BORDERS OF AN EPIDEMIC
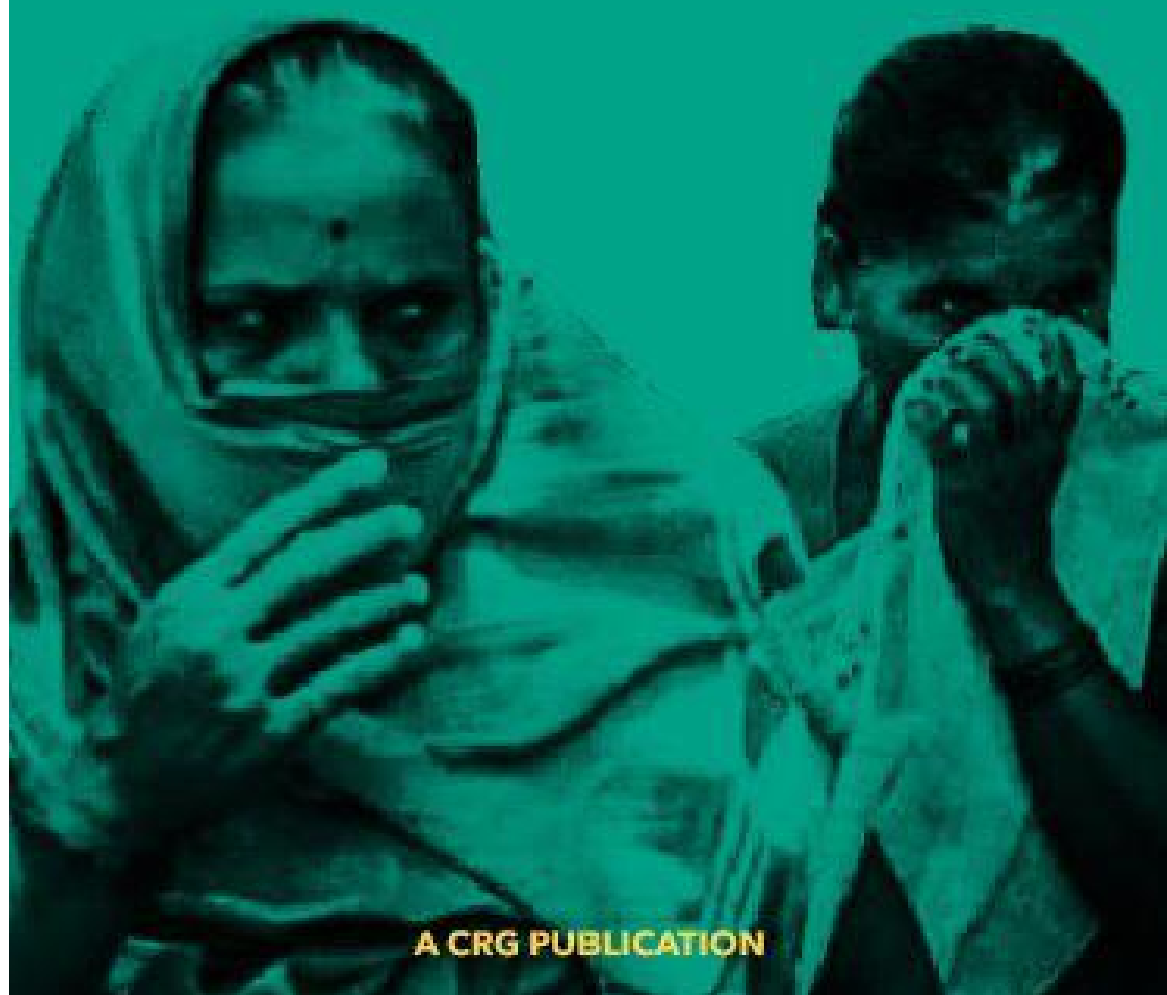## COVID-19 AND MIGRANT WORKERS

As migrant labourers from different parts of India trekked back hundreds of kilometres carrying their scanty belongings and dragging their hungry and thirsty children in the scorching heat of the plains of India to reach home in central or eastern parts of the country after the sudden announcement by the government of a complete lockdown of the country amid the spectre of Corona virus, questions were raised as to whether this ordeal could have been avoided through adequate arrangements of food and safe shelter for the workers at the places of their stay in the host cities and places of work. The employers of the migrant workers closed shop. The workers were also driven out of their rented shelters on the ground that they would not be able to pay the rent. Their paltry savings also were to dwindle soon. The fear of hunger forced the workers to opt for unimaginable journeys of hundreds of kilometres as all modes of transport had been suddenly closed down. Their choice was between the devil and the deep sea, between starvation and pandemic. India had not witnessed anything like this mass migration across the plains of the country without food or a night's place of stay for sleep since the days of the Partition of the subcontinent.

Yet while scenes of migrant workers walking in long processions caught the cameras of the journalists, it still requires to be asked: What lay behind these long marches? How do caste, race, gender, and other fault lines operate in governmental strategies to cope with a virus epidemic? If the fight against an epidemic has been compared with a war, what are the forces of power at play in this war against the pandemic? What indeed explains the sudden visibility of the migrant workers in the time of a public health crisis?

India is in a complete lock down mode. This online publication by the Calcutta Research Group is based on contemporary reflections by journalists, social scientists and social activists, legal practitioners, and thinkers, which highlight the ethical and political implications of the epidemic in India – particularly for India's migrant workers. This book is written as the crisis unfolds with no end in sight. It is a tract of the time.

BORDERS OF AN EPIDEMIC
COVID-19 AND MIGRANT WORKERS

Edited by
RANABIR SAMADDAR

Calcutta Research Group
Kolkata

Contents

Acknowledgements

This is a hurriedly prepared collection of part reflections, part analyses, and part reportages as the Covid-19 pandemic rages on. I am grateful to the contributors who responded to an impossibly short notice of one week and generously gave their time to write out these pieces. In the process of initial discussions with the contributors on the possible themes of this collection, the plan behind preparing the collection became clearer. Ideas about the implications of the pandemic for world economy and the possibilities of global restructuring of power, the cutting lines of race, caste, and gender in the landscape of gender, the new ethical issues of life in a post Covid-19 world, and above all the place of labour, particularly migrant labour, in what is called the war against the virus became clearer.

I am equally grateful to the Calcutta Research Group (CRG) members who went through the pieces and gave me editorial advice – again literally completing the task in two three days. They are all veterans of this research collective. Because of them CRG is what it is. To Ria De I am grateful for the cover design. Finally, my thanks go to Kusumika Ghosh, Utsa Sarmin, and Samaresh Guchhait who helped me in preparing the copy for this online publication. We got enthusiastic responses from others also. These contributions will come in duly. They will be published in CRG research paper series, *Policies and Practices.*

I request the readers to ignore the imbalances in this volume, and its rough and ready nature. These reflections had to be readied within a total of two weeks – from the genesis of the plan to the publication of the book all made under lock down condition of the city. The writers from other cities also wrote in similar situation. The collection is a response to the time. Therefore it is not surprising that the notion of time dominates these reflections. The time of Corona virus, the time after, the time before – in this way the shadow of the time in which the contributors have written these pieces looms heavily on these. The immediacy of pieces is evident. However at the same time the sense of a longer time is also there. I wish the collection had this double

imprint of the time more clearly. After all, is not an epidemic like a great war carrying the two marches of time?

The reflections revolve around four themes: implications in terms of global economy and as its logistical aspect, labour particularly migrant labour, care and care economy, and finally race, caste, and gender as fault lines of protection in the time of an epidemic.

There are two reflections on the first theme. Chapter one by Ravi Anand Palat on "Corona virus and the World-Economy" discusses crisply the implications of the pandemic for global capitalist economy irremediably weakened by the US political and economic system. Yet as he points out, the outcome is not clear. Will there be a new system, a new economy? Chapter two by Ritajyoti Bandopadhyay, "Migrant Labour, Informal Economy, and Logistics Sector in a Covid-19 World" carries further the discussion on economy, and taking the instance of the urban region of Chandigarh-Mohali argues that the issue of informal labour sits at the heart of a logistical reorientation of economy, whose future is now uncertain in the wake of the pandemic. Therefore it is no wonder that with the sudden announcement of a lock down of the country labour vanished overnight.

The following five chapters reflect on the second theme. They focus on migrant labour. Chapter three by Badri Narayan Tiwari, "The Body in Surveillance: What to Do with the Migrants in the Corona Lock Down" discusses the ambivalence of the prevailing political and the economic order towards the migrant worker's body, which is valorised when it is found to be a source of foreign exchange earnings and/or stable income in India's poorer households, but becomes a concern when it is thought to be a carrier of a disease, even though the body of the comparatively affluent frequent flyers may be the primary carrier of the disease. As Badri Narayan Tiwari asks: What to do with the body except keeping it under surveillance? Chapter four by Utsa Sarmin on "Hunger, Humiliation, and Death: Perils of Migrant Workers in the Time of COVID-19" takes forward the discussion on migrant labour and shows that India's efforts to fight the virus have brought further perils to the lives of hundreds and thousands of migrant workers in the form of hunger, humiliation, and in some cases even death. Chapter five by Manish K Jha & Ajeet Kumar Pankaj, "Insecurity and Fear Travel as Labour Travels in the Wake of the Pandemic" maintains the focus on the conditions of migrant labour and discusses how insecurity and fear accompany the labour on move haunted by loss of jobs and the despair to reach homes hundreds of kilometres away. Chapter six by Anamika Priyadarshini and Sonamani Chaudhury, "The Return of Bihari Migrants after the COVID-19 Lockdown" is a fascinating study of the returnee labour in Bihar. The authors show how fear, anxiety, and insecurity, indeed every aspect of human life, mark the issue of return of the migrants to their villages and towns. The theme of return features also chapter seven, "The Sudden Visibility of Returnee Labour", written by Rajat Roy. Roy shows how the return of thousands of workers to their places of origin amidst conditions of hunger and despair made them visible. Their visibility has raised questions to which policies built around a single-minded focus on lock down have no answer.

Chapters eight and nine reflect on the theme of care and care economy. Chapter eight by Madhurilata Basu and Sibaji pratim Basu while offering, "Glimpses into the Life in the Time of Corona", introduces the theme of care economy whose significance becomes clearer with each passing day of the pandemic. They link the issue of care with the general theme of labour in the time of Corona virus. Chapter nine by Ambar Kumar Ghosh and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury, "Migrant Workers and the Ethics of Care in the Time of COVID-19" reflects on any possible meaning of care during an epidemic, when migrants become the first casualty of neglect and are relegated to irrelevance. They also wonder if the idea of citizenship has any meaning left at that time.

The last three entries deal with the fault lines of protection, namely, race, caste, and gender. Chapter ten by Ishita Dey on "Social Distancing, 'Touch-Me-Not' and the Migrant Worker" discusses the policy and the practice of social distancing as a measure against the spread of virus. Dey argues that perceived as a threat to public health, arousing the fear of spreading contamination, migrant bodies now face new challenges of ostracization and social stigma as new surveillance mechanisms are enforced. The gaze is on the "migrant's body" – the domestic worker, the vegetable vendor, the garbage collector, the care giver, and other service providers inherent to the life of the city. They stand at the risk of being contaminated as they are compelled to "risk", and stay in "touch" amidst lockdown. "Not touching" is thus an ambivalent metaphor in the lives of many migrant workers. They have to touch, they are not touched. Their lives show how "touch" has been normalised in the history of migrant labour in India. Through invisible measures of "touch" the city has always failed the migrant and Covid-19 has been no different. Chapter eleven by Samata Biswas, titled, "Bringing the Border Home: Indian Partition 2020" continues the reflection on the migrant body, which carries along with the boundaries of caste and other ascriptions. She does this by relating today's situation to the ways in which the migrant bodies were visualized in the Great Partition of 1947. She says that while we are told that Covid-19 is a great equalizer and can attack everyone irrespective of class, caste, gender, age, ability, language, religion, and region, the Covid-19 scenario is witnessing the coming together of every fault line of society. Not for nothing the biggest weapon to fight this virus is called social distancing. As a society we have distanced ourselves from those that have built our cities, those that grow our food and those that deliver them, those that clean our roads and offices and those who care for our elderly, and our children. Chapter twelve written by Paula Banerjee, "Nouvelle Corona Virus and Gender Transgressions", contests the impression given by the international media that Covid-19 pandemic is transgressive as it affects prince and pauper alike. Banerjee shows how race and gender work as crucial factors in the pattern of morbidity in the current pandemic. She says, women, particularly from the minority communities may find their vulnerability increasing, and with increased women's insecurity and morbidity society as a whole becomes more insecure. "Therefore" in her words, "what was

considered as transgressive actuality goes on to further entrench gender related vulnerabilities".

The epilogue returns to the theme - repeatedly surfacing in this book - of knowability and unknowability of migrant labour in economy and in a crisis like this. Sabir Ahamed reflects on the lack of knowledge about migrant labour in India and refers to the available data in "Counting and Accounting for Those on the Long Walk Back Home".

We end the volume with a report, which points out as an instance of what one state in India can learn from another state in protecting migrant labour.

The four themes mentioned above tell us of the borders of an epidemic – an event that creates and recreates boundaries. The introduction points to these borders while tying these four themes and expanding on them.

Introduction

Borders of an Epidemic

By

Ranabir Samaddar

War, Pestilence, and Revision of an International Order

War revises international order. Colonial wars changed political orders in many parts of the world, set up new borders and boundaries, and created a division of the world and in some cases of continents. Many of these divisions last still today. The First World War brought in revolutions, created a different political and economic system, and the following war, the Second World War, again effected massive revisions on a global scale. But we rarely notice how much pestilence and massive outbreak of a disease changes the global order.

Some say that plague brought down the Roman Empire. The Black Death bacterium caused plague from the sixth to eighth century AD, and killed more than 100 million people. Some have linked plague to one of the first known examples of biological warfare when the Mongols catapulted plague victims into cities. Before Rome we know also of the plague in Athens in the second year of the Peloponnesian war. It continued for four years (430-426 BC), and claimed one hundred thousand lives including those of Xanthippus and Pericles. But, more importantly Thucydides who survived the war and gave detailed description of the epidemic, wrote how fear and self interest to which people submitted, guided not just their actions, but affected the fate of the nation as well. Thucydides talks of the practical and moral weaknesses which had disastrous impact. Athens lost the war which continued for a long period, but, as historians noted, it led to the decline of the Athenian democracy.

The plague had serious effects on the society. It produced disrespect of laws and religious beliefs. In response laws became stricter. Non-citizens

claiming to be Athenians were punished heavily.[1] Following the ancient age, there were several plague outbreaks with epoch-changing consequences. We may mention only one instance: The Black Death in England in 1348 led to the beginning of the end of "villein" system in England as one third of the villages was wiped out. This enabled the members of the group of partially free persons under the feudal system, who were serfs with respect to their lord but had the rights and privileges of freemen with respect to others, to leave the lands of the landlords and begin the journey towards tenantry. Coming to the modern time, another plague outbreak struck the world in the 19th century, beginning in China in the mid-1800s and spreading to Africa, the Americas, Australia, Europe and other parts of Asia.

The Spanish invasion of Mexico and other countries of Central and South America not only brought new diseases in the world, it also changed forever the political history of the Americas. Colonial invasion of Mexico transformed the social and physical environment of the land, and the division of the country into governable units in the form of congregations that focused on agricultural production and conversion to Christianity – both of which brought people in much closer contact to one another, also with animals, whether rats, or chickens, pigs, or cattle. Animals imported from the Old World were potentially disease vectors for illnesses of the New World. We also know of the repeated outbreaks of pestilence in India and China as late as 1918-19 in the form of Spanish Flu that physiologically took back the countries' populations decades and perhaps centuries. Droughts also increased the presence of rats and mice in the New World. These animals probably transported the viruses capable of causing hemorrhagic fevers. The Aztecs and other indigenous groups affected by the outbreak were potentially put at a disadvantage given their lack of exposure of these new diseases. In short, if wars have changed borders, or more correctly, if by changing borders wars have changed the world, so is true of a pandemic.

The present liberal order, still claiming to be a world order, now faces a pandemic in the form of Covid-19, the disease caused by the new Corona virus. In the modern age probably for the first time the international order, already plagued by rising nationalism and economic power of non-Western countries, now faces an epidemic.

