as V. Geetha wrote: "Capital and coronavirus, presided over by a watchful state, have opened up a vast landscape of suffering, which in so-called normal times, appeared the very stuff of things, as if they were unavoidable, given."<sup>171</sup> With this theoretical understanding in mind, one can thus view the attempts to restructure the Indian economy by the Union Government, a process that seemed to have been catalysed by the Covid-19 pandemic, as a fresh round of primitive accumulation. Faced with a crisis, the source of which can be found in the "economic Achilles heel of capital", public assets are being transferred to private hands; land, erstwhile inhabited by the marginalised, is being cleared for the purpose of the accumulation of capital; and, temporary and precarious employment is being allowed to proliferate to effect an overall cheapening of labour-power. Examples abound. The fact of the matter is that primitive accumulation, advanced by the Indian State, hence emerges here to facilitate the transition to a new regime of capital from the critically fated one by transcending barriers to accumulation.<sup>172</sup>

The methods of primitive accumulation, to use Marx's expression, are "anything but idyllic."<sup>173</sup> Historically, the transition from a pre-capitalist social formation to a capitalist one involved separating the workers from the means of production. The existence of the emergent workforce was sarcastically termed as "free in the double sense" - the worker is free to accept any work and free of any attachments to means of production.<sup>174</sup> In our times, the figure of a migrant comes to mind to instantiate what Marx would have meant by this. Dispossessed and exploited, the migrant, in this sense, emerges as a 'free' subject and thus remains central in meeting the contemporary conditions of capital. Again, it is in this sense, it is the migrating labourforce that, while experiencing increased precarity, pay the price of the onslaught.

## Championing Collective Care: Politics from Labour's Vantage Point

Having gained clarity on what implications the pandemic leaves on the work and life of the labour, we may take one extra step and finally ask what possibilities of envisioning politics from the labour's point of view portends from the present situation? We can begin by first, focusing on the failure of organised politics in forging a response. The mainstream parties in India, as argued, failed to make any worthwhile intervention, evidenced by its dull imagination to restrict politics in old, routine forms.<sup>175</sup> Maybe this was so as the electoral equations didn't require them to make the effort for the disenfranchised.<sup>176</sup> Meanwhile, shackled to similar fetters of the past, the 'Left' too came across as being unable to adequately expose the politics surrounding pandemics.<sup>177</sup> In this list, conventional trade unionism was no outlier. Their declarations to nationwide programmes made reference to the "miseries" of migrant workers, yet carried no demand directly concerning the footloose population.<sup>178</sup> It is only now that Central Trade Unions have taken up the task of the unionisation of migrant workers.<sup>179</sup>

But then, precisely at a time when we heard about the shortcomings of the institutionalised politics, we also heard about the championing of collective care by the solidarity networks, local NGOs, community groups, associations of grass-root workers, religious bodies, who supplied food, provided cash assistance, arranged transportation, among others in whatever capacity they were allowed to.<sup>180</sup> This year was no different. In the face of the second surge in Covid-19 cases that brought the country's healthcare system to the brink, pleas for oxygen, hospital beds, ventilators, among others, inundated the social media.<sup>181</sup> They were addressed, least of all, by the State machinery.<sup>182</sup> Moreover, solidarity and self-activity emerged in other layers too and at different levels, even as the appearance of it was predicated on the breakdown of the institutional order. The governance of multiple State Governments were hailed as a model.<sup>183</sup> Inspiring efforts by the civic authorities showed how restricting the spread of Covid-19 in slum towns, marked with congestion and unsanitary living environment, is possible.<sup>184</sup> While local 'republics' in the hinterlands of India ensured the protection of the rural population.<sup>185</sup>

Political commentators were quick to identify these happenings. Attempts are now being made to ascertain the possibilities of these initiatives in redefining the notions of work and life, keeping labour in mind, in the post-pandemic world.<sup>186</sup> Migrants, without a doubt, constitute a central figure in this alternative politics. But in what form, will they finally achieve their political agency, remains to be seen.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The first positive case of Covid-19, the disease caused by the novel Corona virus, was reported in India on January 30, 2020, see, Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, "Update on Novel Corona virus: one positive case reported in Kerala", *Press Information Bureau*, 30 January 2020 – <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1601095> (accessed on 2 August 2021); subsequently, in March, a stringent lockdown in the country in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was announced at a notice of about four hours, on this see, Jeffrey Gettleman and Kai Schultz, "Modi Orders 3-Week Total Lockdown for All 1.3 Billion Indians", *The New York Times*, 24 March 2020 – <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/24/world/asia/india-coronavirus-lockdown.html> (accessed on 2 August 2021).

