

Where did all these people suddenly come from?

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Introduction

1.

An imaginary video call between ladies and gentlemen of Mumbai's Malabar Hill and Delhi's Golf Links

Golf Links resident: Hi darlings. Saw those dreadful pictures of migrants who haven't eaten for days? If they get infected, we 'll really have a pandemic. Where did all these people suddenly come from?

Malabar Hill resident: We have got corona patients even in our building, can you imagine? Not just in the slums.

(Sagarika Ghose in third edit in TOI on 20 April. 2020)

2. Amid coronavirus lockdown, over 900 stranded pilgrims from South India sent home from Varanasi by buses ---Free Press Journal, 15 April, 2020

3. 1800 people stranded in Uttarakhand to return to Gujrat in 28 buses---India Today, 28 March

4. U.P. government sends 250 buses to Rajasthan's Kota to bring back 7500 students---Live Mint, 17 April, 2020

These are representative of the responses evinced by the states and mainstream media to COVID-19 inspired lock down throughout the country, one cannot fail to notice the common characteristics that have surfaced. There is a pronounced class bias in their attitude captured in the news and views regarding COVID-19. The migrants, who were there all-through their works in unorganised sectors and service sectors, yet had an invisible existence, have all of a sudden become visible. But this sudden visibility is laced with a danger of spreading the virus, and thus presented the migrants as outsiders, like external agents who are threatening to disturb the ecosystem of health in the society.

While the society is thus confronting the migrants as 'threats' and impose on them quarantine, they have different prescription for people who are 'us'. For 'us', the government can send fleet of buses hundreds and thousand miles away to bring them back home. The cruder manifestation of this inherent bias against the migrant workers becomes evident when the police do not hesitate to use brutal force to keep them in quarantine even though their plea for food goes overlooked.

The government's announcement to feed 80 crore of people for the next three months free of cost with extra 5 Kg rice/wheat and 1Kg pulses a month per person enrolled in the public distribution system (PDS) has been based on a flawed calculation. As Jean Dreze and Rittika Khara pointed out that more than 100 million people are excluded from the PDS as the

central government insists on 2011 census data to calculate state-wise coverage under National Food Security Act (NFSA).(1)

The migrant workers form a large chunk of this 100 million people, who are suffering from endemic hunger because they have been kept out of the PDS. After establishing contact with several migrant workers who have been forced to remain confined in their temporary shelters in the states away from home, it was found that most of them are suffering from acute shortage of food and cash, and looking forward to an uncertain future with no succour coming their way from the State. Even if some of them have got ration cards, that are registered in their home state, thus, they are deprived of the Centre's free ration in their hour of crisis. Some of the civil society organisations in Bengal, after receiving distress calls from these people have arranged for some dry ration for these people, but that was not enough.

Research proposal:

From the examples cited at the beginning and many such instances, one could see that the sudden appearance of the Migrant workers in the centre stage took the mainstream media by surprise. After overcoming their initial feeling of shock and dismay, the media and the society started a campaign for their containment. At the same time, the industry was forced to admit that the reverse migration has also caused them suffer a lot, as the workers were not there at their work place even in essential services. This paper will try to seek answer to the preconceived notion of the society that the Migrants are, though needed very much for the economy, yet they are considered to be alien. Of course, it has to be kept in mind that the question 'Who is a Migrant?' should be taken in its exclusionary meaning, i.e. to say, the white-collar migrant workers are not the subject of study here. The poor, semi-skilled or unskilled workers, who fall prey to the push and pull factors, and lead a precarious life even in their new status as migrant worker, are the subject of this study.

To seek explanations for that, efforts will be given to examining of media reports during the time of the COVID-19 epidemic and interviews would be conducted of migrant workers, representatives of host state governments, administration of the state of origin and civil society people. This paper will try to seek answer to the question as to why and how the society continues to keep the migrants in the margin? Keeping in mind about the time constraint and other factors, this study will be restricted to West Bengal's out-migration, with special emphasis on Malda, Murshidabad, Birbhum and Nadia districts. To gather data and interact with the migrant workers and other people, field visits are to be made as and when the situation is back to normal.

Lack of detailed data about the Migrants

While recording the experience of the migrant workers during the lock down period, it was also found that there is no state wise out-migration data available (West Bengal had decided to prepare this data for some of the districts in 2019, but nothing was heard thereafter.). Absence of data creates problem as to how to go for helping the migrant workers in time of crisis. Some of the state governments have relied on the civil society people to start prepare such database and initiate action based upon that. For want of data base, the West Bengal

government has initiated a scheme to help the migrant workers with one-time cash transfer, but to avail that the migrants themselves need to apply first.