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[1] Some say that works like Albert Camus' *The Plague* (1948), which is again popular among those who want to know better the destiny of society reeling under the impact of the novel Corona virus reads and at times mimicks Thucydides. Camus' *The Plague* ends with these words, "And, indeed, as he listened to the cries of joy rising from the town, Rieux remembered that such joy is always imperilled. He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city." - https://antilogicalism.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/the-plague.pdf (accessed on 10 April 2020)

The European Union, subjected to Euro-zone debt and migration crises with the surrounding regions collapsing caught in massive civil wars and conflicts, now face Covid-19. Everyone, every country is looking inward to protect itself. The redrawing of boundaries of wealth, territory, resources, and knowledge in order to protect, insulate, abandon, and make use of the post-recovery age mark our time. Never before were epidemic, control measures, and geopolitics so close to each other.

Yet, the sirens of closure of the liberal world were calling for some time. Denial and dithering combined with pseudo-Darwinian theories of herd immunity to escape the closure – closure meaning literally closure of families, neighbourhoods, schools, cities, provinces, states, modes of transportation, and closure of the system. Borders are closed. These closing lines are drawing inwards like concentric circles to the extent that the migrant labour returning home after closure of work is unwelcome, s/he is a migrant to his/her own home – simply unwelcome.

Perhaps this is the ultimate vindication of the closure agenda championed by xenophobic politics and ideology that went on through the two long centuries of liberal rule under the garb of trade protectionism, regional integration, WTO, barbed wire, closure of walls, ports, and drawbridges to stop the migrants. Isolation camps and segregation centres resemble and remind people of detention centres. The liberals must face the fact borne out by the epidemic that the modes of fighting the epidemic are uncomfortably similar to repressive apparatuses. Clearly this will be a point of no return for WTO, EU, and Free Trade Zones- led globalisation and interdependence on the basis of liberal norms.[2] The unrestricted operation of value chains, global logistical freedom, and the imperial infrastructural design with a hub and spoke network may become big questions marks in the post-crisis order. The post-crisis world will be chaotic, and that chaotic world will not be suitable for a design in which nodes are separated by distances and essential functions are centralised in large hubs. The reason is that this design runs the risk of a large hub triggering a global threat like the present one cascading and threatening entire system. The global economy will shake if a single major hub (perhaps China or say Wuhan or New York or London) releases a threat with a capacity of bringing the global economy to a halt. The virus exposes the vulnerabilities and fragilities of the present system which cannot isolate the shocks as the present global confrontation with Covid-19 shows.

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[2] One commentator, Ludger Hagedom, presciently observed, "Although liberal democracies will hopefully prove capable of mastering the Corona pandemic, this does not mean that everything will, or should, remain unchanged. Perhaps this crisis entails a clear message for our highly individualized societies, namely that the mere pursuit of one's self-interest is not enough." In "Corona and Resurgence of Communitarian Ideas", *IWM Post*, 124, Weekly Focus – https://www.iwm.at/closedbutacitve/weekly-focus/kommunitarismus/corona-and-resurgence-of-communitarian-ideas/ (accessed on 10 April 2020)

We were told that the steps China took to contain the disease were autocratic. The liberal world for two months drew a line between the democratic zone and the illiberal system of China and Russia. They ignored, scoffed at the measures taken in China, abjured the path of science, and went back to militarist conspiracy theories. Then as the disease reached the liberal shores, "democratic closure" began. But it was late. The West proved too clever by half. The "democratic closure" agenda suspiciously looks like a shield, which takes cue from the border wall set up by successive US Administrations, the European cordon at the Greek-Turkish border, and the policing of waters in the Mediterranean Sea or the Indian Ocean. In many ways the situation is a throwback to the colonial time. Even European cooperation in the framework of EU (European Union) is of no avail in this critical situation. Its governance structure was of no use to a debt-ridden Greece. It is of no use now to a virus-hit Italy and Spain. At times Germany alone carries the burden of the union. Indeed when multilateralism at the global level was needed more than ever, nations shrank within. Money will be pulled out by governments only to prepare rescue packages for business enterprises, banks, and plan flexible monetary policies – all, apparently, to protect respective citizens.

There is no doubt that the old pattern of hegemony will lose its last bit of legitimacy. The ruler cannot protect its citizens against economic catastrophe, brutal forces of globalisation, and now the force of a disease – what legitimacy then remains? With welfare system, public health provisions, disease monitoring methods, public scientific research – every bit of public life being subjected to privatisation, the winner will be the one who can demonstrate better capacity to reorganise the society in face a disaster like the present one, display technological depth, demonstrate new logistical thinking, resolve in marshalling the resources, and skill and plan to go back to a "normal" life (even though it will be a "new normal") after the war against the virus will be over. This indeed is a moment of war with the meeting of three crises: the much talked about ecological crisis, a crisis of global capitalist order, and the biological crisis as evident in the current global pandemic of Covid-19. The three crises have met and the combined effects will be devastating for the present order. Altogether it is a comprehensive global crisis, because none of the three components is a short-term phenomenon. The contraction in economic activity is the one that is scaring the order most. Major Powers do not know whether to give priority to economy or to human life.

In a way the most invisible border springing up is between states that have power over life of their inhabitants and those with only power to delay death. As we know, medical doctors in Wuhan, China, first reported the existence of an unspecified virus in late December 2019. In almost less than a month China framed its strategy to save its citizens. On 23 January 2020 China placed the city of Wuhan with 11 million people under mandatory quarantine along with travel restrictions for other cities in the Hubei province accounting for a total of 57 million people. It re-organised its society, marshalled its resources, brought in a nationwide system of restrictions and

response, overnight increased its capacity of medical equipment and treatment, set up new dedicated hospitals, and deployed hundreds of frontline medical and administrative staff as parts of a strategy. It was and remains for China a war to defend the society and defend life. Italy declared a state of emergency eight days later on January 31; however it imposed a national quarantine more than a month later, and still dithered on its strategy. It could only delay death. In United States and United Kingdom, the governments vacillated till the last. On 11 March a travel ban was put into place by the US administration for travellers from Europe – those who were not US citizens. There was no clear policy with respect to others. Spain announced a national quarantine on March 15, however with many gaps in public health and public mobilisation strategy. The scale, speed, and the extent of these sovereign measures were globally uneven and showed the uneven capacity of the states to decide whether to give priority to economy or to life. This unevenness of state capacity to respond to Covid-19 highlighted a long-term failure of liberal democracies to sustain public health and life, weakened as they had become due to their commitment to neoliberal agenda and the demotion of public welfare in favour of privatisation. The US and the British governments in particular were notoriously guilty of governing on the basis of provisional schemes of "affordable" death figures on the basis of highly suspect and ideologised modelling.[3]

Saving private capital and following austerity measures remained the bedrock of the policies of these countries, one of them in fact proposing "herd immunity" whereby Covid-19 was to be allowed to run its course through the country's population. One analyst wrote, "Clothed in scientific expertise and upward and downward curves of infection" the discourse of herd immunity seemed like "a pantomime being played out for a population that seems more dispensable than ever before. Social Darwinism, after all, is a fond faith" of rulers and "ideologues who have devoted their lives to privatising education and destroying education itself as a public good..."[4] It exemplified a laissez-faire approach to heath. But perhaps it also signified a more fundamental reality – the state's incapacity to guarantee life.

The emerging economics of Covid-19 tells us in stark terms the inability of the current neoliberal global regime to secure life. It can only arbitrate death. After this war will be over, and we still do not know the results of the ongoing war despite the relative success of some states to protect life, the issue of life and death and the kind of society we want will

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[3] An interesting aspect of such model building exercises will be to find out as to how they relate to India. See, Gautam L. Menon, "Covid-19 Pandemic: Should You Believe What the Models say about India?", *The Wire*, 4 April 2020 -
https://science.thewire.in/the-sciences/covid-19-pandemic-infectious-disease-transmission-sir-seir-icmr-indiasim-agent-based-modelling/ (accessed on 4 April 2020)

[4] Rashmi Varma, "Lockdown in London: The Demise of What the Neo-liberal City has Made us Accustomed to", *The Wire*, 28 March 2020 –
https://thewire.in/world/london-lockdown-covid-19 (accessed on 30 March 2020)

become globally the paramount question. Therefore equally significant will be the issue of the revision of international order. As of now, states seem to be only concerned with, in Chistopher J. Lee's words, the "arbitration of death".[5] They have to find out the "hot spots", isolate the spaces thus identified, and in this way continuously deploy boundary drawing strategy to arbitrate the number of deaths.

The situation thus looks suspiciously like a world war and post-war scenario. The metaphors of war frequently deployed remind us of one of the most physical aspects of the Corona virus crisis. Like all wars, this too has recreated "race" as a physical reality of life.

Virus, Race, Bio-politics, and the Language of War

Identification, confinement, drawing of boundaries, and strategy of exclusion have produced race in history. In as much as these have been physical or material activities, race as a consequence of these modes of rule has been a physical reality. Covid-19 induced the deployment of these strategies and not surprisingly re-ignited the question of race.

Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* spoke of an order issued at the end of the seventeenth century regarding measures to be taken if plague visited a town.[6] The order mentioned strict spatial partitioning, closing of the town and its outlying districts, prohibition to leave the town on the pain of death, the division of the town into distinct quarters, each street placed under the surveillance of a specific authority who himself would come to lock the door of each house from the outside. Each family made its own provisions; and for bread and wine, each person would receive his ration without communicating with the suppliers and other residents. Meat, fish and herbs would be hoisted up into the houses with pulleys and baskets. Inspection would continue ceaselessly. "A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance", guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter were to ensure the prompt obedience of people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion. Also there was inspection if anyone was hiding the dead or the sick. In Foucault's words, "Everyone locked up in his cage, everyone at his window, answering to his name and showing himself when asked — it is the great review of the living and the dead."

The surveillance was based on a system of permanent registration and reports: reports of observations during the course of the visits — deaths, illnesses, complaints, and irregularities. Magistrates had complete control over medical treatment; they appointed physicians in charge; no other practitioner could treat. Five or six days after the beginning of the quarantine, the process

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[5] Chistopher J. Lee, "The Necropolitics of Covid-19", *The Citizen*, 2 April 2020 – https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/6/18541/The-Necropolitics-of-COVID19 (accessed on 3 April 2020)
[6] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. A. Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), pp. 195-228

of purifying the houses one by one would begin. The inhabitants were made to leave; in each room the furniture and goods were raised from the ground or suspended from the air; perfume was poured around the room; after carefully sealing the windows, doors and even the keyholes with wax, the perfume was set alight. Finally, the entire house was closed while the perfume was consumed. This enclosed, segmented space – city, street, the house - observed at every point, and every link recorded produced power in form of a system in which each individual was constantly located, examined and distributed among the living beings, the sick and the dead — all these in their totality constituted a compact model of a governing mechanism. Plague was met by order, though Foucault also noted, order provoked disorder, "suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory restrictions." Foucault called this the great confinement, and commented of "the leper and his separation; the plague and its segmentations." However though Foucault wanted to distinguish between the effects of the two – "the first is marked; the second analysed and distributed... the exile of the leper and the arrest of the plague", the response to Covid-19 shows one draws on the other. Exclusion, separation, identification, confinement – all have to be deployed interchangeably or all at one time to immobilise a city to gain control over all individual bodies, because this is how the Corona virus spread will be stopped. The image of the leper "cut off from all human contact" and that of the plague ridden city folk segmented and interned tell us of the two elements of a mixed strategy of exclusion. We need not stop short at this point but direct attention to the deep relations between such strategy of exclusion and the production of race.

The operation of the strategy of exclusion is characterised by the way the affected communities and population groups participate in identifying and excluding the potential victims of the disease. To defend the community the vigilantes come out, erect gates, guard them, prevent outsiders from entering, and thereby work as the inner perimeter of a community – a slum settlement, a city ward, a village, a clan, a kin network, or the nation. Race originates from the obligation to defend a society in as much from the dynamics of conquest and subjugation. Disease brings out this reality out. From communal strife to ethnic conflict, from national wars to civil wars, and from resource strife to a communicable disease leading to pestilence – the operation of power is not simply vertical but horizontal also. In this play of power the migrant stands on the borders of an entity. S/he belongs to the world of labour, but if s/he cannot sink her/his identity as labour in the boundary-making exercise, s/he will be compelled to remain forever a migrant who will be subjected to the vigilantism of the community. We must not be astonished that in the wake of the recent exodus of migrant labour from Delhi to reach distant towns in Uttar Pradesh migrants were apprehended and washed with insecticide to make them eligible to enter the district, or the village. Race produces an irrevocable reality of physical segregation of a group. Disease like conquest and war unleashes the process of segmentation and exclusion. Race also provokes an enigma towards the group excluded or sought to be excluded

turning the latter as an unknowable object of knowledge, an object of eternal curiosity.

The reason why we should harp on race in the context of the epidemic is because there is a binary schema here. It functions in both historical mode and a social mode. The historical mode of controlling an epidemic is so strong as not to allow any interrogation of the social mode deployed to manage a disease-ridden society. Recall the incident of the assassination of Walter Charles Rand, the British Plague Commissioner of Pune, by the Chapekar brrthers (Damodar Hari Chapekar, Balkrishna Hari Chapekar, and Vasudeo Hari Chapekar) in 1897 in the background of widespread grievances of the people when the Special Plague Committee under the chairmanship of Rand had deployed troops to deal with the emergency. The measures of the Committee included forced entry into private houses, forced stripping and examination of occupants (including women) by British officers in public, evacuation to hospitals and segregation camps, removing and destroying personal possessions, and preventing movement from the city. Historian David Arnold tells us that violence erupted in Mumbai, Kheda, Delhi, and Kolkata and people fled their homes in panic. Placards came up in Delhi, threatening another 1857-like rebellion. Mumbai's Arthur Road Hospital was attacked by an angry mob because a sick woman was kept under isolation. The 1897 reaction against quarantining and isolation was strong enough for the British officials to back off, but they wondered what it was that had angered the natives? Was it, perhaps, the fear of sharing hospital confines with somebody from a different caste? Or was gender a factor? They also thought that Indians had been always uncomfortable with male doctors examining women, especially in an out-of-house setting. It is true that the social management of an epidemic is not what it was hundred years ago in the age of colonial rule. Things have much changed. However the essentials are the same. Epidemic provokes civil war like situation with the incessant production of physically segregated groups.

Race operates as a major factor driving wedge in the general landscape of human battle against an epidemic. The reaction of the western world to the outbreak of the epidemic in China was nothing short of a racist response.

Since the novel Corona virus outbreak in China in the last month of 2019, enlightened people in the West have been asking, why China? Is it to do with their food habits, their biological (warfare) experiments, or their lack of democracy and transparency of the system, or something else? When the Chinese sought to explain the history of the viruses, and implored the world to understand their initial unpreparedness, inadequate knowledge, and their readiness to take help – scientific inputs and medical equipment – and exchange information with the world, the liberal West was not satisfied. This was Wuhan virus, Chinese virus, and the mysterious ways of the Chinese system. Questions arose, why did China, which for most of its history was ahead of the West, suddenly lost steam and fell behind? The answer was in the gene, which explained the root of the problems of modern China. The Wuhan virus taking China by surprise had exposed the country: the lack of a modern

scientific approach, the lack of a powerful bourgeoisie, the excessive power of the Beijing, and the insularity of the system and the country. They had culture, a sort of feeling of the world, but less science. The westernisation of China has been incomplete, inadequate. In this way, racist understanding underlay the liberal response to the first outbreak of the Corona virus in China. The question animates the western mind: Did China cover up the virus outbreak, and did the WHO (World Health Organisation) conduct itself as a stooge of China, because it had appreciated Chinese response to the disease?