- <sup>2</sup> Press Trust of India, “India May Be Entering Endemic Stage of Covid: WHO Chief Scientist”, *NDTV*, 24 August 2021 - <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/who-chief-scientist-soumya-swaminathan-says-india-may-be-entering-endemic-stage-of-covid-2517758> (accessed on 29 August 2021).
- <sup>3</sup> The living archive, namely “COVID 19 and Migrant Workers”, can be accessed from here – [http://www.mcrg.ac.in/CRG\\_COVID-19/Covid\\_Migrant\\_Workers\\_Home.asp](http://www.mcrg.ac.in/CRG_COVID-19/Covid_Migrant_Workers_Home.asp).
- <sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Mahesh Vyas, “Covid leaves a lasting impact”, *Business Standard*, 28 June 2021 – [https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/covid-leaves-a-lasting-impact-121062800907\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/covid-leaves-a-lasting-impact-121062800907_1.html) (accessed on 10 August 2021).
- <sup>5</sup> See, Ranabir Samaddar, “Introduction”, in *Borders of an Epidemic*, ed. Ranabir Samaddar, (Kolkata, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2020) 21. [https://www.policefoundationindia.org/images/resources/pdf/COVID-19\\_migrant\\_workers.pdf](https://www.policefoundationindia.org/images/resources/pdf/COVID-19_migrant_workers.pdf) (accessed on 17 August 2021).
- <sup>6</sup> “Key Indicators of Employment and Unemployment in India: NSS 68th Round” (National Sample Survey of Office. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, June 2013), [http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/KI-68th-E%26U-PDF.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/KI-68th-E%26U-PDF.pdf). (accessed on 18 August 2021).
- <sup>7</sup> Himanshu, “The seriousness of the problem of unemployment in India”, *Livemint*, 1 August 2019 - <https://www.livemint.com/opinion/columns/opinion-the-seriousness-of-the-problem-of-unemployment-in-india-1564679281965.html> (accessed on 21 August 2021).
- <sup>8</sup> K P Kannan and G Raveendran, “From Jobless to Job-loss Growth: Gainers and Losers during 2012-18”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 54, no.44 (9 November 2019) – <https://www.epw.in/journal/2019/44/insight/jobless-job-loss-growth.html> (accessed on 27 July 2021).
- <sup>9</sup> Santosh Mehrotra and Jajati K. Parida, “India’s Employment Crisis: Rising Education Levels and Falling Non-agricultural Job Growth”, *CSE Working Paper: 2019-04* (October 2019), 21 – [https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Mehrotra\\_Parida\\_India\\_Employment\\_Crisis.pdf](https://cse.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Mehrotra_Parida_India_Employment_Crisis.pdf) (accessed on 27 July 2021).
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- <sup>33</sup>Utsa Sarmin, “Hunger, Humiliation, and Death: Perils of the Migrant Workers in the Time of Covid-19”, in *Borders of an Epidemic*, ed. Ranabir Samaddar, (Kolkata, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2020), (accessed on 17 August 2021).
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- <sup>35</sup>“India reached coronavirus peak in late September, crisis likely to end by February end: Govt-appointed panel”, *India Today*, 18 October 2020 - <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/india-reached-coronavirus-peak-in-late-september-crisis-likely-to-end-by-february-end-govt-appointed-panel-1732845-2020-10-18> (accessed on 24 August 2021); how much of this hope, now turned out to be false, costed the country equally merits our attention.
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27 August 2021); on the religious congregation, read, Press Trust of India, “70 Lakh Participated In Kumbh Mela Held Amid Covid Surge”, *NDTV*, 1 May 2021 - <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/70-lakh-participated-in-kumbh-mela-amid-covid-19-surge-2425654> (accessed on 27 August 2021).

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<sup>38</sup> “21 Days and Counting: Covid-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India”, Stranded Workers Action Network (15 April 2020), 7-9 – [http://publications.azimpremjifoundation.org/2272/1/lockdown\\_and\\_distress\\_report\\_by\\_stranded\\_workers\\_action\\_network-2.pdf](http://publications.azimpremjifoundation.org/2272/1/lockdown_and_distress_report_by_stranded_workers_action_network-2.pdf) (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>39</sup> “32 Days and Counting: Covid-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India”, Stranded Workers Action Network (1 May 2020) 14-16 – <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/library/resource/32-days-and-counting-covid-19-lockdown-migrant-workers-and-the-inadequacy-of-welfare-measures-in-india/> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>40</sup> Amey Tiroadkar, “During Lockdown, 59% Workers Not Paid Wages in Maharashtra, 92% in Gujarat: Study”, *NewsClick*, 13 May 2020 - [https://www.newsclick.in/During-Lockdown-59%25-Workers-Not-Paid-Wages-Maharashtra-92%25-Gujarat-Study?fbclid=IwAR21PvJq\\_XPnzgSu3PXuBjOZKN9zjFnuplDjtXCDILK6-RblqG0fmGPIeHY](https://www.newsclick.in/During-Lockdown-59%25-Workers-Not-Paid-Wages-Maharashtra-92%25-Gujarat-Study?fbclid=IwAR21PvJq_XPnzgSu3PXuBjOZKN9zjFnuplDjtXCDILK6-RblqG0fmGPIeHY) (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>41</sup> “Unlocking the Urban: Reimagining Migrant Lives in Cities Post Covid-19”, Aajeevika Bureau, (April 2020) 16 - <https://www.aajeevika.org/assets/pdfs/Unlocking%20the%20Urban.pdf> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>42</sup> Himanshu Kaushik, “Gujarat: 15 lakh migrant workers left during lockdown, says study”, *The Times of India*, 19 July 2020 - <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/15l-migrant-workers-left-during-lockdown-study/articleshow/77044207.cms> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>43</sup> “No Country for Workers: The Covid-19 Second Wave, Local Lockdowns and Migrant Worker Distress in India”, Stranded Workers Action Network (16 June 2021), 4 – <https://alumni.azimpremjiversity.edu.in/f/no-country-for-workers-swan-report-2021-9658> (accessed on 17 June 2021).

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.* With only 452 responses from workers, the report includes very preliminary data regarding the difficulty faced by the working population in getting vaccinated. Even then, it manages to capture the reasons behind the low vaccination rate among the workers at the time that included above all, scarcity of vaccines and hesitancy among the workers.

<sup>45</sup> Nitin Sinha, “Perception, Legality and Politics of the Migrant Worker Crisis in Lockdown”, *The Wire*, 15 May 2020 - <https://thewire.in/labour/migrant-worker-crisis-lockdown> (accessed on 2 August 2021).

<sup>46</sup> “Citizens and the Sovereign”, Migrant Workers Solidarity Network, (November 2020), 11 - [https://mwsn.in/uploads/resources/pdfs/Citizens\\_and\\_the\\_Sovereign.pdf](https://mwsn.in/uploads/resources/pdfs/Citizens_and_the_Sovereign.pdf) (accessed on 3 August 2021).