Although, West Bengal has 10.33 million migrants (2) in the state and a huge number of people have migrated out of the state to work and earn their livelihood in other states, there is no proper record of these people with the state administration. In 2019, after an accident took the lives of 5 Bengali migrant workers in Benaras, UP, the state government had asked the district administrations to prepare a data base of all those migrant workers in their respective districts. But nothing happened to that end and there is no data base of out migration from the state. Though, it is a public knowledge that Malda, Murshidabad, Nadia and Birbhum are among such districts where the rate of out-migration is very high.

Kerala government's response:

Kerala is exceptional in their approach to grapple with the coronavirus attack and the state administration has started generating data on the migrant workers (for them, guest workers) working there.

A response from Kerala's Kunnur district is noteworthy. Shri Harris, Assistant Collector, Kannur has responded in writing to queries made by this author saying that:

“There are 38095 guest workers in Kannur district, and those who need support from district administration are 19167. Rest of the people are being provided with essential supplies by their employers. Local bodies are ensuring this and keeping an eye if any complain arises.

Dedicated helplines are set up in our district control room for assistance. Panchayats are running two shelter homes, and District Administration has identified spaces in case there is requirement to run more such homes.

30 Mobile Teams, each headed by a Deputy Tahsildar are there to inspect guest worker camps and to ensure availability of supplies and cleanliness. Each team has volunteers who are proficient in Hindi and Bengali to communicate effectively with our guests. Medical teams have been conducting regular Medical screening camps in different localities. A dedicated Mobile Health Team has also been constituted to cover all guest workers. Along with this, regular IEC campaigns are being run by District administration and various NGOs.

Food is provided through.

1. Kannur Thali (in Corporation limits)
2. Community kitchen (in Municipalities and Panchayats)
2. Raw material kits such as Atta or rice, vegetables, oil etc.

They are also being provided with Milk packets from Milma. TV sets are being distributed to provide means of entertainment while going through this difficult time in lock-down.

89 community kitchens are working in Kannur district. Guest workers are provided cooked food in community kitchen, which is working in all the local bodies. In most areas, without any charge.

Our guests prefer to receive raw material and cook food themselves. Hence state has provided food kits to families with Atta/rice, onion, potato, cooking oil and other ingredients. As honorable CM has directed, all care possible is being extended to our guest labourers.” (3)

Those Migrants living outside government shelters/camps in Kerala:

In recent years, Kerala has become a favourite destination for migrant workers from West Bengal. The wages are better in comparison to that of their home state, a mason gets minimum Rs.750 per day and the helper gets Rs.470. According to Majammel Haq and Barun Sarkar, 16 of them had come to work there and now got stranded in Kasaragod district in Kerala. There are nine from Murshidabad and rest are from South Dinajpur's Tapan area. They were engaged in construction of a new school building and staying at the site. After the lock down, they got some help from the school authorities in terms of ration. Now that has stopped, but they still get running water from the old school building. Now, they are procuring ration from nearby shops (mostly, rice, dal, Atta and potatoes) and the bill is footed by the construction company which will be adjusted against their wages. The lock down was imposed before their three weeks cycle of wage payment came in. So, they are now almost penniless and since most of them joined work only a few weeks back, they might find it difficult to buy train ticket for homebound journey after adjusting all these expenses incurred sitting idle. Yet, Mojammel (21) states, his family was insistent that he should return home at the first opportunity. Barun Sarkar is relatively seasoned worker and this is not his first trip to Kerala. But he has not got wages for last two months, as was the standard practise with many a contractor. Some workers take minimum money for their food and sundry expenses and rest of the wages get accumulated with the contractor. When they take leave to go home or need to send money to their home, they take the payment from the contractor. Now, the lock down has upset their calculations and they are looking at uncertain future.