Over the course of the outbreak, the narrative quickly changed from an initial appreciation of China to bitter allegations and abuse against the supposed massive cover up of the virus outbreak for weeks. The Chinese government and the Party were to be made accountable. Various news outlets including *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* participated in building up the story of cover up. At the same time obfuscations were spread on a large scale to confuse people about the sequence of events:

On I December 2019 a viral pneumonia patient with an unknown cause had been hospitalised. This was the earliest known case of the novel Corona virus infection. The patient did not have any exposure to much talked-about Wuhan Seafood Market. On 27 December the ICU doctor at Hubei Hospital of Integrated Traditional Chinese and Western Medicine filed a report to Wuhan Municipal Health Commission on pneumonia patients with an unknown cause. Investigation opened thereafter. On 28 December three more patients arrived in the hospital, all of whom related to Seafood Market. Messages were sent out over social media on 7 cases of unknown virus, claiming it was SARS. On the 30th, notice was sent out by Wuhan Municipal Health Committee of an unknown viral illness. Next day, China received genome results from a commercial laboratory, and WHO was immediately informed of mysterious pneumonia cases in Wuhan with unknown cause. On 1 January the seafood market was shut down as potential cause of outbreak. Two days later on 3 January China reported a total of 44 suspected patients with the mystery disease. Same day the National Health Commission classified the virus as a highly pathogenic virus, ordering all labs to either destroy samples or transfer them to higher level labs. On the same day China confirmed the existence of the new virus. Genetic sequencing work started. On 9 January China reported the first death linked to the new virus. On 11 January China shared the genetic sequence of the novel Corona virus with the international database. On 14 January WHO reported limited human-to-human transmission between close contacts, but on 21 January confirmed human-to-human transmission of the virus. Three days later China declared complete quarantine of Wuhan. By then there was widespread infection to the medical staff (20 January) and sufficient evidence of a new human-to-human transmissible disease. China paid dearly even though other countries also showed later the same trend. China's mortality rate was in a sense nothing special, right in the middle. Italy's fatality rate started to peak around 2 weeks after quarantine began, in line with the trend in Wuhan at the time of its quarantine. On the other hand, western governments took the Chinese

experience lightly or dismissed it, played with science, became more worried about economy than about human life.

Racist arguments were the only ploy of the liberal governments to discredit China by spreading the cover-up myth. Yet China rolled out probably the biggest public health strategy of containment and cure coupled with universal temperature monitoring, masking, hand washing, massive screening, and dramatic increase in hospitalisation facility. Thousands of health care workers and massive supply of tons of vital protection gears along with ventilators poured into the province and the city. As China was the first victim, it was a bold approach. A science-based, risk-informed approach couple with planning of phases allowed China to recover relatively quickly. The key elements of the containment strategy had to be put in place and they still remain. In disease as in war the law of objective appraisal of forces and situation operates. No amount of racist ignorance and high talk will change the fact that the affluent liberal world despite having all the experience of China in front of them failed to react in time. Meanwhile tens of thousands of cases emerged in various parts of the globe including the western world. The Presidents of Germany, Singapore, Ethiopia, and Ecuador, and the King of Jordan issued a joint op-ed in the *Financial Times* on 31 March 2020, appealing for a new global alliance to convene the "medical, economic, and political elements required to produce a vaccine for all who need it" and ensure that testing kits are produced quickly and distributed widely and fairly. They said, "Our countries are at varying stages of the crisis but we all see and admire the strong spirit of solidarity and the many people who are passionately trying to save lives or keep indispensable services up and running... There is a central lesson to be learnt from human experience: nearly all plagues that took their toll on humankind - tuberculosis, smallpox, Ebola, AIDS - have been defeated by modern medicine providing therapies and vaccines. Shared knowledge and accelerated research driven by a global network of scientists will also provide the ultimate answer to our current predicament. This is a global crisis. Delay in action means death. We all face the same enemy... There cannot be victory over the virus in one, or some, countries alone... Internationalising the development, manufacture and distribution of treatments and vaccines will not only deliver the antidote to the virus itself, but also to the deepening of political fault lines that has taken place since its outbreak. This pandemic will not spare any country, no matter how advanced its economy, capabilities, or technology. Before this virus, we are all equal and must work together to beat it..."[7] The appeal seems to have been in vain given the deeply racist fault lines on the basis of which global neo-liberal economy functions today. The trajectory of science and that of race at times meet, but their paths are mostly separate.

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[7] "Five Political Leaders: No Time for Geopolitical Turf Battles", *Financial Times*, 31 March 2020 –
https://www.ft.com/content/c0178836-7274-11ea-90ce-5fb6c07a27f2 (accessed on 4 April 2020)

Racial fault line in the history of epidemic management comes out also in the way the epidemic is reported. After the initial interest in China, there was little desire in the liberal democratic countries in how China actually contained the disease, the specific measures, and the way popular support was organised. Vietnam's success story was again ignored. Community support was important everywhere. This has been true of Venezuela also.[8] It must have been puzzling as well for North Americans and Europeans, when Chinese Communist Party members in Wuhan invoked Bethune and said that they must serve the community and give their lives, fighting Covid.

Class and caste also operate as fault lines in disease management landscape. As one asks, "How do you discuss self-quarantine to a person sharing a tiny shanty with 10 people in a slum? How do you advise social distancing to a manual scavenger? How do you tell an *adivasi*, who struggles for one meal a day, to prioritise hand sanitisers? How do you educate tuberculosis survivors about cough etiquette?"[9] This is perhaps a postcolonial question, nonetheless crucial in the disease management landscape. In urban slums, the big question is about the type of public health measures to be applicable there and to find out affordable alternatives to say the hand sanitiser. Already, lockdowns and work from home will force thousands of informal workers to lose daily wage. Families of daily-wage earners will recede to poverty. At the same time governments will worry more about the overall economy than paying the closest attention to mitigating the medical aspects of the epidemic, changing public health priorities, and bringing about public health solutions. This will call for immediate initiation of a new outlook on urban planning and public management of the city. The crucial element will be developing local strategies of self-management of public health situation, neighbourhoods, enabling panchayats and local bodies to allow local organisations to participate in this war. Yet if this is a war, and just like a war, the virus does not discriminate; the society does. This pandemic lays bare the extent to which individual health depends on the health of everyone in the community, while public healthcare has been eroded through decades of austerity policies, privatization, and inadequate planning. This is most evident in inadequate supports for healthcare workers, lack of protective standards, decline in recruitment and retention, and the absence of resources and equipment they need. All these are results of the social fault lines operating in public health care, which proves weak in face of a crisis like this. When the vigilantes of local settlements like slums and dense neighbourhoods take up the responsibility to protect and defend their societies (with both good and bad consequences), they have in mind precisely these deep cleavages in the

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[8] Federico Fuentes, "Venezuela: Community Organisation Key to Fighting Covid-19", *Countercurrents.org*, 11 April 2020 - https://countercurrents.org/2020/04/venezuela-community-organisation-key-to-fighting-covid-19 (accessed on 11 April 2020)

[9] Anup Agarwal and Yogesh Jain, "India Cannot Fight Corona without Taking into Account Its Class and caste Divisions", *Scroll*, 24 March 2020 – https://scroll.in/article/956980/india-cannot-fight-coronavirus-without-taking-into-account-its-class-and-caste-divisions (accessed on 1 April 2020)

healthcare system. With no provision for screening, detecting, treating, and little provision of food and other means of sustenance for daily wage earners and migrant labour, and with the only advice being quarantine, what else will the lower classes believe but in the fact that the poor are under attack, that they have to fight away the invaders – the disease and the superintendents of disease control? This is a grotesque manifestation of the race war that goes on in society.

The Ethics and Politics of Care

Without beating the bush, we should confront the question raised by the return of race, caste, and class in this war against Covid-19. The question is: if managing population to control the disease is the essence of the bio-politics of our time, can we think of a different form of bio-politics, which does not segregate populations along lines of caste, or race, or occupation for disease management, but thinks of the society in a different way, and addresses the task, "How can the entire society be defended?"? This of course calls for a new kind of public power, a new republican authority built on the *sans culottes* of the society – the slum dwellers, neighbourhood committees, local clubs and associations, associations of health care workers, workers in waste processing and reprocessing – sections in greatest danger and who will be also engaged in defending themselves. In this sense, it is legitimate to think of post-capitalism bio-politics at the core of which will be the role of the urban and semi-urban poor. They will support surveillance methods needed to fight the epidemic, they will sanction the toughness the society requires, because on them people have trust. They will have trust on the government because the latter will be able to provide necessary number of say ventilators, protective gear, arrange for work and food during lock down, and the government will be seen as giving priority to public health. Trust is crucial; patients trust the doctors, which is why patients follow medical prescriptions. Without trust, the society cannot rely on its rulers to save people's lives. At the base of this trust is a *bio-politics from below* if one can use such a phrase, admitting that it is an awkward phrase.

    To put the question differently: Can we imagine a society based on collective practices to help the health of populations, including large-scale behaviour modifications, without a large scale expansion of forms of coercion and surveillance? What will collective "care of the self" mean in such circumstances, an alternative politics of life? How will that principle of care of the self admit self-coercion? Can we pose this question at all if workers are forced to choose between life and livelihood? Will care of the self mean anything if it does not mean caring for each other, a principle of solidarity? Mitigating risk will mean the first principle of care for care workers in times of an epidemic. Such care workers include also all those logistical workers also who maintain collective life by supplying food, milk, medicines, sanitation, warehouses, electricity, connectivity, etc. They are the front soldiers in this war. A new bio-politics will mean protecting and caring for the care givers first. It will mean self-organizing which produces a new public power.

Admittedly there will be a tension between self-organisation and public power – particularly in the postcolonial context where supply chain workers are crucial to the maintenance of life. Which is why, it will be a new kind of public power that all revolutions and great wars have produced on the combination of local autonomy and a new general authority.

In any case as we find ourselves in the midst of a war, we can realise how western commentators including quasi-liberal and anarchist philosophers only oversimplify or misrepresent the question, when they pose the dilemma as one between authoritarian biopolitics and a democratic polity, which allows persons to make rational individual choices. As one said, "Naked life" is closer to the pensioner on a waiting list for a respirator or an ICU bed, because of a collapsed health system.

Think of the vaunted National Health Service (NHS) in the UK now caught unprepared for the war against the new virus. A report of 2014 had warned that reforms of the NHS along the line of reducing staff, undermining public health provisions, and defining spare capacity as waste would make it vulnerable to pandemics. The report was ignored. Institutional and expert resources had been discarded, with no less than 10,000 key NHS staff made redundant. The Lansley Act's (Health and Social care Act, 2012) conversion of NHS into a system of competing businesses ("trusts") made the UK extra-vulnerable to pandemics in two other key ways. One was that it downgraded public health and made it vulnerable to further cuts. In the last five years alone the public health budget was cut by GBP 700 million in real terms. Spare capacity was redefined as "waste". In this way, reforms led to inadequate personal protection equipment for clinicians and care workers, lack of ventilators (which was not thought fit to be included in the stockpiles list), and reduced capacity to quickly produce test kits and administer tests. As a result in UK today there are just 6.6 intensive care beds per 100,000 people today, and a shortage of over 40,000 nurses. Now as the hour of crisis has struck, NHS has to hire private hospital and nursing home beds.[10] UK is an example of how liberal democracies obsessed with privatisation prepared themselves for a war. The call of war against the virus has proved a hollow cry. The knight's shining armour has proved to be of tin. War is too serious a business to be led by ideologues of privatisation.

By now the implications of the war metaphors used in abundance in the fight against the new Corona virus should be clear. If race is a crucial dimension of bio-politics and disease reactivates bio-politics in fierce ways, clearly we are in the midst of a war. None more than the rulers knows of this reality of this war. The President of China said, China's fight against the Corona virus was a "people's war". All kinds of resources had to be mobilised, there had to be a proper deployment method, logistics of

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[10] On the details of the scandal of the NHS, Colin Leys and Stewart Player, *The Plot against the NHS* (London: Merlin Press, 2011); see also, Colin Leys, "How Market Reforms Made the NHS Vulnerable to Pandemics", *The Bullet*, 25 March 2020 - https://socialistproject.ca/2020/03/how-market-reforms-made-the-nhs-vulnerable-to-pandemics/#more (accessed on 30 March 2020)

marshalling of human and material provisions, and mobilisation of the society as a collective army of the fighters organised in the form of front soldiers, planners, commanders, and suppliers of material. All had to have a role, though critics said that in this war there was no win, only an end. The Indian Prime Minster said, the battle against the virus was like the great epic war of the *Mahabharata*. He said alluding to the declaration of the 21 day nationwide lockdown, "Mahabharata was won in 18 days, Covid-19 battle will last 21 days". Again critics pointed out that after the 18 days of the epic war no one was alive and the victorious few alive had to leave along with their faithful dog for the mountains to embrace a holy life after death.

Probably, between the two wars, the conventional and against the epidemic the line of difference is the principle of care. In the former death is the principle, in the latter it is care for life. In the former the organisation is for death, in the latter it is life. A war for life is a contradiction of terms. Yet like other paradoxes, this too is a paradox of our existence. A people's war must be an all out effort for care.

As we know, long-term residential care like public healthcare organizations has been reeling under the impacts of neoliberal policies, reduction of public funds, and an all round failure to keep up with demand for public services. Everywhere new managerial policies are promoting part-time jobs, contract work, privatisation of health care facility, and shrinking of municipal services. All these have had impact on conditions of care. What happens then to 24 hour nursing services, which should be accessible based on need, not the ability to pay? How is the state to protect low middle class and poor homes that require nursing, food for the patients, and even medicare goods like injections? In long-term care, the pressure is on relatives and volunteers, most of whom are women. The contracted women perform the precarious work of caring and nursing. They are often the racialised migrant. Whether in hospitals or in nursing homes or in individual families the bulk of the work is carried out by personal care providers. There is no dedicated work-force for an aging population. The political economy of health has been never as paramount as in the battle against the virus. The ethics of care calls for a material structure. Till now we knew how economics influenced population health, now the pandemic makes us realise the ways in which population health impacts on economy. Banal statements have become crucial: importance of cleanliness, adequate food, social support for the sick and elderly, and we must not be surprised that these ordinary things call for greater public provision, governmental intervention, organisation of social support, and public arrangement of care. There is no doubt that the public power that will win this war, if it has to win, will promote more collective strategies of care and sharing of responsibilities. In this sense, this war calls for a new type of public power.

Migrant Worker and the Logistical Nightmares

For the State the migrant worker is a nightmare for the task of logistically organising the society. For the migrant worker the programme of logistical

reorganisation of society is a nightmare. This is true of the capitalist economy in general. It is true of India also.

We saw this in the wake of the sudden clamp down – without notice – of a 21 day closure of the country, which had no plan for hundreds and thousands of migrant workers working all over the country, no provision for their needs, no contingency measure for their food, shelter, health, their families, and life. Thousands upon thousands, evicted from their temporary shelters, without money and food, desperately tried to reach home – villages and small towns – from wherever they were working. Tens of thousands of migrant workers – mothers with children, young boys and girls, single women, husband and wife, young single workers - trekked hundreds of kilometres, some reports tell of workers walking five hundred kilometres to reach home, with some perishing on the roads. We do not know how many lost their ways, how many reached home in what condition, how many perished, but we know of savage incidents as the one when a group of workers was sprayed with disinfectants like dead animals to purify them of Covid-19. Migrant workers carrying their belongings and small children were beaten up, baton-charged and frog-marched on interstate highways because they had disturbed the lockdown measures and the disease containment plan. In the Indian city of Surat, *The Indian Express* reported on 30 March 2020, police fired tear gas shells to disperse an angry mob of textile factory workers who confronted the former when stopped from leaving for their homes in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and other states the previous day. The police baton charged to drive them back to Pandesara, where they lived in colonies. The police also arrested 96 people on charges of rioting. The workers' crime was that they wanted to walk back to their native places in UP, Bihar, and elsewhere. Following the lockdown there was shortage of food in the textile labour colonies in Surat city. Thousands of workers left their rented rooms and started walking to the reach national highway around 20 km away. The police later told, "We did our best to convince them, but they had only one thing in mind: to walk back home."[11]

The central government woke up late to the fact that the migrant workers had kept the most thriving sector of the economy running – construction, infrastructure, and other logistical services. Newspapers, television channels, administrators, government officials, and minsters tried to put the "blame" on the individuals, some governments, agencies... whoever they thought should be rightly blamed. Central and state governments vied with each other in blame game. And then the knowledgeable people realised that no one knew how many migrant workers were working in the country. Census, other data pools, information portals, with everything around in this information-led governance, the migrant worker was the invisible figure. Suddenly with tens of thousands defying the lock-down, walking, those who

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[11] Kamal Saiyed, "Surat: Police Fire Tear Gas Shells as Textile Workers Turn Violent after Being Barred from Going Home", *The Indian Express*, 30 March 2020 – https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/surat-lockdown-police-migrant-labourers-violence-coronavirus-6338852/ (accessed on 3 April 2020)

could jumping on to whatever transportation had been made available by the Delhi or the UP government or other agencies, the political class woke up to the fact that the migrant worker as a person existed.