<sup>47</sup> Press Trust of India, “Over 1 crore migrant labourers return to home states on foot during Mar-Jun: Govt”, *The Hindu*, 23 September 2020 - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/over-1-crore-migrant-labourers-return-to-home-states-on-foot-during-mar-jun-govt/article32674884.ece> (accessed on 27 June 2021); it is important to note that this figure does not include all the returnee migrants.

<sup>48</sup> I use quotation marks because the meaning that the term denotes here is similar to the one highlighted by Ranabir Samaddar in his work. For example, see, Ranabir Samaddar, “Introduction”, in *Borders of an Epidemic*, ed. Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2020)16 (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>49</sup> “The Enemy from Outside”, in *Burdens of an Epidemic: A Policy Perspective on Covid-19 and Migrant Labour*, ed. Ranabir Samaddar (Kolkata, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, 2020) 3 (accessed on 18 August 2021).

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- <sup>52</sup> “State of Working India 2021: One Year of Covid-19”, *Centre for Sustainable Employment*, Azim Prem University (2021) 21 (accessed on 9 August 2021).
- <sup>53</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Over 7.5 Million Jobs Lost in April: Experts Call for Fresh Relief Package for Marginalised”, *Newsclick*, 4 May 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/7.5-Million-Jobs-Lost-April-Experts-Call-Fresh-Relief-Package-Marginalised> (accessed on 9 August 2021).
- <sup>54</sup> Pheroze L. Vincent, “Double whammy of job loss and Covid care cost in Delhi-Ghaziabad”, *The Telegraph India*, 31 July 2021 - <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/cpm-survey-bares-double-whammy-of-job-loss-and-covid-care-cost/cid/1824628> (accessed on 31 July 2021).
- <sup>55</sup> On this, see, Ronak Chhabra, “Amid Labour Stir, Workers Blame Toyota for ‘Horrible Work Conditions’”, *Newsclick*, 12 November 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/amid-labour-stir-workers-blame-toyota-horrible-work-conditions> (accessed on 9 August 2021); also see, Ronak Chhabra, “Behind Spate of Protests by Auto Workers, a Struggling Industry and State Failure ‘On All Fronts’”, *Newsclick*, 5 March 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Behind-Spate-Protests-Auto-Workers-Struggling-Industry-State-Failure-Fronts> (accessed on 9 August 2021).
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- <sup>58</sup> Press Trust of India, “COVID-19 crisis can push 40 crore informal sector workers in India deeper into poverty: ILO”, *The Economic Times*, 7 April 2020 - <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/covid-19-crisis-can-push-40-crore-informal-sector-workers-in-india-deeper-into-poverty-ilo/articleshow/75032778.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 10 August 2021).
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- <sup>61</sup> “State of Working India 2021: One Year of Covid-19”, *Centre for Sustainable Employment*, Azim Prem University (2021), 24 (accessed on 9 August 2021).
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<sup>65</sup> Samyak Pandey, “Forget petrol & diesel, prices of edible oils have soared even higher in June, July”, *The Print*, 27 July 2021 - <https://theprint.in/economy/forget-petrol-diesel-prices-of-edible-oils-have-soared-even-higher-in-june-july/703309/> (accessed on 30 July 2021).

<sup>66</sup> T J S George, “Now COVID is the great leveller”, *The New Indian Express*, 9 August 2020 - <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/columns/t-j-s-george/2020/aug/09/now-covid-is-the-great-leveller-2180941.html> (accessed on 7 July 2021).

<sup>67</sup> All the observations are backed by last year’s quarterly PLFS data. They are made in the report, by Amitabh Kundu, “Has the economic fallout of the pandemic affected different communities in different ways?”, *The Indian Express*, 28 August 2021 - <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/has-the-economic-fallout-of-the-pandemic-affected-different-communities-in-different-ways-7472675/> (accessed on 28 August 2021).

<sup>68</sup> FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, “The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets”, *FAO*, Rome, 2020, p. 182 - <http://www.fao.org/3/ca9692en/ca9692en.pdf> (accessed on 1 August 2021).

<sup>69</sup> “Global Hunger Index 2020: India ranks 94 out of 107 countries, under ‘serious’ category”, *The Indian Express*, 19 October 2020 - <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/global-health-index-2020-india-6757899/> (accessed on 1 August 2021).

<sup>70</sup> “India’s poorest ‘fear hunger may kill us before coronavirus’”, *BBC*, 25 March 2020 – <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52002734?fbclid=IwAR2Pg1XItZpTiIcsalxcr70CV8zzTiXWznX4x4NwozDcEP-nBcfVa5CcXMw> (accessed on 2 August 2021).

<sup>71</sup> The figure is provided by a public database that was maintained to include the deaths that were caused, “as a result of the lockdown.” The data was last updated on 30 July 2020. There were in total 991 deaths recorded till then on this website One can visit it here - <https://thejeshgn.com/projects/covid19-india/non-virus-deaths/#Charts> (accessed on 27 August 2021).

<sup>72</sup> As quoted in a report by, Vaishali Bansal, “India’s godowns are overflowing. So why are people starving?”, *The Indian Express*, 6 August 2021 - <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/indias-godowns-are-overflowing-so-why-are-people-starving-7440463/> (accessed on 8 August 2021); the report further adds: “The irony is that this happened when the government had an unprecedented 100 million tonnes of food grains in its godowns — larger than the food stocks of any country.”

<sup>73</sup> Press Trust of India, “Covid-19 lockdown negatively impacted women’s nutrition in India: Study”, *IndiaToday*, 29 July 2021 - <https://www.indiatoday.in/coronavirus-outbreak/story/covid-lockdown-women-health-nutrition-1833984-2021-07-29> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>74</sup> Geoffrey P. Johnston, “Pandemic hurting children in India”, *The Kingston Whig Standard*, 21 August 2021 - <https://www.thewhig.com/opinion/columnists/pandemic-hurting-children-in-india> (accessed on 24 August 2021).

