

## Report Proposal

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

The dominant trope of recent times has been labor. Historically, since the beginnings of the wage-labor economy, the specter of unbearable distress within this class [returns](#) with every recession and depression. The present-day downturn in the economy and the subsequent predominance of labor in the official and unofficial discourses is thus, no outlier, for the former marks the overwhelming return of the unemployed, the pauper, the starved – now reeling under the pressure of a ‘crisis’, conjecturally caused by a pestilence.

Today, in this context, varied attempts are being made by economists to characterize work and life under the contemporary capitalist imperatives. Notwithstanding the creditable endeavors 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 labor. Moreover, as the infectious cases ebb and the devastated economy stares at a possible restructuring to avert another supply breakdown, a critical account of living and making a living in the present times also tells about what the post-pandemic future portends for an individual worker.

As such, in India, there emerges already a widely accepted understanding over how the last 15 months, ever since the pandemic-triggered nationwide lockdown was announced in March last year, were experienced by the country’s workforce. One can easily notice, in these conceptualizations, the two dominant threads of argument that are not so independent of each other.

The first centers around the surging unemployment, worsened by the restrictions on mobility that had caused businesses to shut down their operations; the latter focuses on the proliferation of temporary and precarious employment.

We are told that even though with mobility restrictions getting eased, the labor markets [could not recover](#) all their losses – thereby, hinting towards a lasting impact of the pandemic. Accordingly, given the prevailing dejection in the labor force, what follows from this analysis is the demand to

create jobs. This is accompanied by pressing the Indian state to let the fiscal taps flow and increase government spending to achieve so – considering the weak private investment climate.

An absence in doing so, as the argument further advances, gives rise to conducive conditions to [further](#) the process of informalization, casualization, and dispossession. This push to precarity, as we are told again, is aided by the renewed thrust of the state to “codify” the labor laws and unabated eviction drives in the urban areas – both, under the shadow of the pandemic.

For all its credibility in disinterring the fine print of the latest economic reports, neither line of analysis, however, seems adequate in capturing the contemporary imagination of the struggle of labor against the conceptual segregations forced on it by the regime of capital. And there are reasons for it.

One, the emergent understanding of how the Indian labor experiences the pandemic tends to blame for the said hardships on the democratic governance under an ‘elected’ political regime, while arguably overlooking the traditional mediating role of the state in favor of markets.

Furthermore, it also sins of having a false ‘immediacy’ in what could, unfortunately, be viewed as an inevitable trajectory. For as Marx had [argued](#) in *Capital Vol 1*: “... it is capitalist accumulation itself that constantly produces, and produces indeed in direct relation of its own energy and extent, a relatively redundant working population, i.e. a population which is superfluous to capital’s average requirements for its own valorization, and is therefore a surplus population.”

With this theoretical understanding of the above mentioned opposing forces in mind, I hence propose, under the short term fellowship with Mahanirban Calcutta Research Group, to analyze the aspects of work and life in the post-COVID-19 pandemic times by reflecting upon the salience of primitive accumulation – as the economy restructures – that also corresponds to the rise in the reserve army of labor, a significant part of which is constituted by the migrating workforce.

## **Resources**

I shall use the resources – news items, reports, audio and video files, and Facebook posts – of the Living Archives available at the CRG website, along with additional material sourced from creditable organizations.

### **Timeline**

I hope to submit the 10000-word analytical report by August 31, 2021.