What accounts then for the spectral presence of the migrant as a worker? We have here once again the question of border operating as a principle of the economy of life. In this case it is the border between visibility and invisibility – presence in economy, absence in the formal organisation of life in a time of war - the war against the epidemic. Yet, as Frederick Engels wrote nearly one hundred and fifty years back, workers become visible when they become a threat to public health. In his words, "Modern natural science has proved that the so-called 'poor districts' in which the workers are crowded together are the breeding places of all those epidemics which from time to time afflict our towns. Cholera, typhus, typhoid fever, small-pox and other ravaging diseases spread their germs in the pestilential air and the poisoned water of these working-class quarters. In these districts, the germs hardly ever die out completely, and as soon as circumstances permit it they develop into epidemics and then spread beyond their breeding places also into the more airy and healthy parts of the town inhabited by the capitalists. Capitalist rule cannot allow itself the pleasure of creating epidemic diseases among the working class with impunity; the consequences fall back on it and the angel of death rages in its ranks as ruthlessly as in the ranks of the workers."[12] The political class should be worried, probably because it is one of the rare occasions when an epidemic starts not from the poorer classes, but from the relatively secure section of the population. But now that the disease has become an epidemic, the anxiety is: Will not the migrant workers spread the disease, with thousands of returning migrants being potential carriers? However as mysteriously as the migrants had emerged on the scene, they had vanished also in the same way few days later. The image of the migrant as an anomalous figure in a well planned strategy of managing the disease had been erased from the public gaze. The fight against the virus had shifted to other priorities. Workers trekking for miles in a time of virus and lockdown were an aberration.

Part of the answer as to why the migrant is a spectral figure in a public health crisis is of course in the state of the economy. After the global financial crisis of 2008, the looming shadow of US-China trade dispute became even more fearful for the global bourgeoisie with the globalization of the Corona virus sending out new shocks. It is now an unprecedented global recession. The international supply chains have been severely disrupted with Covid-19 shooting down GDP growth, capital profitability, capacity utilization, and volume of working hours. Initially the capitalists thought as US President Trump said, the Corona virus was little more than the regular flu, which also caused a limited number of people to die every year with a

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[12] Frederick Engels, *The Housing Question*, Part II, "How the Bourgeoisie Solves the Housing Question" (1872) –
https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1872/housing-question/ch01.htm
(accessed on 2 April 2020)

mortality rate of 0.1 per cent. It was a dangerous neo-Malthusian game, where the only concern was with "productive" workers, and not people's health at large. To Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro the crisis was a fantasy, and the British Prime Minister Boris Johnson spoke of "herd immunity", according to which the British population should be exposed and infected with the Corona virus all at once in order to "get it over with." Migrant labour has no role in this milieu of a social-Darwinist experiment with potential death of hundreds of thousands of old people and people with pre-existing debilitating conditions, as one put it, "a veritable geronticide" (https://twitter.com/hashtag/geronticide? lang=en). Everywhere the rulers toyed with the idea of a utilitarian calculation that economically it would be more efficient to let 40,000 to 80,000 people die rather than to disrupt the economy through massive costly state measures including lockdowns. However, as soon as the reality of massive deaths dawned upon the leaders by mid-March, they forgot everything else but the measure of restricting mobility. The migrant labour became a question mark in that hour.

As already indicated in the previous section, healthcare workers were fast becoming the new precarious labour group as countries continuously cut on public health spending. Take Italy as an instance where thousands of tragic deaths have happened now. Already in Greece under the pressure of global financial system, healthcare expenditures had dropped by 22.4 per cent between 2011 and 2016. Now in Italy healthcare expenditure relative to GDP dropped from 9.0 to 8.8 per cent despite a growth in population from 59.2 million to 60.7 million people in the same period. In total, around 37 billion euro was taken from Italy's public health system, the number of hospitals was cut by 15 per cent, the numbers of staff – doctors, nurses and social workers – heavily reduced and a total number of 70,000 hospital beds cut, i.e. 17 per cent of the total number of hospital beds. Reduction of hospital beds also included intensive-care beds. In a country of more than 60 million inhabitants and a generally aging population, the number was reduced to 5,200. Likewise in the US more than half of counties have no intensive care beds at their disposal, putting more than 7 million people who are 60 or older at risk. Budget cuts led to the closing of 20,000 hospital beds in the city of New York alone, where 29 million people have no health insurance and where losing one's job mostly means losing healthcare coverage. The Corona virus crisis met the workers in this situation.[13]

The informal workers in supply services in India have found themselves in equally appalling condition. They include the supply workers in food items, or employed as maids, elderly caregivers, childcare providers, who

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[13] Figures taken from Ingar Solty, "The Bio-Economic Pandemic and Western Working Classes", *The Bullet*, 24 March 2020 –
https://socialistproject.ca/2020/03/bioeconomic-pandemic-and-western-working-classes/#more (accessed on 30 March 2020); on this see also, Conn Hallinan, "How Austerity and Anti-Immigrant Politics Left Italy Exposed", *Counterpunch*, 26 March 2020 - https://www.counterpunch.org/2020/03/26/how-austerity-and-anti-immigrant-politics-left-italy-exposed/ (accessed on 28 March 2020)

are now made redundant by the closure of the country. At the same time self-help initiatives and supply workers' cooperatives are almost absent. Political parties have fallen silent. They are clueless about how to respond to the crisis of lives and livelihoods of the migrant workers. Even the All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) with its hundred years' history of organising the workers is silent. In the time of crisis the traditional defence mechanisms of the society are all dead. One commentator has pointed out that the failure to assess how migrant daily-wage workers would react to a sudden closure of the entire country suggested that the government was without a logistical map of how to protect the groups especially vulnerable to a sudden lock down scenario. There were no inputs from bureaucracy, political parties, local governments, autonomous and semi-autonomous bodies, and other social forums, as neoliberal governance had cut itself off from all conduits between the market and the society. To it market was the society. There was no consultation with bigger states producing and receiving migrant workers, such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, West Bengal, Haryana, Delhi, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand and Orissa. Already there was hardly any social security measure for the migrant labour, and social organisations who worked for the unorganised labour were considered as "political", and potentially "anti-national".[14]

In neighbouring Bangladesh, garment workers, again a large chunk of them migrants from far away districts of the country, were in dire stress. The closure of garment factories with suspension or cancellation of GBP 2.4bn of existing orders left thousands of garment workers penniless. Thousands were sent home, in many cases without pay. Big retailers such as Primark and Edinburgh Woollen Mill suspended additional future commitment as they scrambled to minimise losses. The big brands offered no financial assistance in covering the cost of lay off of workers or help to pay severance costs. The garment supply chain meant that suppliers would take all the risk. They would buy cloth, hire the workers, and make the clothes but could raise the invoice only after the order was shipped. Some brands were exceptions; they said they would honour existing financial arrangements. One report estimated that 1 million garment workers had lost jobs in the Covid-19 fallout.[15] Similar lay-offs happened in China, Cambodia, Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar.

However one of the largest sections of unorganised workers – the farm workers – has been relatively lucky. In many parts of the world including India governments overnight realised that the farm workers were essential to life and declared that the latter were exempted from lock down. Many of these

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[14] Bharat Bhusan, "Migrant Disaster in Covid-19 Lockdown: Silencing NGOs has Proved Costly", *Business Standard*, 1 April 2020 - https://www.business-standard.com/article/opinion/migrant-disaster-in-covid-19-lockdown-silencing-ngos-has-proved-costly-120040100582_1.html (accessed on 3 April 2020)

[15] Report by Lauren Frayer, *NPR*, 3 April 2020 – https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/04/03/826617334/1-million-bangladeshi-garment-workers-lose-jobs-amid-covid-19-economic-fallout (accessed on 6 April 2020)

farm workers, mostly seasonal and undocumented, were declared "essential" during the pandemic. Migrant field workers were told to keep working despite stay-at-home directives, and were given letters of permit. They were critical to the supply of food chains. This has happened in the United States with undocumented Mexican immigrants after they have lived for years under the cloud of deportation. This is happening with farm workers in Europe too with berry picking, asparagus harvesting, tomato and potato cultivation, where east European and non-European farm workers do the job. In India also, farm workers are struggling to understand what the virus outbreak will mean for their safety, livelihood, and families. Yet many of them were sent back forcibly when the lockdown started. Many worry that the working conditions in fields, staying close to each other in densely packed night shelters, and crop transportation methods will put them at risk of contracting the virus. Wages of several warehouses, cold stores, and *mandis* (wholesale market of agricultural products like crops, vegetables, and flowers) workers suffer cuts as work-hours decrease with the warehouse, cold store, and *mandi* employers adjust to the shifting market. Agricultural workers in poultry plants and florists also are subject to double jeopardy. They have to work in close quarters, and are worried about cutbacks.

The absolute importance of agricultural workers, fishery workers, and transportation workers linked to deliverable agricultural products like food items or flowers tells us of the way the formal economy is subsuming informal modes in food production and consumption and horticulture. Agribusiness has extended beyond mere stripping localities of resources, and is taking a turn towards turning massive extractive operations into discontinuous networks of production and circulation across territories and at different scales. Specialised agriculture in zones in the country such as the Punjab, Maharashtra, Kerala, Himachal Pradesh, and Jammu and Kashmir are the "commodity regions" of India embedded in the national geography and producing a flexible migrant labour market, which has now produced challenge to the country's government to manage its vast population in the time of an epidemic.

Discerning commentators have pointed out that this rush to go back home was not only a massive response of the workers to the absolute thoughtlessness of a government as the latter suddenly imposed a clamp down on the mobility of the workers, it was also a demonstration of the way in which the informal economy works in the country, in which circular migration between villages and cities has a prominent role to play. According to one study, circular migrants are to be found in large numbers in construction industry. Presently 35 million workers are registered under various construction welfare boards, a number which by itself is nearly 3% of the population. While some construction workers may not be migrants, many migrants are not registered with these boards, and we are speaking here of only one of several such employment sectors. Given the informal conditions in which workers live and work, they shuttle between their villages and cities. It is surprising that policymakers were not prepared for the speed and desperation with which the migrants would attempt to return home following

the lockdown order. The same study of 3,018 circular migrant construction workers in Delhi and Lucknow showed that migrants had little reasons to stay in their destination cities, and many reasons to leave. The majority of those surveyed (63%) had no family members living with them. In the city, they lived in cramped and usually illegally rented rooms (52%); or slept on footpaths (25%). Less than 3% held ration cards registered in the city. Finally, they earned low wages, and remitted most of their savings, leaving little to cushion them if work stopped. The study commented, "This precariousness is furthered by the hostile treatment they receive from urban authorities, especially the police since they sleep in public streets, squares, and footpaths." Many had experienced violent police action within the past year in the city, while fewer than 5% had ever done so in their home villages. Equally significantly, the study revealed that on average, these migrants made 2.55 trips each year to their home village, spent on average of six months a year within the city, and over half had been engaging in circular migration for at least eight years.[16] Perhaps the policymakers had never heard of a phrase familiar in migration literature, namely "safe return".

In the all round atmosphere of neoliberalism where the state had retreated from public education and public health, the priority for migrant workers was found to be absent. We have to remember, India spends less than 1.2 per cent of its GDP on public health; it has 0.7 beds per 1,000 inhabitants; and private hospitals now account for 51 per cent of the hospital beds in the country, which in any case are not affordable for the poor. The relief package announced by the government was a mere 0.8 per cent of the GDP, while the small and medium-sized enterprises employing nearly 40 per cent of the workforce were probably the biggest hit due to the lockdown.[17] The relief package did not address their issues properly. All these had cascading impact on workers. They had to leave their jobs and finally the places of stay as they were told by landowners that they posed a health hazard.

Therefore as to the question, why does any major logistical step by the state become a nightmare for the workers, the answer is in the nature of a logistical exercise, which will not have the workers as its main object of attention. Workers are the cogs and wheels, but never the main object. This had happened to the tea garden workers and other workers in small and medium units following demonetisation, which devastated them. Within three and half years this happened again.

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[16] Tariq Thachil, "Despite Covid-19, Why did Migrant Workers Go Back?", *Hindusthan Times*, 3 April 2020 - https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/despite-covid-19-why-did-migrant-workers-go-back/story-NPhLzTd4joLSovjMDxCtaM.html (accessed on 4 April 2020)

[17] Christophe Jaffrelot and Utsav Shah, "Keeping Poor Safe in Lockdown is State Responsibility, not an Act of Charity", *The Indian Express*, 30 March 2020 - https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-india-lockdown-migrant-workers-labourers-exodus-modi-govt-6337630/ (accessed on 4 April 2020)

An All Round Crisis

It is clear that the official story of Corona virus hides a systemic chaos and possibly an irremediable hole in country's life, also a global crisis. Corona virus is no doubt a serious health problem, but not the deadliest one, yet why then the all round sense of gloom and death? In case of Covid-19, fatality rate is estimated at 3.5 per cent, in case of SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) it was 11 per cent, and for MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) 34 per cent. And yet, Covid-19 has exposed the malaise of global economy and as its part the system of public health, and the overall state of social vulnerability under capitalism as nothing else before in recent time. From the social point of view, the striking aspect is that till now the poorer countries were at the receiving ends, whereas rich liberal democracies are now victims of an epidemic, creating panic and uncertainty in the mass media. The only way out for liberal politics, it seems, is to create racist and xenophobic responses to the crisis, blame others to hide its own systemic incompetence, and for that as a beginning shower abuses on an "authoritarian" framework of containing the disease. The response is neo-Malthusian in its essence. People are the victims of the neo-Malthusian game.

What will be the response to the resurgence of neo-Malthusianism in global politics? In this article we have already referred to the new politics of life and the importance of care in a transformed politics. We have also suggested that this calls for a new type of public power which values care as the guiding principle of organising society. Sandro Mezzadra calls for a "care of the common". In his words, "Corona virus is a threat to something essential, to 'the common'. The ongoing epidemic shows the fragility and precarity of such a common (as well as our very lives), together with the need of 'care' - something highlighted in particular by feminist debates of the past few years. But, without forgetting the heightened control of the present situation, it is this latter, equally essential, perspective that I want to develop in order to think about what is currently happening in Italy, Europe, and the World."[18] This is an important response to the time, and I want to add to this perspective the fact that care needs appropriate political organisation of society, and that we must not shrink away from the kind of power we need and the society has to struggle for. We have to consider the questions: What kind of power will guard the society that emerges as the common? What kind of power will nourish the world of care, which would mean protection and a consequent norm of responsibility – precisely the principles which have been central to care of the self and manipulated by modern bourgeois democracies? What kind of state shall we require, and for an answer the further thought as to why some states have failed in protecting the people and some have

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[18] Sandro Mezzadra, "Politics of Struggles in the Time of Pandemic", Verso blog, 17 March 2020 - https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4598-politics-of-struggles-in-the-time-of-pandemic?fbclid=IwAR3NHs7yzB1pLGflRcTzEPDaYYTFloSYa2QpBJmmzm2V-BdwfvA75bgG8LU (accessed on 5 April 2020)

succeeded? Why some states only tried to "get them through the crisis" and in the process accumulated vulnerabilities now brought out in the open by the virus, and why some other states manage to cope with the virus in a more competent manner as to be able to save lives? What relevance do we make of the old distinction between "authoritarianism" and "democracy"? Remember, viruses are part of nature. They attacked human beings in the past. In 1918, the Spanish Flu killed millions worldwide including India which suffered 18 million casualties – 6 percent of the population at that time. The colonial state was responsible in a big way for the deaths of thousands upon thousands of Indians. So, the question is: Does the state build up public health properly to strengthen society's preparedness: stockpiled test kits, masks, ventilators, hospital beds, trained personnel, medical research, drugs, etc.? The historical-political analyses of these questions have to take the place of largely ineffective ethico-philosophical debates. This is because while this too shall pass with tragic casualties all over the world, the question politics will face is what kind of society will be able prevent the outbreak of another epidemic in a better manner? What will be the new policies and new modes to reinforce and widen the social bases of care and protection? What will be the new politics of responsibility?