<sup>75</sup> The figures are quoted from Union Ministry of Health and Family Welfare’s Comprehensive National Nutrition Survey in the report by, Subodh Verma, “Hunger Amidst Plenty - Tragedy Continues 75 Years After Independence”, *NewsClick*, 15 August 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/hunger-amidst-plenty-tragedy-75-years-independence> (accessed on 15 August 2021).

<sup>76</sup> Joe Wallen and Mohammad Sartaj Alam, “First coronavirus, now starvation: hunger stalks millions of Indians plunged into extreme poverty”, *The Telegraph*, 15 October 2020 - <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/global-health/science-and-disease/first-coronavirus-now-starvation-hunger-stalks-millions-indians/> (accessed on 21 August 2021).

<sup>77</sup> Press Trust of India, “Jobs lost to lockdown, houses to Amphan: Migrant workers stare at uncertainty”, *The Telegraph India*, 21 May 2020 - <https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/jobs-lost-to-lockdown-houses-to-amphan-migrant-workers-stare-at-uncertainty/cid/1774762> (accessed on 20 August 2021).

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<sup>78</sup> Gurvinder Singh, “West Bengal faces the brunt of Cyclone Amphan”, *Mongabay India*, 26 May 2020 - <https://india.mongabay.com/2020/05/west-bengal-faces-the-brunt-of-cyclone-amphan/> (accessed on 20 August 2021).

<sup>79</sup> Shruti Srivastava, “Return to the city or struggle in village? Migrant workers who fled lockdown are in a bind”, *The Print*, 29 June 2020 - <https://theprint.in/india/return-to-the-city-or-struggle-in-village-migrant-workers-who-fled-lockdown-are-in-a-bind/450627/> (accessed on 20 August 2021).

<sup>80</sup> Basant Kumar Mohanty, “Migrant disinterest builds case for broader NREGA: Study”, *The Telegraph India*, 30 April 2021 - <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/migrant-disinterest-builds-case-for-broader-nrega-study/cid/1814059> (accessed on 20 August 2021); it must be noted that the study quoted in the report considers both the MGNREGA and the Garib Kalyan Rojgar Yojana to conclude whether the employment was provided or not to the returnee migrants in the said States.

<sup>81</sup> The observation was made by economists Amit Basole and Rosa Abraham of the Centre for Sustainable Employment in an interview by, Shreehari Paliath, “Second COVID Wave To Hit Jobs, Economy Harder”, *IndiaSpend*, 19 May 2021 - <https://www.indiaspend.com/indiaspend-interviews/second-covid-wave-to-hit-jobs-economy-harder-749738> (accessed on 20 August 2021); moreover, it was noted by the interviewer in one of her questions here that as on May 4 this year, only 60 percent of 29 million households that demanded work under MGNREGA were provided with it.

<sup>82</sup> The figure is quoted from a Union Government’s website that plays the role of a “guide and facilitator”, for those looking to invest in the country. For more details on the construction industry, one can visit the website here - <https://www.investindia.gov.in/sector/construction> (accessed on 27 August 2021).

<sup>83</sup> Shamindra Nath Roy, Manish, Mukta Naik, “Migrants in Construction Work: Evaluating Their Welfare Framework”, *Centre for Policy Research*, (June 2017) 2 - <https://www.cprindia.org/research/reports/migrants-construction-work-evaluating-their-welfare-framework> (accessed on 27 August 2021).

<sup>84</sup> “Informal Sector and Conditions of Employment in India: NSS 66th Round” (National Sample Survey of Office. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India, January 2012) 45 - [http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication\\_reports/nss\\_rep\\_539.pdf](http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/nss_rep_539.pdf). (accessed on 27 August 2021).

<sup>85</sup> Deepanshu Mohan, Jignesh Mistry, Advaita Singh and Snehal Sreedhar, “How daily wage workers in India suffered in the lockdown – and continue to struggle months later”, *Scroll*, 26 March 2021 - <https://scroll.in/article/989258/how-daily-wage-workers-in-india-suffered-in-the-lockdown-and-continue-to-struggle-months-later> (accessed on 26 August 2021).

<sup>86</sup> G.V.R. Subha Rao, “Lockdown blues still haunt construction workers”, *The Hindu*, 9 July 2020 - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/lockdown-blues-still-haunt-construction-workers/article32027615.ece> (accessed on 27 August 2021).

<sup>87</sup> “COVID-19 Crisis and the Informal Economy: Informal Workers in Delhi, India”, *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing*(December 2020)1 – [https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO\\_FactSheet\\_Delhi\\_for%20Web.pdf](https://www.wiego.org/sites/default/files/publications/file/WIEGO_FactSheet_Delhi_for%20Web.pdf) (accessed on 26 August 2021).

<sup>88</sup> Shiney Chakraborty, “Women Informal Workers: Falling Through the Cracks in the Pandemic”, *The Wire*, 14 February 2021 - <https://thewire.in/women/women-informal-workers-covid-19-pandemic-employment> (accessed on 26 August 2021).

<sup>89</sup> On this, see, Salman S.H. and Varsha Bansal, “Delhi, not Bengaluru, is the place to be for gig economy workers”, *Livemint*, 12 April 2019 - <https://www.livemint.com/companies/start-ups/delhi-and-not-bengaluru-is-the-place-to-be-for-gig-economy-workers-1555013405684.html> (accessed on 9 August 2021); the report notes “readily available job training at hyperlocal delivery companies,” as the driving factor behind more migrants taking up gig economy jobs.