Experience of Migrants in other states

Ironically, unlike Kerala, other host states did not show much empathy to the distressed migrant workers. Maharashtra, a state which has remained a favourite destination of migrant workers for ages, shows callous disregard for the migrants in the wake of the Corona outbreak. Amidst Corona scare (the number of infected cases in Maharashtra is highest so far) the state government booked 12 long-distance special trains and packed these with migrant workers and sent them off to eastern and northern states like West Bengal, Bihar and UP. Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, correctly pointed out that the Maharashtra government did not bother to conduct minimum health screening of those workers before pushing them into those trains. It is a different matter that when two of those trains arrived at Howrah station with a few thousand of migrant workers from Pune and Mumbai, the state administration promptly sent these people by

chartered buses to their home districts like Malda, Murshidabad, Birbhum and other places but no health check-ups were done at Howrah either. The recent incident at Bandra, Mumbai was also indicative of the lack of care offered by the state administration to the stranded migrant workers there.

Sagram Tudu is from Malda's Gajol area. Few months back, he came to Bengaluru with a team of masons and helpers to work in a massive construction project and is now stuck in Bengaluru's Kangeri area. The labour supplier Sahadeb Biswas, who brought them, is also from Gajol. The project, a 24-story commercial complex has just begun, only two floors have been constructed so far and it would take another 4-5 years to complete. The sudden Lock Down forced them to abandon work and remain in the temporary quarters erected by the construction company there. There are around 200 workers who are residing there in temporary quarters, made of tin roof and tin walls. Sagram Tudu reveals that at least four persons are sharing one room. Toilets are there, but much fewer than the requirement. Initially, they had to buy ration from the market and arrange for cooking in their common kitchen. Now, only a few days back the contractor arranged for their ration, the cost of which will be adjusted against their payment in future. Sagram Tudu, Haren Murmu, Samrat Biswas and other workers from Malda are living as a group there. The company's staffs are regularly coming at the construction site and taking a measure of their body temperature. They are getting meals two times, and have been asked to remain in their rooms. But they are worried. They are worried because they don't know how long they would have to be confined in that condition. Whatever limited money they had, they have spent on buying essential ration and now entirely depending on the credit line offered by the contractor. Like millions of migrant workers spread over the country, they were not prepared for the sudden lock down. Once the lock down was put in place, they wanted to return to their home district Malda. But they did not have enough money to make the journey (they explained that labour -supplier Sahadeb Biswas would make the payment every two-three month after deducting the cost of ration and other sundry expenses that were borne by him in the interim period. But, because of lock down he also did not get his bills cleared by the project contractor's office, and consequently the workers' wages were not forthcoming. Now, they are worried because they don't know if they would be able to retain their job, whether their dues would be cleared by the company, and how long the contractor would continue with the credit line. Moreover, news coming from home district makes them anxious further.

Long March

Majir Sheikh (44) and 70 other workers started off from Bihar's Aurangabad on 26 March and within minutes they were joined by some 80 more people. The immediate provocation was the brutal treatment by Aurangabad police. "After lock down was put in place, we used to be given a small window of one hour to make the purchase of the essentials. But with a long queue in front of ration shops it was not easy to do the shopping and return home within an hour. The police would pounce upon us and beat us, take away the bags and

throw the ration away. So, we thought it would be better to return home in Bengal,” says Majir Sheikh.

The sheer desperation made them to take up the journey on foot, without knowing that million other migrant workers were also on the roads across the country in desperate bid to reach their home and clogging the highways in the process. The workers, who had a very bad experience at the hands of the Aurangabad police, were in for a surprise later when after walking 25 kms along G T Road they were stopped by some policemen in the evening. “They offered us Khichuri and Achaar and asked us to rest a while before embarking on the onward journey. At midnight we resumed our walk. By that time, we were 500 people, many of them came from Sasaram, Bhabua, even Benaras in UP, and all of us walked towards Bengal border,” narrated Majir. On their way many more joined them and finally after hitchhiking some part of the journey by trucks around 500 people reached Chirkunda on G T Road, the Jharkhand-West Bengal border post in the morning. They took two days and two nights to cover the 300 km distance from Aurangabad to Chirkunda. By that time all inter-state traffic was brought to a halt. The Jharkhand police welcomed them with cup of hot tea and biscuits, under the supervision of the SDPO there, their preliminary health check-ups were done and names recorded. Then they were marched little more than one km to Maithon and lodged in a local college building, where they are now served two hot meals (mostly Khichuri or rice and Daal) a day and some refreshments (bread and tea) in the morning. They were told to stay indoors till the lock down period is over. Though they could not enter Bengal, less alone reaching Murshidabad’s Raghunathganj where they came from, they are all praise for the Jharkhand police.