The more we think of these questions the more we shall see that these are issues of how to imagine self-rule in a different way, which will learn from the histories of fighting diseases and war in the past and yet infused with an order of a new imaginary of a state that runs things differently, assures protection to its people, discharges responsibility for the safety, security, and well being of its people – in short a new combination of autonomy, history, and politics. In many countries local governments, communities, and in many states different tactics are being followed in this war against the virus. The response is not, unlike what the media tells, even. In India again various states have followed different innovative strategies – West Bengal, Kerala, Orissa, Delhi, to name a few. Perhaps its federal set up or whatever remains of that enabled a range of variegated responses. The poor and the migrant labour, the aged and the vulnerable, the assembly chain workers in a plant that produces ventilators and the mechanics in a small shop producing test kits, or the vigilant guards of a village and an urban slum – all are playing roles in this war. The closer a government will pay attention to how people respond to this danger and mobilise its resources - which would mean the people, the country, the nation, the less costly will this war be. This war is also an extension of politics. Only a politics that is organic to people will be able to wage such a war.

The history of the knowledge of borders and boundary making exercises, crucial to making a war, will be also crucial to keep the people safe. Covid-19 has brought to fore the forgotten knowledge of bordering exercises of containment, isolation, mass scale nursing and treatment, rapid evacuation, zoning, erecting corridors, guarding, respecting the implications of age differences, guarding vulnerabilities, and getting on top of the enemy. Bordering will also mean border managing – borders of jobs, spaces, economy, and life. To wage a war of this kind, perhaps like all other major

wars, people have to repose trust on their state, and the conduct of the state has to be such as to induce trust of the people. The legitimacy of the new power rests on this capacity. The capacity is to guard the common, which the society is. This means that the people not only need to be reassured of essential supplies, but must be given back their self-confidence.

Although this is a crude sketch of the new type of general power that the post epidemic scenario will call for reminding us of a post world war scenario, I think it provides a starting point to reconstruct and characterise what is specific about this "war", the other conflicts it will unleash, and confrontations it will provoke. In some sense it is a counter-history based on elements that the given history of sovereignty and state provides.

Corona Virus and the World-Economy: the Old is Dead, the New Can't be Born

By

Ravi Arvind Palat

"The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a variety of morbid symptoms appear."

- Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*

The novel coronavirus pandemic has struck the world-economy in a way that no other crisis had done before. Earlier pandemics—like the Spanish flu of 1918—struck a world which was far less integrated than today and supply-chains did not then span the planet. Nor was there then the volume of long-distance travel that could transport the virus all over. Since the SARS epidemic in 2002, airline data indicate that air traffic from China alone has increased ten-fold. The Great Depression of 1929-33 settled in over time: now, as countries close their borders and order all non-essential businesses to shutter their stores and offices, economic activity has ground to a halt without parallel. At that time, manufacturing commanded a large share of the economic output, and inventories that piled up could be sold as conditions eased up. Today, services account for the bulk of economic activity and a haircut, an Uber ride, or a dinner at a restaurant foregone cannot be made up. The global financial crisis of 2008-09 may have plunged economies on both sides of the North Atlantic into a recession but not China, India, Brazil and other 'emerging market economies.' This time it is different: it affects the entire planet even though its impact is conditioned by how this virus mutates and scythes through populations with different immunities and age, class, gender, and ethnic compositions.

The very distinctiveness of the current situation makes the past experience a poor guide even though past experiences can provide some clues. The last major pandemic was the Spanish flu of 1918 which may have come out of Kansas and is estimated to have killed 1 to 2 per cent of the world population. But its impact across the world varied widely: 60 per cent of its fatalities came from western India where a major drought did not prevent

grain exports to Britain and the malnourished population was more vulnerable.

The greater vulnerability of the poor to the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, will tragically be repeated once again. Social distancing as a means to mitigate its spread will have little effect in densely populated, low-income states. How do people in slums or informal settlements practice what is misleadingly called social (rather than physical) distancing? In Johannesburg's Alexandria township, 700,000 people live on 1.9 square miles; the same number of people are crowded into Dharavi's 0.81 square miles in Mumbai; and Rio de Janeiro's Rocinha is as large as Dharavi but with only 200,000 people. Daily labourers and people who sell used clothing or vegetables don't have the luxury of working from home. Nor do people in slums and *favelas* have easy access to running water to practice the hygiene recommended to prevent contagion.

Ethnic and racial minorities in wealthier countries are also less able to practice physical distancing. A study by the Economic Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., found that less than 30 per cent of the people in the United States have jobs that can be done from home in 2018. Even if new telework technologies like online schooling are included, only 16.2 per cent of Hispanic workers and 19.7 per cent of African Americans are able to work from home compared to 30 per cent of Whites and 37 per cent of Asian-Americans. According to the latest available figures in 2017, 30 per cent of the households in the U.S. lacked broadband access—underlining not only the limitations of telework but also of online schooling.

Taxi owners in New York City who took out large loans to buy the medallions to drive yellow cabs are facing ruin as air traffic virtually ceases and the city shuts down. People supplying essential commodities—fruits, vegetables, and other agricultural products—have no option than to work if they are to feed themselves and their families. And in the United States, they and the workers in abattoirs are poorly-paid migrants—though subway ridership in New York has fallen by 87 per cent, in poorer neighbourhoods populated by migrants from Latin America and Africa, subway stations are almost as crowded as they were in pre-lockdown days.

A three-tiered system of privilege thus develops in the most powerful country in the world: the affluent withdraw to their second homes in the hills and seaside resorts placing intolerable burdens on local medical facilities; a middle class trying to work at home and school their children; and a working-class compelled to lay their lives on the line and work in stores, fields, transportation, and other essential services.

It should be blindingly obvious that policies implemented in wealthier North American and European countries cannot be blithely applied in the Global South—and yet that is precisely what has been done in India. The government imposed a virtual ban on movement within the country for 21 days with just 4 hours' notice—leaving migrant workers stranded and making no provision for wages in a country where upwards of 90 per cent of the working population are in the informal sector and the density of population is almost 400 per square mile.

Rather than social distancing—especially in cities such as Mumbai which has a population density of 73,000 per square mile—and confining people to tiny tenements separated by tarpaulins or tin walls, epidemiologists advocated community participation. Yet, the ban on movement has expelled millions of migrant labourers from the cities where they have no opportunity to earn to walk hundreds of miles to their villages—perhaps the greatest exodus in history after the Partition—exposing them and others to the virus! A disease which was imported into the country by those who could travel and study abroad is devastating the lives of those who could least afford to protect or feed themselves!

Conversely, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil and Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico have dismissed the pandemic as a minor aberration. Bolsonaro has even denied that COVID 19 is anything more than a cold and the drug cartels are imposing night-time curfews in the *favelas* and in a deliciously ironic twist, Mexico is securing its border with the United States!

Low-income countries also do not have the infrastructure to deal with a major pandemic: Bangladesh has 170 million people but only 500 ICU beds. The worst affected country in Europe, Italy, has only 4 doctors per 1000 people; India has less than 1 and other countries fare even worse. Populations of low-income states are also more vulnerable to environmental pollution which reduces their immunities. One-third of coronary respiratory diseases in the world in 2018 were in India which also has the largest number of tuberculosis patients in the world—and the latter are especially at risk for COVID-19. One estimate suggests that 300 million Indians could be infected by the virus by July and fatalities could be anywhere from 2 to 3.5 million.

Much of the clothing sold by big brand name corporations in the Global North are made by workers in China, Bangladesh, Laos, Cambodia, and elsewhere. With lockdowns being imposed in Europe and North America, companies are cancelling orders and since manufacturers are only paid once their products are shipped while they have to pay their workers and material suppliers beforehand, they are now stuck with large inventories of clothes that have shelf-lives determined by the season. The Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers' and Exporters' Association reported this week that orders worth $1.8 billion have been put on hold and $1.4 billion cancelled. This has led to millions of workers being sent home without pay.

Their governments do not have the ability to bail out manufacturers in the ways contemplated by governments in high-income states. Unlike the United States, they cannot simply print more currency, especially when the currencies of states in the Global South are plunging relative to the dollar: the Indian rupee is now at a historic low as is the South African rand to take just two examples. It is clear, then, that the impact of the virus will be felt disproportionately by the poor, especially in low-income countries.

If the disproportionate impact on the poor is similar to prior pandemics and crises, it is not at all clear how the world-economy will emerge out of it. Responding to the collapse of stock markets, governments are pumping money into the economy but when people are ordered to stay home, the circulation of money slows down as well—especially for small businesses.

The Amazons and the Walmarts may advertise for tens of thousands of more workers, but that will barely make a dent in the number of employees shed by small businesses.

Broadening our aperture, the scale and suddenness of economic and social disruption are such that there can be no return to the pre-pandemic situation. Supply-chains within and between states have been severed, perhaps irretrievably. The range and severity of these disruptions would depend on how the COVID-19 impacts populations—depending on the virus' mutations and age, class, ethnic, and gender distributions of specific population groups with their different disease experience and immunities. Given the expansion of robotics and numerically-controlled machines, the ongoing disruption of supply chains may well lead to a further replacement of workers by these technologies, especially if the virus scythes through low-income economies disparately.

Again, while the stock market collapse and rise of unemployment may recall the Great Depression, conditions today are very different, During the 1920s and 1930s, the industrial working class was a key component of the recovery. Solidarities forged in factories and mines were the basis of organizing against deprivation—to the New Deal in the United States and to an expansion of the modern welfare state in Europe. Widespread de-industrialization and the destruction of unions in the contemporary world have cut the ground from under the trade unions. In these conditions, as the electoral appeals of Trump, Boris Johnson, Matteo Salvini and others indicate, the atomized successors to historically advantaged middle and working classes have turned against ethnic minorities and migrants; against globalization and towards a reactionary nationalism. This is not only in Europe and North America but even in South Africa where migrants from other African states face xenophobic attacks.

Keynesian policies adopted in the Great Depression to increase demand did reduce unemployment but not by nearly enough: in the U.S., it fell from a peak of 25% in early 1933 to 14% in 1940. It was the Second World War which transformed the U.S. into the breadbasket and factory for the Allied war effort and military mobilization which eventually solved it. And after the hostilities, when de-mobilization raised the prospect of surging unemployment again, *Pax Americana* led to a new burst of economic prosperity that lasted for a little over two decades—the 'Golden Age of Capitalism.'

The Cold War was the essential element of this age: military mobilization and aid to European allies, and domestically a pact between Big Government, Big Business, and Big Labour in the United States led to an era of consumerism at home and abroad; the Soviet Union which assumed responsibility to maintain the peace from East Germany to the 38th parallel similarly implemented relatively successful reconstruction in its zone; and independence brought modest rewards to former colonies in Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean and elsewhere.

Today, the United States exercises no intellectual leadership: indeed, its president with, what Peter Baker and Maggie Haberman characterized in

the *New York Times* as, his "profound need for personal praise, the propensity to blame others, the lack of human empathy, the disregard for expertise, the distortion of facts, the impatience with scrutiny or criticism" has proved singularly inadequate to the task. His attempts to buy exclusive rights to a vaccine being developed by Curevac, a company funded by the German government has offended and exasperated not only the Germans but all thinking citizens everywhere. This is hardly the type of leadership one expects from the leading power. Even worse, the U.S. prevented a G7 declaration on the virus because of the Trump Administration's insistence on calling it the 'Wuhan virus' instead of the 'coronavirus'!

In contrast, China is stepping up to aid countries: sending doctors and medical supplies to countries from Peru to the Philippines, Japan to Spain. Cuba is dispatching its doctors to Europe and elsewhere. The United States, after having failed to secure exclusive rights to a potential vaccine, is now scouring Eastern Europe and Central Asia for medical supplies after initially refusing to implement its Defense Production Act to compel its domestic industries to produce these vital goods in a critical time. Rather than demonstrating leadership, seeking to procure essential medical supplies from these poorer states harkens back to Britain's policies of requisitioning food from its colonies even when they were suffering droughts.

Even worse, by invoking the Defense Production Act, U.S. officials forced the 3M Corporation to divert 200,000 en route to Germany from its factory in Singapore—masks that the German government had paid for and had ordered for its police force. Renaud Muselier, president of France's Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region complained that U.S. agents had bribed officials in Shanghai to divert a planeload of essential medical equipment destined for the region to the United States. The Trump administration also directed the 3M corporation not to send N95 masks to Canada and Latin America. Even a colonial power never practised piracy on its allies!

Actions of the European Union are, if anything, even more repugnant. Not only did several countries close their borders in spite of a commitment to free movement, but the wealthier northern European states refused to help the poorer southern ones. The Dutch finance minister, Wopke Hoekstra, even suggested that Spain may be hiding some of its budgetary resources. Migrants in Calais are housed in conditions where they cannot easily wash or isolate themselves. The EU has increased the budget for its Border and Coastal Agency, Frontex, to €420 million—a 34 per cent increase from 2019—and border guards in Hungary, Bulgaria, Greece, Italy, Serbia, Romania are inflicting considerable violence on refugees for which they have been praised and called the continent's "shield" by Ursula von der Leyen, the European Commission president! Portugal, fortunately, is a shining case apart: its Socialist prime minister António Luís Santos de Costa insists on treating migrants who applied for asylum as the same as residents!

Meanwhile, Trump's allies in the U.S. Congress are pushing through a bill to provide about 1,200 dollars (for those with an annual salary of $75,000 or less) and $500 per child: not even enough for a month's rent in a major metropolitan centre. Strong opposition from Democrats overcame objections

to increase some contributions to the poor like extending unemployment benefits but these still remain very inadequate and short term. It is the provision of cash to the employees and workers whose spending generates multiplier effects that can at least partially revive economies though that also depends on how supply chains are reconstituted.

In the week from March 15 to March 21, 2020, 3.3 million workers filed for unemployment and the President of the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis, James Bullard, predicted that the unemployment rate in the second quarter could reach 30 per cent and that GDP could fall by 50 per cent.

In contrast, the government of Denmark is guaranteeing 75 per cent of salaries (up to $3288 a month) of those with annual salaries of $52,400: amounting to almost 13 per cent of GDP. Even in the UK, laid-off workers are being paid 80 per cent of their salaries and are guaranteed their jobs back once the economy picks up. However, the closure of borders has immobilized Eastern European workers who harvest crops from Sweden to Spain and could cause a major problem in food supplies.

Even if predictions of unemployment and falls in GDP are an exaggeration, it indicates that the scale of economic meltdown far exceeds that caused by the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09. During that time, China led the global economic recovery with a stimulus package worth $509 billion compared to $152 billion by the U.S. and $100 billion by Japan. Now, however, as the crisis hits China as well, it has the additional burden of many of its cities and regional governments being saddled with high debts.

The Democratic Party seems equally rudderless. Its presumptive presidential nominee, former Vice-President Joseph Biden has hunkered down at his home and has not been seen making policy statements. Though the Democrat-controlled House of Representatives passed an early bill, it didn't address fundamental problems and they are now likely to adopt the Senate version of the stimulus package, with minor revisions at best. Given the urgency of the situation and the strength of industry lobbies, much of the relief will, in any case, go to companies that have long avoided taxes including cruise lines that fly the flags of other nations than to the lower classes and to ethnic and racial minorities in the country.

The Second World War and the Cold War reconstituted the world economy on a new basis because the concentration of economic and political power in the United States enabled it to exercise intellectual leadership when most other industrial economies had been devastated, hegemony in the Gramscian sense. The United States no longer has a similar dominance. Nor does any other state or group of states.

What the pandemic makes clear though is that we need a fundamental change in institutional structures of the world economy. Wealth inequality has escalated everywhere in the world and is no longer sustainable. The emergence of a precariat, now subject to extraordinary deprivations by the shutdown of economic activities, is not the result of the pandemic or of low oil prices. State institutions have become increasingly privatized. Distinctions between centre-right and centre-left parties have been erased and neither one shows any inclination to compel Big Pharma to invest in research to preserve

public health and prevent the spread of infectious diseases. Indeed, fifteen of the eighteen major pharmaceutical companies have stopped research on antibiotics and anti-virals to focus on medicines that generate large profits: to treat male impotence, addiction from tranquillizers, and heart disease. Viruses jump more easily from animals to humans as nature is being destroyed and as cheap meat is dependent on factory farming which also has disastrous ecological consequences. It is imperative to move to more humane methods of food production and this would entail a drastic reduction in meat consumption.

How we address these issues—and the issue of global warming and climate change—will be key to a new, sustainable, and more equitable pattern of life. With the old dying and the new being unable to be born, we are condemned to an unstable and volatile future.