<sup>90</sup> Kaarika Das and Srravya C, “BETWEEN PLATFORM AND PANDEMIC: MIGRANTS IN INDIA’S GIG ECONOMY”, *Futures of Work*, 16 March 2021 - <https://futuresofwork.co.uk/2021/03/16/caught-between-the-platform-and-the-pandemic-locating-migrants-in-indias-gig-economy/> (accessed on 9 August 2021).

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<sup>91</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Food Delivery Workers Protest Incentive Cuts Despite ‘Recovery’ Projections”, *Newsclick*, 20 August 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Food-Delivery-Workers-Protest-Incentive-Cuts-Swiggy> (accessed on 9 August 2021).

<sup>92</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Spirit to ‘Fight’ for ‘What We Deserve’ Rises Among Amazon India Workers”, *Newsclick*, 26 March 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/spirit-fight-what-we-deserve-rises-among-amazon-india-workers> (accessed on 9 August 2021).

<sup>93</sup> Sujata Gothoskar, “It Can’t Be Business As Usual for the State, ‘Employers’ in the Case of Gig Workers”, *The Wire*, 31 March 2021 - <https://thewire.in/labour/it-cant-be-business-as-usual-for-the-state-employers-in-the-case-of-gig-workers> (accessed on 9 August 2021).

<sup>94</sup> Rinju and Udaya Shankar Mishra, “Covid-19: How do India’s urban informal settlements fight the pandemic”, *Down to Earth*, 22 May 2020 - <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/health/covid-19-how-do-india-s-urban-informal-settlements-fight-the-pandemic-71302> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>95</sup> The figures are provided by the Housing and Land Rights Network. “The vast majority of affected persons were not provided prior notice or resettlement. They have been rendered homeless and face heightened exposure to the coronavirus as well as the cold weather and air pollution, which compounds their health risks,” noted the network in their press statement that carried the figures. A pdf version of the statement can be accessed from here –

[https://www.hlrn.org.in/documents/Press\\_Release\\_Evictions\\_COVID19\\_November\\_2020.pdf](https://www.hlrn.org.in/documents/Press_Release_Evictions_COVID19_November_2020.pdf) (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>96</sup> For example, see, Ronak Chhabra, “After Losing Their Livelihoods, Craftsmen in Delhi’s Badarpur Mourn Demolished Houses”, *Newsclick*, 29 August 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Aafter-losing-livelihoods-craftsmen-delhi-badarpur-mourn-demolished-houses> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>97</sup> On this, see, “Save us from demolition: Khori Basti residents”, *The Hindu*, 7 July 2021 – <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/save-us-from-demolition-khori-basti-residents/article35181016.ece> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>98</sup> To get more sense on this, read, Ishita Chatterjee, “How Khori Gaon Residents, Now Facing Eviction, Were Forgotten During the Pandemic”, *The Wire*, 26 June 2021 - <https://thewire.in/rights/how-khori-gaon-residents-now-facing- eviction-received-no-help-during-the-pandemic> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>99</sup> The assurance came from none other than the Prime Minister as he ostensibly sought to bring the situation under control even as the nationwide lockdown was not announced by him as yet. On this, read, Avishek G Dastidar and Atri Mitra, “Covid-19: PM Modi urges calm as migrants leave cities for home”, *The Indian Express*, 22 March 2020 - <https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/janata-curfew-pm-narendra-modi-coronavirus-lockdown-6326075/> (accessed on 7 July 2021).

<sup>100</sup> One can read the Status Report from here - <https://www.mha.gov.in/sites/default/files/Status%20Report%20COVID19.pdf> (accessed on 24 August 2021).

<sup>101</sup> Sheetal Chhabria, “Manufacturing Epidemics: Pathogens, Poverty, and Public Health Crises in India”, *The India Forum*, 6 May 2020 - [https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/manufacturing-epidemics?utm\\_source=website&utm\\_medium=organic&utm\\_campaign=category&utm\\_content=Covid-19](https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/manufacturing-epidemics?utm_source=website&utm_medium=organic&utm_campaign=category&utm_content=Covid-19) (accessed on 8 July 2021).

<sup>102</sup> On this, read, Serish Naniseti, “Battling Covid-19 with a colonial-era law”, *The Hindu*, 28 March 2020 - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/battling-covid-19-with-a-colonial-era-law/article31195144.ece> (accessed on 8 July 2021).

<sup>103</sup> “Top Medical Professionals Call Out Government's 'Incoherent' COVID Policy, Lockdown”, *The Wire*, 31 May 2020 - <https://thewire.in/health/top-medical-professionals-call-out-governments-incoherent-covid-policy-lockdown> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>104</sup> For more on this, read, Sagar, “Government’s initial COVID response betrayed its own road map for ‘biological and public health’ disasters”, *The Caravan*, 22 April 2020 –

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<https://caravanmagazine.in/health/covid-lockdown-ndma-planning-social-justice-workers-women> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>105</sup> It was later withdrawn on 18 May 2020. On this, see, Press Trust of India, “MHA order directing companies to pay full wages to employees during lockdown withdrawn”, *The Times of India*, 18 May 2020 - <https://thewire.in/health/top-medical-professionals-call-out-governments-incoherent-covid-policy-lockdown> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>106</sup> “SC Gives Option To Establishments And Workers To Negotiate On Full Payment Of Wages, Regardless Of MHA Order”, *Live Law Network*, 12 June 2020 - <https://www.livelaw.in/top-stories/sc-gives-option-to-establishments-and-workers-to-negotiate-on-full-payment-of-wages-regardless-of-mha-order-158207> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>107</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Neemrana: Rift Over Lockdown Wages Shows why Negotiation Not a ‘Practical Solution’ for Workers”, *Newsclick*, 12 June 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Neemrana-Workers-Lockdown-Wages-Automobile-Rubber-Industry-Contractual-Work> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>108</sup> The press statement, issued by the Union Ministry of Labour and Employment can be accessed from here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1654819> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>109</sup> On additional food grains for poor, see the press statement issued by the Union Ministry of Finance here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1608345> (accessed on 17 August 2021); on food grains for migrant workers, read the statement by Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1624455> (accessed on 17 August 2021).