Supreme Court on Migrant Workers

But the Supreme Court’s latest position vis-a vis the migrants made a sad commentary on the judiciary. The bench of Chief Justice S A Bobde, Justice S K Bail and Deepak Gupta has observed that the migrant workers stranded in various states need not be paid cash as they were being fed free of cost by the government. The observation was made after the Government of India submitted a status report on the migrant workers to Supreme Court. In the report submitted by Solicitor General Tushar Mehta, it was claimed that the government has set up 22,567 shelter homes across the country and NGOs have added to that with another 3909 shelters bringing the total to 26,476, which together housed 10.3 lakh people. There are 17000 food camps where around 84 lakh people are fed daily. Also, over 15 lakh migrant workers are given shelter and food by employees and industries where they were employed. Responding to the petition filed by Prashant Bhusan on behalf of Harsh Mandar, the Supreme Court bench observed, since the workers are fed by the government the court do not see the need for giving any order making cash transfer to them. The court ignored the plea of the petitioner that the workers need the money for their family at home. What was overlooked in this observation is the fact that the government even by its own admission has covered only a tiny fraction of migrant workers affected by the lock down. The government has housed 10.3 lakh migrant workers, and 85 lakhs are fed in food camps. Even if we consider these two figures are not overlapping, and add another 15 lakh workers who are sheltered and fed by their employers, then the grand total comes to 110.3 lakhs or little over 11 million. According to 2011 census, there are 453 million migrants in India and in Maharashtra, a preferred destination of many, the migrants are 20.38% of the population

at 22.89 million. But it has to be admitted that not all migrant workers are living a precarious life, the IT workers in Bengaluru, Hyderabad and elsewhere, and a big number of migrants engaged in other white-collar jobs, are not in need of State's largesse. Still, as we look at the scenario, where migrant population in West Bengal is 10.33 million, Delhi is having 2.9 million, for Tamil Nadu it is 12.39 million, Karnataka 10.49 million and so on. (4) Even if it is considered that during the period 2011-20 the migrant population in these states did not grow because of the long period of economic recession and the steady rise of rate of unemployment in the country, and even if we consider that a good number of migrant workers slipped through the lock down to their home states, still it is extremely difficult to account for the huge gap between the census data and the number of migrants covered by the government. A huge number of migrant workers remain invisible.

From sustained Invisibility to Sudden Visibility

Though the migrant workers live an 'invisible' existence in normal time, the Corona induced lock down and consequent loss of employment made them visible as a large number of the migrant workers made a mad dash for their home. The reverse migration and 'social distancing' during the lock down made their existence visible, in two ways. First, the cities and towns felt the absence of service providers which keep their life going. The absence of huge number of workers in unorganised and organised sectors, even the absence of domestic helps, made the urban citizens wonder why their life is being affected suddenly by the sheer absence of some people. Next came the visual of hundreds of thousands of people walking miles on highways and trying to reach their far-off homes, some even perishing in the process. After the initial callous indifference shown by the union government, when the mainstream media and social media started showing keen interest in the plight of the hapless people, the government was forced to take some steps to neutralise the situation and announced that shelter and food would be arranged for them. Before that, a chief minister (of Telangana) threatened to issue 'shoot at sight' order to restrain them from coming on the highways in number. In some places, the police did resort to lathi charge on the migrant people.

From an ordinary police constable unleashing their canes on the hapless workers without any compunction to the Supreme Court bench that feels that mere feeding the workers two times a day is enough and they don't need to be paid cash, the underlying belief is the same—the migrants' existence is outside their compact society and like 'termites' they eat into the vitals of the system. The prevalent narrative is that because of the influx of immigrants, the employment opportunity of the native labour in host country or state is hampered. Abhijit Vinayak Banerjee and Esther Duflo in their book 'Good Economy for Hard Times' have busted the myth and pointed out that the facts are contrary to the belief. The migrants have become visible in the time of Corona pandemic. But their voice is not being heard, it is still muted. (End)

1. <https://qz.com/india/1839932/modis-coronavirus-relief-package-misses-100-million-indians/>
2. 2011 Census report, Emerging Pattern of Migration Streams in India: A State-level Analysis of the 2011 Census. Rabiul Ansary. Migration Letters, July 2018, Volume 15, No.3. www.migrationletters.com

3. This was conveyed to this author over email by Assistant Collector of Kunnur district, Kerala
4. 2011 Census report, Emerging Pattern of Migration Streams in India: A State-level Analysis of the 2011 Census. Rabiul Ansary. Migration Letters, July 2018, Volume 15, No.3. www.migrationletters.com