Migrant Labour, Informal Economy, and Logistics Sector in a Covid-19 World

By

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay

Yogesh Kumar, a 35-year-old fruit seller, broke into tears when asked about the loss of livelihood during the COVID-19 curfew/lockdown in Chandigarh Tri-city. He runs a small establishment on a hand cart at Jagatpur urban village in Chandigarh to feed his family of six. Over 7000 vendors of the city, who do not run shops in a permanent structure, are denied permission to run their trade even when they sell essential commodities. A few of them, however, managed to secure a pass from the local police and are seen delivering services in gated communities and residential campuses such as ours at IISER Mohali. Most of those who have found a way-out during the curfew to sell their commodities turn out to be locals of Chandigarh or Mohali. The migrant vendors have failed terribly in this race of running between police stations and city corporation offices to secure a pass. Yogesh Kumar—our respondent—is a migrant from UP and serves a locality which is popularly known as the 'mini UP' in the Tri-city area.

The UT administration and the Punjab Government strictly imposed a ban on street vending owing to the 21 days lockdown. Despitethe assurance of financial assistance from the government, the lack of transparency in listing out and licensing street vendors as per the provisions of the Street Vendors Act 2014, may lead to massive dispossession of vending spaces. Among the street vendors. One may recollect that Chandigarh administration conducted a brutal eviction drive of street vendors in late 2019 and early 2020 (supposedly) in a bid to implement the provision of zoning in the Street Vendors Act which is supposed to protect their livelihood! The street vendors whom I have managed to talk to during the lockdown attribute their current plight to a myriad set of state policies that predated the COVID-19 emergency. They, for instance, talk about demonetization and GST, the introduction of e-retail in essential commodities, and continued bureaucratic apathy toward the informal sector, which already drove them to the brink of extinction before the declaration of national lockdown.

As I write this essay, the news comes that the police has completely 'sealed' Jagatpur after a resident was found COVID-19 positiveon 2 April. The immediate shiver of this was felt the next morning in our gated campus as the vegetable vendor, who used to come daily to the campus in the last couple of weeks, could not do so to deliver some locally grown vegetables. Four days back, a migrant worker in one of our hostels died. It took a whole day for the cops to evacuate the body for cremation. Finally, they assembled a gang of young men from the same Jagatpur. This event became an occasion for bargaining between the cops and the Dalit men who were lured to perform the dirty job. Eventually, the men were able to secure a pass to walk back to their village near Kanpur in the UP.

The Making and Unmaking of Jagatpur as 'Mini UP'

How did Jagatpur come into existence as a residential hub for the migrant working class? How is this village related to the adjacent urban centres? It is well-known that Chandigarh was developed in the aftermath of National Independence as a planned city, with Panchkula in the north and Mohali in the south as two satellite urban frontiers for the absorption of a possible excess population that would, in course, try to settle in Chandigarh. After the bifurcation of the state of Punjabinto Punjab and Haryana, Chandigarh began to house two state headquarters along with itsunion territory secretariat. Panchkula was to become a prime city (and possibly in the unforeseeable future, the capital city) of Haryana while Mohali was given a similar rolefor Punjab. Panchkula and Mohali began to expand and to take a city-like character in subsequent decades, starting from the mid-1980s.

Chandigarh continued to host three secretariats, several central and state government installations, a very prominent defence setup and numerous social infrastructures such as the PGI, the Panjab University, many research institutes, schools and colleges. As a result, Chandigarh emerged as a city with a very strong public-sector middle-class, primarily serving the government and government undertakings. As were ached the 1980s, a large section of this middle-class began to retire from services without going back to their native towns. An interesting feature of the public sector middle class is that thanks to the assurance of permanent employment, this particular population can take long-term house-building loans at low-interest rate to build massive houses outshining their salaries. In summary, what we are saying is that real-estate in Chandigarh remained firmly and exclusively in the hands of a particular class of people and the government establishments. In addition, owing to the presence of a defence installation and numerous public institutions, hectares of prime land in the tri-city area remained out of the speculative land market. The remaining land in the tri-city area became extremely expensive and eminently speculation-worthy.

The poor could not penetrate the Tri-city. The civic regimes in the Tri-city remained remarkably resistant to popular encroachments in public spaces and vacant land. In this respect, the Chandigarh Tri-city region has

posed an anomaly to the overall trajectory of urban development in other parts of India. In those cities, universal adult franchise contributed immensely to the mass political formation, which meant a fundamental transformation in the relation between the municipal governments and the governed. By sheer number, the urban poor (such as East Bengali refugees, slum and squatter colony dwellers and street hawkers) became an important player in the city's political sphere. In most of India, the political aspirations and energies of democracy began to exceed the frame of institutional politics in the postcolonial context.

Chandigarh was constructed in such a way so that its architecture, its spatial layout and its roads inhibit the growth of this overwhelming popular political culture. The public transport system in the Tri-city was deliberately kept inefficient and insufficient so that per-capita transport expenditure would remain considerably high (when compared with cities with efficient mass public transport system). Such a feature of the Tri-city proved very effective to keep the original plan and layout almost intact as the poorer social classes could hardly afford toreside in such a revanchist city. The middle class of the city, on the other hand, neededto access cheap labour to maintain their lifestyle and standard of living. Villages such as Jagatpur, Kandala, Kambala etc., proved to be ideal locations to keep this low-costservice giving population. These villages are almost adjacent to Chandigarh and Mohali, yet they are virtually invisible to the city dweller thanks to the elevated rail track connecting Chandigarh and SAS Nagar rail stations.

Between the late 1980s and early 2000s, these villages witnessed a profound land use transformation as they began to emerge as thelow-cost ghettos of the migrant as well as the displaced population from the Tri-city. During our fieldwork in Jagatpur in mid-2019, we, for instance, found a rather interesting land use development. We found that some of the land-owning families recycled some of their agricultural lands to build low-cost tenement structures and rented rooms to households earning their livelihood in various informal sector occupations in the tri-city. Many of them work as construction sector labourer, domestic help, transport sector labourers and are often employed throughout out-sourcing agencies to various institutions as security guards, cleaning staff and so on. From the early 2000s,the government began acquiring landin the vicinity of these peri-urban neighbourhoods for the expansion of an airport and for building faster connectivity between the prime neighbourhoods of the tri-city and the airport. A huge parcel of land in adjacent villages such as Kandalais kept-in-waiting or acquisition by the airport authority. The primary occupation of the residents of these villages is still agriculture. However, these lands cannot be sold or bought.

In 2007, two working-class colonies in Phase 8 Mohali were relocated to Jagatpur and thus by 2011, Jagatpur became the second largest village (in terms of population size) in the SAS Nagar District. Between 2001 and 2011, the population in this village increased twelve times. In 2019, we conducted a

'three-phase' socio-economic survey[1] of 200 household and seven dormitory arrangements (each with 7 to 15 beds) for single male users. We brought 1225 individuals out of a total census population of 6673 individuals under our survey. We found the following demographic features of Jagatpur:

More than 57.5 percent of the households in this village were migrants from the Uttar Pradesh, 13.2 percent migrated from Bihar, and only 6 percent of the total population could be termed as 'local' who had been residing in the village for more than two decades. Migration from UP and Bihar appeared to be 'permanent' in nature, as in most of the cases the entire family unit migrated. The largest chunk of migration from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar happened between 2009 and 2016, and it was definitely connected to massive urbanisation in the adjacent cities of Mohali and Zirakpur, the construction of a new airport and subsequently an 'aero-city' near the airport and the operationalisation of the 'knowledge city' in sector 81 in Mohali. More than 22 percent of the total earning population (under survey)were daily wage earners, out of which only 16 percent received wages at the rate of minimum wage stipulated for the urban areas in Punjab for May 2019. About 23 percent described themselves as 'self-employed'. The above two were the most populous occupational categories. We found that most of the daily wage earners were engaged in the construction sector (about 49 percent). About 35 percent workers in this category were found to be engaged in major wholesale and retail markets in Chandigarh and Mohali, as transport coolies. It was also found that most of the self-employed people (53 percent) were street vendors in Chandigarh, Zirakpur, Mohali and in Jagatpur itself. We unravelled close ethnic, family and village connection and interdependency between the transport coolies and vendors of fruits and vegetables residing in Jagatpur.

Needless to say, the transport coolies and vendors of fruits and vegetables were the first to lose their employment as wholesale and retail market places began to shut down as one of the initial measures to resist the spread of COVID 19. I came to know from the people I knew there in Jagatpur that a large section had started a long 'on-foot' voyage to their homes amidst uncertainty and in spite of having the informed apprehension that inter-state borders might be sealed by the time they would cross Haryana. Most of those who decided to go back did not have PDS entitlement in Jagatpur. The local NGOs, groups of grassroots workers and Gurdwaras, were supplying food, but it was still inadequate, and access to food and ration depended upon the location of their residence. Those whose dwellings were closer to the main street and the approach-gate of the ghetto accessed more and consumed more than those who lived far inside the settlement.

The sudden 'reverse' migration jeopardised the pre-existing social and geographical boundaries. The barefoot mobile bodies became the agents that turned quarantine upside down and transformed major inter-state transit

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[1]The first phase was conducted as a part of Masters Project in our Research Group by Parikshit Parihar: Peri-urban Developments in Chandigarh Tri-City: The Case of Jagatpur (under the joint supervision of Ramajit Kaur Johal and Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay)

points as 'hotspots' of disease and apprehension. The very act of moving together became an act of insurgency. Circulation became pathological while obstruction became the norm. What is left of capitalism when obstruction returns as the order of things?

Two Hypotheses on Lockdown and Indian Economy

Now, I will present two hypotheses about the likely impact of lockdown in Indian economy.

Hypothesis 1: The crisis of 2020 will hit the Informal Economy more Dearly than the Crisis of 2008-2009

Saktiman Ghosh of National Hawker Federation is an 'organic intellectual' and has been an astute observer of time. In his opinion, a major difference between the crisis of 2008-2009 and the current one is that in the former the informal sector remained largely unaffected and it continued to transfer subsidy to the formal sector. 'In the current scenario', says Saktiman, 'the informal sector is going to shrink, leading to a massive dislocation in the economy as a whole', and thus completing a whole chain of destruction 'that started with demonetization'.

The global crisis of 2008-2009 coincided in India with a number of legal and institutional reforms by the first UPA Government that kept the informal economy viable amidst stress and strain in the corporate and banking sectors. The shift of rhetoric from 'shining urban India' of the NDA 1 to the 'aamaadmi' of the UPA 1regimewas accompanied by an unprecedented expansion of the law, blurring the original distinction between civil and political rights as the 'fundamental rights', and that of the basic entitlements necessary for the everyday social reproduction of labour set in the non-justiciable 'Directive Principles' of the Constitution. A series of interventions starting from MGNREGA to the Forest Rights Act and the Right to Food Act legislated the right of the poor to the basic socio-economic conditions for social reproduction. Of course, such interventions represented a 'prose of counterinsurgency' from the above in response to the political society in the mainstream, the Naxalite movements in the margins. One may also argue that such measures were taken to expel the Left from political significance. However, as Sanjay Ruparelia puts it, '"India's new rights agenda" resulted in the expansion of the space of citizenship, claiming 'universal rights'[2]. These years were valuable for street vendors as well. Between 2004 and 2009, several important discussions took place to legalise street vending, acknowledging it as one of the major components of the service sector. In addition, the NCEUS gave a solid policy goal for informal economy researchers, trade unions and the government to achieve in terms of measuring and bringing the contribution of the informal economy within the national accounting system.

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[2] Sanjay Ruparelia, "India's New Rights Agenda: Genesis, Promises, Risks," *Pacific Affairs* 86, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 569–90, https://doi.org/10.5509/2013863569.

The research on the informal economy during the first decade of this century revealed three important developments: 1) in order to survive in the globally competitive market, there emerged a move for the standardisation of labour relations and commodity chains within the informal economy. 2) scholars noticed a dramatic decline in the growth of casual employment since the beginning of the new century, while there had been a corresponding growth in the number of regular workers and self-employed within the informal sector. 3) There had been a significant increase in organisational activities *outside* the scope of official trade unions in both the formal and the informal sectors. Scholars have reported two kinds of unionisation: the extension of the already registered trade unions, accommodating the workers in the informal economy or providing affiliation for the new unions in the informal economy; and unions organised by the informal workers themselves outside the fold of the existing legal trade union complex. Both types of unions are seen to combine the issues of labour rights and representation with the concerns of economic and business development. In short, the three major attributes of the informal economy—namely, the existence ofa casual labour force, para-legality, and lack of organisation—were put into question, a move that I elsewhere called 'un-informalisation'.

Thus, Saktiman Ghosh's hypothesis that the informal economy rescued India from the crisis of 2008-2009 does not seem to be ill-conceived. According to Saktiman, the crisis of 2020 is going to impact on the informal economy more dearly because of certain legacy issues, much of which has to do with demonetization and e-retailing. According to a study we did in East Delhi on the impact of demonetization on street vendors and another survey we conducted on demonetization in various vegetable and fruit markets in central India, demonetization interrupted cash flow in these markets that resulted in the shrinking of circuits of circulation in these markets. Saktiman estimates that e-retail has destroyed 70 percent of physical retailing in the market place in some of the major cities. The national lockdown in March-April, 2020 came when the networks of the informal economy were already strained and were yet to recover from the effects of demonetization. The shrinking of the informal economy will result in the decline in the quantum of social subsidy that it transfers for the sustenance of the profit-oriented accumulation economy, which is already under significant crisis. Moreover, a decline in the informal economy means an inevitable reduction of the purchasing power of 85 percent of Indians, leading to the crisis of over-production.

Hypothesis 2: The Lockdown is likely to adversely Impact on the Logistics Sector and the Logistical City

The recovery from the crisis of 2008-2009 happened through massive investments in infrastructures, logistics and in the transformation of industrial

and bazaar cities into what Samaddar[3] calls the 'logistical city'. What is a logistical city? Let us explain this process a little further.

Marx says in Grundrisse, 'continuity of production presupposes the suspension of circulation time', while the nature of capital presupposes that it travels through different phases of circulation and situations separate in time. The globally connected cities stand at the crossroad of these two contradictory impulses with physical, legal, social and financial infrastructures to synchronise the gap between production and consumption which ultimately leads to the erosion of the distinction between production and circulation. The city in the hegemony of supply chain capitalism is thus tasked to engineer an architecture of coordination between the 'great variables' of territory, communication and speed.

A logistical city is also an informatised city. Interoperability and seamless exchange of data between multiple users dissolve 'transport paradigm that revolves primarily around the overcoming of *space* in favour of a paradigm in which the control and coordination of *timing* are at the forefront'[4]. In fact, this is the infrastructural history behind Wal-Mart's reinvention of merchant capital as giant retail networks operating through Toyotist principle[5] that hinges on a more efficient synchronisation between production and consumption. In high-frequency trading, more emphasis is paid in shortening the turnover time through low-latency within data centres which makes the geography of data centres important as an increase in the distance reduces speed. The synchronisation of intermodal transportation of goods through the quick exchange of data and information becomes its central mode of operation. Eventually, data becomes the driver of further decisions on the market, money transmissions, targeted policy regime, etc.

The transition from a bazaar centric to a logistical city further valorises urban land as it becomes the prime outlet of capital, and ultimately produces an indistinction between rent and interest with interest rate becoming crucial for developers. In short, in the logistical hub, rent becomes the prime count of wealth and a new image of profit as surplus profit transforms into ground rent. This double transformation happens through an over-exploitation of what Samaddar[6] calls the 'transit labour' comprised of multitudes of unsettled migrant bodies. These labouring groups are the prime

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[3]Ranabir Samaddar, "The Logistical City," *IIC Quarterly, Special Issue on "The Contemporary Urban Conundrum"* 43, no. 3 & 4 (2017), http://www.iicdelhi.nic.in/writereaddata/Publications/QuarterlyFiles/636301135846 156739_00_IIC_Prelims-Final.pdf.

[4] Alexander Klose, *The Container Principle: How a Box Changes the Way We Think*, Infrastructures Series (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2015).

[5] Michael Hardt, "Affective Labor," *Boundary 2* 26, no. 2 (1999): 89–100.

[6]Ranabir Samaddar, "The Logistical City," *IIC Quarterly, Special Issue on "The Contemporary Urban Conundrum"* 43, no. 3 & 4 (2017), http://www.iicdelhi.nic.in/writereaddata/Publications/QuarterlyFiles/636301135846 156739_00_IIC_Prelims-Final.pdf.

movers, producers and consumers of the informal and fringe economies. They live in Jagatpur-like Migrant ghettos in the margins of the cities. An estimate suggests, 40 percent of the urban population lives in informal settlements, and 20 percent of Indians are internal migrants. Their cluttered existence unsettles, fragments and at times re-ruralises the city while remaining invisible in urban public discourse.