<sup>110</sup> Only about 28 million, as against 80 million, migrants were supplied with free food grains under the said scheme. This information was provided by the Union Ministry of Consumer Affairs, Food & Public Distribution in a press statement which can be read here – <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1650442> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>111</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Activists Vouch for Universalisation of Food Entitlements After Data Show Foodgrain Reached Only 13% of Migrant Workers”, *Newsclick*, 2 July 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/activists-vouch-universalisation-food-entitlements-data-show-foodgrain-reached-13-per-migrant-workers> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>112</sup> Drishti Agarwal, Manju Rajput and Saloni Mundra, “Udaipur: Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana Remains Elusive for Eligible Families”, *The Wire*, 17 November 2020 - <https://thewire.in/rights/udaipur-pradhan-mantri-gareeb-kalyan-yojana-remains-elusive-for-eligible-families> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>113</sup> See, Press Trust of India, “Govt rules out possibility of free foodgrains to migrants this time”, *Business Standard*, 10 May 2021 - [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/govt-rules-out-possibility-of-free-foodgrains-to-migrants-this-time-121051001046\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/govt-rules-out-possibility-of-free-foodgrains-to-migrants-this-time-121051001046_1.html) (accessed on 18 August 2021); also see, Gulveen Aulakh, “Cabinet approves additional foodgrain allocation till November 30 under PMGKY”, *The Economic Times*, 23 June 2021 - <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/cabinet-approves-additional-foodgrain-allocation-till-november-30-under-pmgky/articleshow/83775184.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>114</sup> The focus on One Nation One Ration Card scheme shifted also because of the recent Supreme Court judgment in which it had directed the States to see to its implementation by July 31 2021. On the judgment and the scheme, read, Akhileshwari Reddy, “The Problem With SC’s Recent Orders in the Migrant Workers Case”, *The Wire*, 29 July 2021 - <https://thewire.in/labour/the-problem-with-scs-recent-orders-in-the-migrant-workers-case> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>115</sup> The argument was made in a report by, Siraj Hussain and Jugal Mohapatra, “How Did Union, State Govts Fare on SC’s Order Providing Safety Net for Migrant Labour?”, *The Wire*, 15 July 2021 - <https://thewire.in/labour/how-did-union-state-govts-fare-on-scs-order-providing-safety-net-for-migrant-labour> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>116</sup> This is mainly because the Union Government still uses the 2011 population figures from the last Census survey. To read more on this, see, “More than 100mn excluded from PDS as govt uses outdated Census 2011

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data”, *India Spend*, 16 April 2020 - <https://www.indiaspend.com/more-than-100mn-excluded-from-pds-as-govt-uses-outdated-census-2011-data/> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>117</sup> On this, read, Subodh Verma, “With Honeyed Words, PM Modi Sells Another Repackaged Programme”, *Newsclick*, 22 June 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Honeyed-Words-PM-Modi-Sells-Repackaged-Programme-Migrant-Labour> (accessed on 19 August 2021).

<sup>118</sup> For the government estimates, see the answer provided by Bhupendra Yadav, Union Labour and Employment Minister in Lok Sabha on 19 July 2021. It can be read here – <http://164.100.24.220/loksabhaquestions/annex/176/AU8.pdf> (accessed on 19 August 2021); apart from this, it must be noted that 94 percent of the construction workers in the country, as one survey noted last year, were anyway ineligible for the assistance from the state welfare boards, see the report by, Divya Trivedi, “Survey finds 94 per cent of construction workers ineligible for funds transfer”, *Frontline*, 8 April 2020 - <https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31286921.ece?fbclid=IwAR2-Ap6sZoLJyqvZwHE9r-3jpSLZP2YRyF4E2BanKagq5hJuaDR0u-Th9BA> (accessed on 19 August 2021).

<sup>119</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Credit Scheme Excludes Majority of Street Vendors; Unions Warn of Soaring Social Tension”, *Newsclick*, 8 June 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Credit-Scheme-Excludes-Majority-Street-Vendors-Unions%20Warn-Soaring-Social-Tension> (accessed on 19 August 2021).

<sup>120</sup> Tina Edwin, “MGNREGA wages up about 11%; yet at least 40% lower than minimum wages”, *The Hindu Business Line*, 29 March 2020 - <https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/economy/mgnrega-wages-up-about-11-yet-at-least-40-lower-than-minimum-wages/article31197140.ece> (accessed on 19 August 2021).

<sup>121</sup> I am talking here about the Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) scheme, which was launched in the month of May under the Atma Nirbhar Bharat package. A survey by a group of academicians and housing activists however, released a report this year which carried an evaluation of the said scheme. To read about the survey report, see, Ronak Chhabra, “Survey of Centre's Low-Cost Housing Scheme Questions Scale and Planning”, *Newsclick*, 7 August 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/survey-centre-low-cost-housing-scheme-questions-scale-planning> (accessed on 8 August 2021).

<sup>122</sup> To read about SWAN’s survey of the helplines, see the report which can be downloaded from here - <http://strandedworkers.in/mdocs-posts/the-responses-from-labour-helplines-that-swan-got/> (accessed on 19 August 2021); on the Union Labour Ministry’s claims, see their press statement which can be accessed from here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1654819> (accessed on 19 August 2021).