Implications of the Lockdown for Capitalism

The lockdown threatens contemporary capitalism in three ways. First, the above discussion on logistical revolution suggests, major investments in the decade following the last major crisis happened in infrastructures mobilised to shorten the 'turnover time of consumption'[7]. To facilitate this, significant investment was made for the establishment of data centres. Data Centres, as we know, make data interoperable by ensuring connectivity and usability. Multi-user Data Centres (MUDCs) of contemporary times emerged in the middle of the previous decade as emphasis gradually switched toward subscription and capacity-on-demand services in the IT industry[8]. The emergence of MUDCs was implicated in some of the key developments in the industry in the last couple of decades, i.e., the enhancement of data transfer capacities, acceleration in data retrieval and the ascendancy of technologies such as cloud etc, and the spectacular increase in the operational capability of delineative processing of data. In aggregate then, by the mid-2000s data centres successfully superseded the earlier era dominated by networks of millions of semi-autonomous computing devices. The mutation of these technologies in data centres has further reduced the turnover time, now to be understood as 'time taken for the advanced capital value to return to its initial form recovering its initial amount'[9] (Park and Xu 2010), which is at the heart of the contemporary information and communication revolution in capital. This is the infrastructural history behind supply-chain capitalism. Lockdown means a near-complete suspension of this massive logistical apparatus. The implication of this is the onset of a massive devaluation of commodities. As Marx tells us, devaluation occurs when commodities cannot be sold 'in time'.

Second, social distancing measures will outlive more drastic and extraordinary measures such as lockdown and curfew. In India, social

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[7] David Harvey, "Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19," Jacobin, March 20, 2020, https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/david-harvey-coronavirus-political-economy-disruptions.

[8] Zheli Liu et al., "Multi-User Searchable Encryption with Coarser-Grained Access Control in Hybrid Cloud," in *2013 Fourth International Conference on Emerging Intelligent Data and Web Technologies* (2013 Fourth International Conference on Emerging Intelligent Data and Web Technologies (EIDWT), Xi'an, Shaanxi, China: IEEE, 2013), 249–55, https://doi.org/10.1109/EIDWT.2013.48.

[9] Park and Xu, 2010. 'Turnover Time and Its Relation to the Rate of Profit', www.peri.umass.edu › pdf › newschool › NS-UMASS_conference_2010

distancing has a much longer history because of its association with the institution of untouchability. The epidemic may re-invent modernise this institution. This will have a telling impact for restaurant, leisure, tourism and aviation industries. David Harvey[10]clubs these as 'instantaneous consumerism' that played a major role in salvaging capitalism from the previous crisis a decade ago. Harvey estimates, 'international visits increased from 800 million to 1.4 billion between 2010 and 2018'. Needless to say, these are the sectors that are hit very hard by social distancing.

The third implication of this crisis will unfold over a much longer time. Devaluation will accompany a further decline in demand. The corporations will lay off a section of their disposable workers, or, they will try to replace them by mechanical upgradation through one-time-investment which (i.e. the latter), in the long run, will set the 'tendency' of the 'rate of profit to fall'. The 'math' behind this is as follows:

Suppose:
C=total capital
c=constant capital (means of production, machinery, etc)
v=variable capital or labour wages
C=c+v
S=surplus-value
S'= rate of surplus value
P'=rate of profit
Then:
c/v refers to 'organic composition of capital'
S'=S/v and hence S=S'v
P'=S/C =S'v/(c+v)
P':S'::v:C
Since C>v hence S'>P'
The difference between S' and P' is measured by c/v
P'=S/C=S/(v+c)
Now, by dividing both numerator and denominator by v, we get the following equation (Morishima 1973):
P'=S/(v+c)=(S/v)/(1+c/v).

What the equation clearly displays is that as relative investment (c/v in the denominator) increases, the rate of profit tends to fall, assuming a constant rate of surplus-value/rate of exploitation (S/v in the numerator). Marx writes:

> The progressive tendency for the general rate of profit to fall is thus simply the expression, peculiar to the capitalist mode of production, of the progressive development of the social productivity of labour. This does not mean that the rate of profit may not fall temporarily for other reasons as

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[10] David Harvey, "Anti-Capitalist Politics in the Time of COVID-19," Jacobin, March 20, 2020, https://jacobinmag.com/2020/03/david-harvey-coronavirus-political-economy-disruptions.

well, but it does prove that it is a self-evident necessity, deriving from the nature of the capitalist mode of production itself, that as it advances the general average rate of surplus-value must be expressed in a falling general rate of profit. Since the mass of living labour applied continuously declines in relation to the mass of objectified labour that it sets in motion, i.e. the productively consumed means of production, the part of this living labour that is unpaid and objectified in surplus-value must also stand in an ever-decreasing ratio to the value of the total capital applied. But this ratio between the mass of surplus-value and the total capital applied in fact constitutes the rate of profit, which must therefore steadily fall[11].

History tells us, epidemics bring with them technological innovations. COVID-19 will not be an exception to this historical rule. COVID-19 might turn out to be the test-bed for the normalization of 'work from home' in non-manual labour-intensive sectors of production and service. Needless to say, this will make a large section of workers in public and private sectors redundant. The above equation suggests, 'work from home' might not salvage capitalism from the current crisis.

Recommendations

I would like to advance and reiterate three well-known recommendations:
First, there should be a radical redistribution of India's 60 million tons of surplus food grains. This is a demand put forth by P. Sainath.

Second, as an immediate short-term measure during the lockdown, street vendors should be permitted to source essential commodities from local primary producers and artisans and retail the commodities to end-users. This is the time for the revival of local and self-sufficient production and consumption networks as a more viable alternative to the massive supply chains.

Third, this is the high-time for the implementation of the universal basic income. This measure will recover the purchasing power of the poor, which will eventually boost up demand. This measure should be accompanied by universal healthcare and education under the government.

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The Body in Surveillance: What to Do with the Migrants in the Corona Lock Down

By

Badri Narayan Tiwari

In the dark times
Will there be singing?
There will be singing
Of the dark times

(Bertolt Brecht, *Svendborg Poems, German War Primer*, 1939)

Introducing the Subject Body

Rewind to the decade of the 90s. That was the era in which India was ushering in economic liberalisation and what can now be termed as a catch phrase, called globalisation that began capturing the political imagination of the world. National boundaries became blurred, economic integration and cross-border migration gathered momentum as world leaders bought the globalisation story even before it began to play out.

Fast-forward to the present day. Suddenly, globalisation is no longer seen as the panacea it was 25-30 years ago and migration, earlier regarded as a desirable social process that supported the cause of a global community, is now viewed with trepidation and fear. What caused this 180-degree turn in mindset?

Before we answer that question, let us take a quick look at some numbers. By one estimate, some 17 million Indians were living outside the country in 2017 and around 391,000 went abroad as unskilled migrants. According to the 2001 census, 259 million people migrated from one state to another and from village to village.

Every day, the country welcomes migrants into its fold while simultaneously seeing a stream of ethnic Indians moving overseas for work or to become global citizens. It is a typical cycle, albeit not necessarily a vicious one from the emigrant's point of view -- on the one hand, the desire to

improve one's economic lot provides the stimulus to emigrate and on the other, financial ability to emigrate provides mobility to the mover. Cross-border movement of population promotes multiculturalism, boosts economic growth and has been known to improve work ethic as well.

Migrants and Corona Fear

But there is the flip side to migration. For starters, it has the potential to radically change the demographics and culture of a nation, especially when the influx of foreigners is complemented by an outflow of the ethnic population. The other aspect, which has come into focus recently due to the spread of the coronavirus, is the potential of the accepting nation to import diseases from the incoming foreigner or returning Indian. Everybody's uncle will tell you that the Coronavirus spread from Chinese migrants to the populations in their host countries, and that disease made inroads into India due to the influx of Indians returning home from abroad and foreigners visiting the country. There is little argument against the theory that entrepreneurs, businessman, employed public, and entertainers who travel to various parts of the world have contributed a lot to the dissemination of this malady in India. This is especially true in the case of semi-skilled and unskilled Indian migrants returning from the Middle East.

The fallout of this is quite evident. The traditional welcome accorded to those who returned from destinations within and outside India has given way to a great deal of fear especially, in cases where the returnee is from the US and Europe, or from Mumbai, Pune and Kerala, where Covid-19 infection is rampant.

Covid-19, in fact, seems to have stirred up an older theory about HIV-AIDS having made deep inroads into the country through lower middle-class migrants, and poor labourers. This segment has traditionally been treated with much disdain in larger cities like Mumbai, Delhi and Ahmedabad, with the affluent sections viewing them as unclean and keeping them at more than an arm's length, although they have no qualms about using their labour in their factories and homes. This problem is more conspicuous in larger metros like Mumbai, where stark lines have virtually bifurcated the city into the have-not segment of slum-dwellers, chawl and basti residents, and the richer classes living in high-rises.

Yet coronavirus is different from AIDS in that it has wrecked this great divide and brought home to the affluent sections that the disease is agnostic to economic status. Unlike AIDS, it isn't largely limited to the poorer class, and that you could contract with as much, if not more, ease from your next-door neighbour or best friend as you could from your maid or factory hand. So suddenly, colleagues at work and social circles have become the new untouchables, to use a particularly harsh term. You don't practice social distancing with your laundryman or maid--you practice it with those of your kind and stature.

One argument states that it is also out of context to believe that poor migrants are the principle carriers of epidemics in the host country. More

often than not, it is the other way round, and they contract diseases in the destination country and bring it back home.

This mindset is exemplified in a folk song popular among womenfolk in the villages of Bihar and Eastern Uttar Pradesh, which goes: *'RailyanaBairi, Jahajiyanabairi, Paisawabairina, Morsaiyakabilmawe re paisawabairina'*. (Neither the rail, nor the ship, only money is our enemy, for taking away our husbands to distant places for work).

The sum and substance, however, is that while economic mobility adds to the GDP and foreign exchange reserves, it also brings with it negatives in the form of epidemics that have the potential to wreck large-scale destruction of humanity. The silver lining, as history has shown, is that humanity has this remarkable potential to rise from the ashes and reinvent itself.

A friend from Uttar Pradesh's Jaunpur district-town, which has been under lockdown due to the coronavirus spread, puts this understanding of globalisation quite succinctly with this sage piece of advice: 'Save yourself from *Bideshi* and *Pardeshi'*. Bideshi is the Hindi word for foreigner, though it also refers to the native who settled abroad or stayed there for years at a stretch. Pardesi is the term north Indians use to describe migrants seeking livelihood in other nations.

Migrant and Chain of Epidemic

The poor, laborer, villagers and various kinds of subalterns usually don't carry pandemics. Those who are economically better and acquire the capacity to move, or those who aspire to become richer, frequent flyers, foreign attracted socialites, few bureaucrats and so called global public appear as first carrier of epidemics. Those who are called by us as' dirty log'(dirty people) they come later in the chain of spread of pandemics but white colored, aspirant middle class and those who captured a large share of benefits from neo-liberal economy initiated in India after 1990 receive and disseminate epidemics. So in these context, first carrier of' pandemics dirt' are not in most cases poor, slum dwellers and villagers who are considered 'other' by urban centric cultural elites and mobile middle class *nagrik*. These poor, laborer and lower class people don't have gated apartments. They reside in slums, pathways, jhuggi-jhopari, and foot path, they appear as 'over visible social body' in one sense or another. That is why they get blamed as the carrier for all epidemics and pollution.

If someone looks into the history of pandemics then they will see that in most cases explorations, conquest, commerce and migrations have paved the way for the development of networks that resulted in the spread of pandemics in different parts of the world. People who followed these networks such as explorers, colonial entrepreneurs such as those who built plantations and colonial settlement, army troops, travelers, overseas migrants etc. became carriers of most disastrous epidemics. The aggressive growth of colonialism and capitalism in one sense played productive role in outbreaks of epidemics in human society. These communities emerge from the class of

people who acquired capacity and condition to become mobile and it was they who exposed the other world to the chain of epidemics. They were mostly economically well off or at least relatively economically better off and they compelled displacement of large sections of people due to the expansion of colonialism after 17th century in various parts of world. Their aggressive policies had another side effect apart from the growth of the mercantilism and capitalism and that is the spread of pandemics. In most cases they were the carrier of many infectious diseases.

In the second century BC, 'Antonine plague ', which circulated in Rome, it is said came with the army troops who returned from Middle East after a war. The 'Justinian plague' also reached Constantinople around 541 AD with grain ships from China travelling via African and Egypt. It spread through the crew, merchants, ship managers, soldiers and workers. Some historians believe that the 1871 Plague which was recognized as the 'Indian Plague' all over the world in fact did not originate in Bengal but reached Bengal with the Irish army and travelled to various parts of Bengal and also other parts of India with army troops and traders.

Migration in various forms and in various stages of history brought money, culture and diseases together to the home land. The small pox, plague, yellow fever, cholera, Russian flu, Asian flu, Swine flu, Syphilis, HIV in most cases spread at first in different parts of the world with various kinds of migrants and mobile traders, missionaries, ship crew, army troops and rich planters. The locally settled, immobile or less mobile or mobile people in inter or intra state appears as 'passive innocent recipient' of these pandemics and became 'compelled carrier' of these diseases.

Having a good understanding of this phenomenon, colonial powers who took a huge population groups as plantation laborers during the 18th and 19th centuries to places such as Mauritius, Fiji Islands, and Guyana made a system of complete health checkup of migrants before loading them in ships for various destinations. The main worry of the colonial administration was that these 'migrants bodies' should not work as carriers of any epidemic infections. They colonized their bodies and made regulations for how migrant bodies behave in plantations. However, they couldn't fully regulate their army officers, missionaries, doctors, planters, colonial managers so rigorously. So many times they worked as carrier of pandemics.

AS we saw in the recent case of Corona these affluent, frequent flyers, business entrepreneurs, travelers, those who are studying or working abroad, singers, players of international tournaments have emerged as first carriers of this virus. It is true that it has also circulated in India through skilled or semi-skilled lower middle class or middle-class Indian migrants working in Middle East but Corona may have brought even in Middle Eastern countries by its affluent and mobile sections who may have been frequent flyers themselves. Indian workers in Middle East may have appeared again as innocent recipient of this epidemic brought to Middle Eastern countries by affluent and highly mobile population of Middle East society. In India this epidemic is again innocently received by poor taxi drivers, shopkeeper, restaurant workers, internal migrant laborers working in the cities like Mumbai

and Delhi and other sections of our society. So, the Corona case proves again that dollar and diseases may travel together from destination to home land and vice versa. It does not mean that we can stop flow of population from one part of world to another part but we should always take lesson from history of pandemics and keep our selves alert. Otherwise every future epidemic may repeat itself in more disastrous human tragedy.

Biological Body and Fear

Are our poor and migrant laborer reduced to mere biological bodies in the Corona pandemic created conditions? Have we deleted human meaning from their bodies and existence? I am raising these questions in the context of recent happening in Bareli of Uttar Pradesh where hundreds of migrants including women and children who managed to escape from Delhi and reached to Bareli to go to their homes were forced to take chemical bath as disinfectant. According to sources the chemical used in this spraying was a combination of sodium hypochlorite and water but district authority explained that it was only a plain solution of chlorine and water. It is reported that this disinfectant is being used by municipal corporation personnel to clean buses, floor, metallic surfaces like door knobs and frames etc. Similar case happened in Kerala where in the Wayanad district fire and safety officials used spray as disinfectant on people crossing chauraha. It was alleged that the chemical used in this spray was sodium hypochlorite but fire personnel clarified that it was a soap solution.

These incidences suggest that these inhuman treatments with migrants are taking place due two reasons-first, our administration grabbed by middle class and elite mentality often perceive the poor, migrants and low job workers as unclean, dirty and in most cases possibly infected bodies and second, we treat them merely as a biological body and not as a socio-human body. If we define them as bare biological body, we treat them only biologically. We see them as merely a body which is a suspected carrier of disease. Perhaps not even biological bodies, in fact I would like to go a bit further and state that in these cases, we treat them like doors, knobs and frames.