<sup>123</sup> Jenny Sulphath and Balu Sunilraj, “Covid-19 Crisis Exposes India’s Neglect of Informal Workers”, *Newsclick*, 12 May 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/Covid-19-Crisis-Exposes-India-Neglect-Informal-Workers> (accessed on 14 August 2021).

<sup>124</sup> On this refer to, Manish K. Jha and M. Ibrahim Wani, “Will Migrant Workers and Their Grievances Always Be Invisible to the Public Eye?”, *The Wire*, 17 April 2020 - <https://thewire.in/rights/migrant-workers-lockdown> (accessed on 19 August 2021); also see, Himanshu, “Our labour force survey”.

<sup>125</sup> Shashi Ratnaker Singh and Ramesh Sharma, “Government’s ad-hoc response to the migrant crisis did not take into account the realities of their lives”, *Frontline*, 13 August 2021 - <https://frontline.thehindu.com/the-nation/central-government-response-to-the-migrant-crisis-the-covid19-pandemic-exposed-was-ad-hoc-and-did-not-take-into-account-the-reality-of-their-lives/article35509952.ece> (accessed on 18 August 2021).

<sup>126</sup> Asit Ranjan Mishra, “Turn crisis into an opportunity: PM Modi to India Inc”, *Livemint*, 12 June 2020 - <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/turn-crisis-into-an-opportunity-pm-modi-to-india-inc-11591901676915.html> (accessed on 6 July 2021); the report further added: “Speaking at the annual meeting of the Confederation of Indian Industry last week, Modi pledged to accelerate structural reforms to boost growth prospects as the Indian economy heads into a recession that some forecast will be the deepest since Independence.”

<sup>127</sup> To read more about the labour codes which have been notified in the Gazette of India, but are yet to be rolled out as yet, see the reply of the then Minister of State (Independent Charge) for Union Labour and Employment Santosh Kumar Gangwar in Lok Sabha on 22 March 2021. It can be accessed from here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1706610> (accessed on 5 August 2021).

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<sup>128</sup> On this, read an overview of labour reforms, available on the website of PRS Legislative Research. It can be accessed from here - [https://prsindia.org/billtrack/overview-of-labour-law-reforms#\\_edn2](https://prsindia.org/billtrack/overview-of-labour-law-reforms#_edn2) (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>129</sup> For a Marxist perspective on the second National Commission on Labour report, refer to, Anjan Chakrabarti and Byasdeb Dasgupta, “Disinterring the Report of National Commission on Labour”, *Economic and Political Weekly* 42, no. 21(26 May 2007) 1958-1965 - <https://www.epw.in/journal/2007/21/review-labour-review-issues-specials/disinterring-report-national-commission-labour> (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>130</sup> For example, read, Atul Sood, “The Silent Takeover of Labour Rights”, *The India Forum*, 20 November 2020 - <https://www.theindiaforum.in/article/silent-takeover-labour-rights#Top> (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>131</sup> On this, see, Ravi Srivastava, “There is much in the labour codes that needs to be discussed and debated”, *The Indian Express*, 3 October 2020 - <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/economic-crisis-migrant-labour-bills-covid-19-change-6671565/> (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>132</sup> Thanks to labour economists, researchers, trade unionists, there have indeed been a lot of writings on the Labour Codes that are available if one wishes to read about them. For our purpose here, I am including a commendable briefing note on Labour Law Reforms by Working Peoples’ Charter. It can be accessed from here - <https://workingpeoplescharter.in/media-statements/indias-labour-law-reform-briefing-note-for-parliamentarians/> (accessed on 5 August 2021); also read, “New Versions of Labour Codes Introduced: Highlights of the Industrial Relations Code 2020”, *Centre for Labour Laws and Livelihood NUJS*, 20 September 2020 - <https://cillnujs.wordpress.com/2020/09/20/new-versions-of-labour-codes-introduced-highlights-of-the-industrial-relations-code-2020/> (accessed on 5 August 2021); and, Neeleshwar Pavani, “Decoding the Code on Wages, 2019”, *The Leaflet*, 28 July 2021 - <https://www.theleaflet.in/decoding-the-code-on-wages-2019/> (accessed on 5 August 2021); meanwhile on the delay in announcing a national minimum wage, read, Basant Kumar Mohanty, “Centre sets up expert group to recommend a minimum wage”, *The Telegraph India*, 4 June 2021 - <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/centre-sets-up-expert-group-to-recommend-a-minimum-wage/cid/1817672> (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>133</sup> Samaddar, “Primitive accumulation”, 33-42.

<sup>134</sup> On top of this, the Union Government bestows more powers to the State governments through Codes to amend the labour laws even by bypassing the assemblies. For more on this, read, Somesh Jha, “Codes give more power to states to be flexible on labour laws”, *Business Standard*, 25 September 2020 - [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/codes-give-more-power-to-states-to-be-flexible-on-labour-laws-120092401255\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/codes-give-more-power-to-states-to-be-flexible-on-labour-laws-120092401255_1.html) (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>135</sup> Consequently, the 2014 World Bank Enterprise Survey, that surveyed over 9,000 firms across India, found that less than five percent of these firms found the labour laws to be an irritant. On this, read, Kartik Akhileswaran, Samia Mehraj and Ayushmaan Singh, “Why labour law dilution may not bring in fresh investments”, *Livemint*, 29 June 2020 - <https://www.livemint.com/companies/news/why-labour-law-dilutions-may-not-bring-in-fresh-investments-11593418004257.html> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>136</sup> Read, Basant Kumar Mohanty, “Centre to apply Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act after 42 years”, *The Telegraph India*, 26 June 2021 - <https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/centre-to-implement-inter-state-migrant-workmen-act-after-42-years/cid/1823899> (accessed on 5 August 2021).

<sup>137</sup> The figure is quoted from a response to a Right to Information Act request. The report on the response can be read here, Priscilla Jebraj, “Less than 34,000 inter-State migrant workers in 2019-20, says government”, *The Hindu*, 15 September 2020 - <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/less-than-34000-inter-state-migrant-workers-in-2019-20-says-government/article32611360.ece> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>138</sup> On this, refer, Kingshuk Sarkar, “Blame this archaic 1979 law for Modi govt’s lack of data on migrants’ deaths”, *The Print*, 23 September 2020 - <https://theprint.in/opinion/blame-this-archaic-1979-law-for-modi-govts-lack-of-data-on-migrants-deaths/508536/> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>139</sup> Piya Srinivasan, “Migrant Workers and the Pandemic: A Socio-Legal Enquiry into the Interstate Migrant Workmen Act, 1979”, *The Invisible Migrant Workers: In Life, In Death*, (Kolkata, Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, December 2020) 21 - <http://www.mcrg.ac.in/PP113.pdf> (accessed on 21 August 2021).

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<sup>140</sup> Even as the original plan of the Union Government was to see to the implementation of rules under Labour Codes by April this year, media reports now tell us that the delay will be further beyond October. On this, refer, Surya Sarathi Ray, “Labour code rollout to be delayed further beyond October 1 deadline”, *Financial Express*, 13 August 2021 - <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/labour-code-rollout-to-be-delayed-further-beyond-october-1-deadline/2309682/> (accessed on 13 August 2021).

<sup>141</sup> On this, read, Namrata, “How Labour Codes act against migrant workers”, *The Indian Express*, 3 August 2021 - <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/how-labour-codes-act-against-migrant-workers-7436551/> (accessed on 3 August 2021).

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> For example, see, Ronak Chhabra, “Pitching for ‘Self-Assessment’ of Welfare Cess, Draft Labour Rules to Hurt Construction Workers”, *Newsclick*, 16 November 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/pitching-self-assessment-welfare-cess-draft-labour-rules-hurt-construction-workers> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>144</sup> On this, refer to, KR Shyam Sundar, “Migrant Workers: Who Will Penalise Errant Law Enforcers?”, *Newsclick*, 7 October 2020 - <https://www.newsclick.in/migrant-workers-who-penalise-errant-law-enforcers> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>145</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Workers’ Groups Welcome e-SHRAM Portal, but also Point Out Issues”, *Newsclick*, 27 August 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/workers-groups-welcome-e-SHRAM-portal-also-point-out-issues> (accessed on 27 August 2021).

<sup>146</sup> For more on this, refer to a PRS Legislative Research’s brief on Ordinances and Notifications providing relaxations of labour laws that were issued by the numerous State Governments soon after the nationwide lockdown was announced last year. It can be accessed from here - [https://prsindia.org/bills/states/state-brief-relaxation-of-labour-laws#\\_edn19](https://prsindia.org/bills/states/state-brief-relaxation-of-labour-laws#_edn19) (accessed on 7 August 2021).

<sup>147</sup> Yogima Seth Sharma, “15 states seek approval for changes in three labour laws from Centre”, *The Economic Times*, 16 September 2020 - <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/policy/15-states-seek-approval-for-changes-in-three-labour-laws-from-centre/articleshow/78144216.cms?from=mdr> (accessed on 7 August 2021).

<sup>148</sup> Refer to, Anya Bharat Ram, “Relaxation of labour laws across states”, *PRS Legislative Research*, 12 May 2020 - <https://prsindia.org/theprsblog/relaxation-of-labour-laws-across-states> (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>149</sup> On this, refer to the speech made by Prime Minister Narendra Modi in his address to the nation on 12 May 2020 in which he launched the ‘Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyan’. The speech can be accessed from here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseDetail.aspx?PRID=1623418> (accessed on 21 August 2021); note that, in his speech, soon after making a mention about how the Covid-19 has “destroyed the world”, PM Modi said: “The state of the world today teaches us that a (AtmaNirbhar Bharat) “Self-reliant India” is the only path .It is said in our scriptures - *EshabPanthab* That is - self-sufficient India.”

<sup>150</sup> Press Trust of India, “Aatmanirbhar mission to make India hub of manufacturing, services: Thakur”, *Business Standard*, 15 October 2020 - [https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/aatmanirbhar-mission-to-make-india-hub-of-manufacturing-services-thakur-120101501577\\_1.html](https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/aatmanirbhar-mission-to-make-india-hub-of-manufacturing-services-thakur-120101501577_1.html) (accessed on 6 August 2021).

<sup>151</sup> For example, read, Harsh Vardhan Tripathy, “Why The Modi Government Is Pushing The Idea of Atmanirbhar Bharat”, *Madras Courier*, 9 July 2020 - <https://madrascourier.com/opinion/why-the-modi-government-is-pushing-the-idea-of-atmanirbhar-bharat/> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>152</sup> For full information on what the Atma Nirbhar Bharat mission had contained, refer to this press statement by the Union Ministry of Finance here - <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1624536> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

<sup>153</sup> Ronak Chhabra, “Budget 2021: Disinvestment Push Irks Govt Employees; Protests to Intensify”, *Newsclick*, 2 February 2021 - <https://www.newsclick.in/budget-2021-disinvestment-push-irks-govt-employees-protests-intensify> (accessed on 10 August 2021).

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- <sup>168</sup> “This primitive accumulation plays in Political Economy about the same part as original sin in theology. Adam bit the apple, and thereupon sin fell on the human race. Its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past. In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous

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living. The legend of theological original sin tells us certainly how man came to be condemned to eat his bread in the sweat of his brow; but the history of economic original sin reveals to us that there are people to whom this is by no means essential,” he writes in, Karl Marx, “Chapter 26: The Secret of Primitive Accumulation”, in *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I*, 1887 - <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch26.htm> (accessed on 13 August 2021).

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