These incidences also suggest that during the days of Corona, we are cultivating and mobilizing fear and anxieties that erode human qualities such as sensitivity, concern, and care (Seva) from our individual and social-selves. These fears have the effect of projecting our own people as our possible enemy and from whom we are trying to save ourselves by minimizing contact. Eminent post modernist thinker Giorgio Agamben while investigating Corona crisis rightly opined that we are turning into a society which has no value other than survival. He further said that Corona condition is transforming us into a society that no longer believes in anything but 'bare life'. We are losing friendships, affections and religious and political convictions. Taking clue again from Agamben, I would like to say that we are replacing human contact with only machine generated messages that are transmitted through internet

and smart phones. We have left our all human responsibility on our massages, social sites and smart phones.

The fear of getting sick makes us more and more selfish and self-centered. Agamben rightly observed that 'Fear' is a poor advisor. Bare-life and danger of losing it is not something that unite people but blinds them and separate them. To observe the similar condition, our Prime Minister Narendra Modi also appealed recently that 'do social distancing but forge emotional closeness'. This emotional closeness may save human face and human nature of our being in the time of crisis.

Recent happenings with migrant laborer and poor in the lock down time show we are not giving proper human and civilized treatment to our migrants either in the destination or in their home land and home state. Recently in the Siwan district of Bihar the migrants who managed to reach the district town of their home were put in very small space under an iron gate in very infectious conditions. They were crying and making appeal for rescue the whole night. They were rescued the next day and were put in trucks to take them to their respective panchayats where corona isolation centers are located. These happenings also show that we don't consider our poor and migrant laborer as valuable humans. We see them as unclean, dirty and filthy and every one of them are possible pandemic suspects. The stereotype of suspect of virus infected body turn them in popular perception as a body thatis shorn off human value, dignity and respect in our corona produced common sense that is dominant among us now. Recently the Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar also opined that their movement will break lockdown and disseminate diseases. It is interesting to know that the money these migrants earn from their hard work, reach their homes and strengthen the state economy. But today they are in turn a body which is under constant surveillance, vigilance and are controlled. In this Corona affected mentality the body of one is considered as a danger to the other. We need to understand that this condition may be allowed to capture and regulate our body but not our heart and mind which is in the Indian sense full of sensibility and SewaBhav(sense of service).

Hunger, Humiliation, and Death: Perils of Migrant Workers in the Time of COVID-19

By

Utsa Sarmin

Protective gear-clad police personnel order a group of men, women and children to sit and close their eyes. The group obeys. They squat. The police then spray what is being reported as bleach, to "disinfect" the group. Many cries out as the bleach sting their eyes. Another police person video-records s them being disinfected from the novel Coronavirus (COVID 19). The entire incident was made public to show the police's effort of sanitizing migrant workers returning from various places to their native homes in India's northern state of Uttar Pradesh (UP). The incident took place in Bareilly district - about 270 km from Lucknow, the capital of UP.

"Under Chief Minister's Office's supervision, those affected are being treated. The civic body and fire brigade team were asked to sanitise buses...but they did this because they were overzealous,"[1] Bareilly District Magistrate tweeted after facing an uproar from the civil society for the inhumane treatment of the migrant workers whose lives have become more vulnerable than ever since Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a nationwide lockdown of 21 days on March 24 to fight the spread of COVID-19.[2]

As of April 4, 9:30 AM IST, the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center reported 1,099,389confirmed cases of coronavirus out of which it has taken 58,901 lives.[3] Amidst this outbreak which has been

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[1]Alok Pandey, "Bleach Sprayed On Migrants On Return To UP, Shows Shocking Video," NDTV.com, March 30, 2020, https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/coronavirus-india-lockdown-disinfectant-sprayed-on-migrants-on-return-to-up-shows-shocking-video-2202916.

[2] "Modi Announces Coronavirus Lockdown 'to Save India' – Video," *The Guardian*, March 25, 2020, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2020/mar/25/modi-announces-coronavirus-lockdown-to-save-india-video

[3] "Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center," Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, accessed March 31, 2020, https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/.

officially declared a pandemic by the World Health Organization,[4] many nations, especially the Western nations, are announcing total lockdowns to control the spread of the virus.

However, in India, the lockdown spelt disaster for many. For example, a story carried by the *BBC* on March 28 explains how the sudden decision by the Indian government is harming India's poorest, mostly daily wage earners. It tells the story of Suresh Shah and his brother, Ramprasad, who have been selling vegetables in Noida for more than 15 years. When they went out with their carts to sell vegetables after the lockdown was announced, the police abused them and beaten them up brutally before giving them a chance to explain. "I was hit so hard that even today I am struggling to sit. But what hurts even more is that it was a huge loss for me as I only make around 300 rupees every day in profits," Suresh told the *BBC*.[5] His brother said that they need to earn for their family but while at it, they are also trying to help people stay indoors by selling vegetable from their cart.

Another section hit hard by this lockdown is the migrant labourers. India is home to around 100 million internal migrant labourers.[6] They travel from various states, especially from states like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, West Bengal to Delhi, Maharashtra, Kerala, etc. to perform unskilled or semi-skilled jobs. Most of them are daily wage labourers who are facing economic precarity due to the sudden lockdown. In fact, even before the announcement, the workers started witnessing a decline in their income due to social distancing and isolation. A report by Reuters from March 21, three days before the lockdown was announced, showed how the migrant workers in Maharashtra were rushing back home in anticipation of economic deficiency. The western state of India closed all non-essential services till March 31 before Modi announced lockdown which resulted in an exodus of the migrant workers. The report mentions, "For Indians who drive rickshaws or run food stalls, the economic shock of such control measures has been huge, pushing them to leave for family homes where they typically do not pay rent and food is cheaper."[7]

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[4] Medaris Anna Miller and Hilary Brueck, "World Health Organization Declares the Coronavirus a Pandemic," Business Insider, November 3, 2020, https://www.businessinsider.in/science/news/world-health-organization-declares-the-coronavirus-a-pandemic/articleshow/74582336.cms.

[5] Soutik Biswas, "'Beaten and Abused for Doing My Job in Lockdown,'" *BBC News*, March 28, 2020, sec. India, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52063286

[6] "Hungry, Desperate: India Virus Controls Trap Its Migrant Workers | India News | Al Jazeera," accessed April 4, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/ajimpact/hungry-desperate-india-virus-controls-trap-migrant-workers-200402031123631.html.

[7] Shilpa jamkhandikar and Prashant Waydande, "Poor Indians Flee to Villages as Coronavirus Measures Take Heavy Toll," *Reuters*, March 21, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-migrants-idUSKBN2180KL.

Since then Indian and international media have extensively reported on the tolls of the lockdown on the migrant labourers in India. Due to poor planning by the central government and absence of any policy to help them, thousands of workers with their families had to walk for hundreds of kilometres to reach home as all transportation services were halted after the lockdown was announced. Along with bearing the physical exertion, these workers had to shield themselves from continuous assault from the police which in many places lathi-charged the marching workers and humiliated them by making them doing sit-ups while holding their ears, a form of punishment widely used in the subcontinent mainly to discipline unruly children. In some videos circulated on social media, one can see the police making the workers jumping while squatting in an attempt to teach them a lesson through humiliation for violating the lockdown.[8]

Nonetheless, the migrant labourers, having no other options, braved their long marches which ultimately resulted in deaths of many due to hunger, dehydration, and exhaustion. Ranveer Singh, a 38-year-old migrant worker from Maharashtra, who worked as a delivery boy for a restaurant in Delhi, was the first one who lost his life, not because of coronavirus but because of the toll of walking hundreds of kilometres without food or shelter. He was walking back home with other workers to his villageBadfara, when he collapsed in Agra, 100 kilometres away from home, due to exhaustion, and died of a cardiac arrest.[9]

More than 20 people lost their lives in this mayhem since then. *The Wire* reported on March 30 that 22 migrant workers and kin lost their lives since the lockdown started while the official death toll from coronavirus stands at 62 including 55 foreign nationals.[10]

"At least 17 migrant labourers and their family members – including five children – have lost their lives so far in the course of their desperate efforts to return home since Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced on March 24 that a 21-day lockdown would kick off within four hours. The total number of lockdown-related deaths stands at 22... Aside from these deaths, and those of two others who were not migrant workers, an 11-year-old boy also reportedly died of hunger on March 27 in Bhojpur area of Bihar as the

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[8] "Facebook," accessed April 4, 2020,
https://www.facebook.com/sarkar.supriyo/videos/10212885708257556/UzpfSTE2
NzEzNjcxNzc6MzA2MDYxMTI5NDk5NDE0Ojc1OjA6MTU4ODMxNjM5OToz
MzM2NTkzMDI3MzIxODU4Mw/.
[9] Dipankar Ghose, "Last Call of Man Who Died Walking: Lene Aa SakteHoToh Aa Jao," *The Indian Express* (blog), March 30, 2020,
https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-lockdown-migrant-movement-labour-death-delhi-agra-morena-6337959/.
[10] "Coronavirus Pandemic: Death Toll in India Rises to 62, Cases Surges Past 2,500 : The Tribune India," March 4, 2020,
https://www.tribuneindia.com/news/nation/coronavirus-pandemic-death-toll-in-india-rises-to-62-cases-surges-past-2-500-65010.

family could not arrange for food due to the strict implementation of the lockdown. The total number of deaths due to the lockdown is now 22."[11]

Disturbing scenes from Delhi flooded the social media as soon as thousands of workers who were trying to leave for home got stranded in the Delhi-UP border as all inter-state borders were closed without any measures in place to help the workers. On March 29, *The Indian Express* reported that the UP government finally started bus services for the stranded workers. However, the buses started charging exorbitant fees from them i.e. anything between INR 400 to 1200 which the workers could not afford resulting in conflict and clash with bus conductors.[12]

Even when the workers could manage to return home, they are facing stigma from their neighbours. DivyaVarma, the programme manager at Aajeevika Bureau, a migrant workers' rights group based in Rajasthan told *The Caravan* that after the migrants make the perilous journey to reach their native homes, they are stigmatized by the local people. "Everyone has that fear, everyone is scared that those who have come from outside are suffering from the disease. There are cases of people physically harming those who have come back from the cities," she said.[13]

They are seen as carriers of the coronavirus and often facing ostracization which is leading to rising vigilantism, clashes and hiding the truth about returnees. For example, a report by *The Print* on March 31 highlighted how the stigma and social boycott of returnee migrant workers in Bihar led to the lynching of a local resident. Bablu Kumar, a 25-year-old man was lynched to death for informing the local coronavirus help centre about few migrant workers who returned to his village from Maharashtra. The authorities came to test them and found the results negative. But the families were angered by Bablu's decision and attacked him leading to his death. The rising vigilantism by neighbours and social stigma are leading people to hide their travel histories and seeking help when needed.[14]

The pernicious situation of the migrant workers caught the attention of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet

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[11] "22 Migrant Workers, Kin Have Died Trying to Return Home Since the Lockdown Started," March 30, 2020, https://thewire.in/rights/coronavirus-national-lockdown-migrant-workers-dead.

[12] Anand Mohan J, "Leaving Delhi — with Rs 150, Two Bananas, Biscuits and Children | India News,The Indian Express," March 29, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-lockdown-migrant-workers-up-govt-buses-coronavirus-outbreak-6336597/.

[13] Kaushal Shroff, "Migrant Workers Forced to Walk Hundreds of Kilometres Due to Lockdown," The Caravan, March 26, 2020, https://caravanmagazine.in/news/we-are-deserted-migrant-workers-forced-to-walk-hundreds-of-kilometres-due-to-lockdown.

[14] Dipak Mishra, "'No One Wants to Go near Them' — Returning Migrant Workers in Bihar Face Social Boycott," March 31, 2020, https://theprint.in/india/no-one-wants-to-go-near-them-returning-migrant-workers-in-bihar-face-social-boycott/392081/.

who, in a statement urged the Indian government to treat the migrants with respect as they are already in a vulnerable position due to their social standing. "The lockdown in India represents a massive logistical and implementation challenge given the population size and its density and we all hope the spread of the virus can be checked," Bachelet said while emphasising on the inhumane treatment meted out by the police to the migrant labourers. "We understand the strains on police services at this time, but officers must show restraint and abide by international standards on the use of force and humane treatment in their efforts to respond to this pandemic…The Supreme Court's order and its implementation will go a long way to ensuring the safety and rights of these vulnerable migrants," Bachelet said praising the apex court's orders to treat migrants with respect. "Many of these people's lives have been suddenly uprooted by the lockdown, placing them in very precarious situations."[15]

Apart from the prime minister seeking "forgiveness" from his "poor brothers and sisters" for pushing them towards their death in the name of waging a "war against coronavirus"[16], the central government finally took notice of the plight of the migrant workers after media and activists reported it widely.It instructed the State Disaster Response Fund (SDRF), to which INR 29,000 crore has been allocated, for providing food and shelter to workers. It has also instructed the state governments to set up camps and do mandatory health check-ups for the returnee migrant workers as announced by the Joint Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs, Punya Salila Srivastava.[17]

The Supreme Court of India instructed the authorities to treat the migrants in a humane manner but on April 3, it rejected a plea which demanded stranded migrants be housed in hotels and resorts. A bench comprising Justices L Nageswara Rao and Deepak Gupta attended the plea hearing through a video conference and observed that millions of people will come up with millions of ideas and the court cannot force the government to listen to all of them. The centre's Solicitor General Tushar Mehta objected to the plea saying that buildings like schools have already been taken over by the state governments to shelter migrants. He also mentioned that there are no migrant workers who left for their homes are "on the road now."[18]

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[15] "India: Migrant Workers' Plight Prompts UN Call for 'Domestic Solidarity' in Coronavirus Battle | UN News," accessed April 4, 2020, https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1060922.

[16] "Coronavirus: India's PM Modi Seeks 'forgiveness' over Lockdown - BBC News," March 29, 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-52081396.

[17] "Centre Takes Note of Plight of Migrant Worker; Kerala, Telangana Records First COVID-19 Death | NewsClick," March 28, 2020, https://www.newsclick.in/coronavirus-lockdown-live-imf-says-world-recession-cases-india-reach-775.

[18] "Coronavirus: SC Rejects Plea for Using Hotels as Shelters for Migrant Workers - The Economic Times," March 4, 2020,

The previously mentioned report by *The Caravan*stated that the union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced packages under the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana for critically impacted people due to the lockdown. The total amount for the package is INR 1.7 lakh crore which will supposedly provide relief to the migrant workers, sanitation workers, health activists and the urban and rural poor. They will receive financial benefits through direct money transfer as well as food rations. The regular wages of workers under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme have been increased from INR 182 per day to INR 202 per day. The government predicts that this hike will result in an additional income of INR 2,000 per worker.

Nevertheless, *The Caravan* report mentions that "Theoretically, this measure seems good on paper, however, the realities on the ground are starkly different. Work across India has largely come to a halt under the MGNREGA scheme due to the lockdown, effectively highlighting the hike as a purely cosmetic measure. It also fails to address the issue of many daily wage labourers either stuck without employment in cities or those who are in transit to their homes."[19]

Due to little and ambiguous support from the centre, the state governments of India are dealing with migrant workers on their own. For example, the West Bengal government issued an order which says, "Adequate arrangements of temporary shelters and provision of food etc shall be made by the district administration for the poor and needy people, including migrant workers stranded due to lockdown measures in their respective areas. District administrations should explore the option of involving NGOs/civil society/other voluntary organisations to support and augment the services."[20]

The Kerala government, on the other hand, promised to provide free milk to all the migrant worker camps. This will solve the problem of excess production of milk while also providing migrant workers a portion of necessary dietary requirements.[21] The Delhi government had urged the migrant workers who were leaving for home to stay back as it promised to use

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https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/coronavirus-sc-rejects-plea-for-using-hotels-as-shelters-for-migrant-workers/articleshow/74964239.cms.

[19] Kaushal Shroff, "Migrant Workers Forced to Walk Hundreds of Kilometres Due to Lockdown," The Caravan, March 26, 2020, https://caravanmagazine.in/news/we-are-deserted-migrant-workers-forced-to-walk-hundreds-of-kilometres-due-to-lockdown.

[20] "Coronavirus Lockdown: West Bengal Govt Asks Districts to Set up Temporary Shelters for Poor, Migrants | Deccan Herald," March 30, 2020, https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/coronavirus-lockdown-west-bengal-govt-asks-districts-to-set-up-temporary-shelters-for-poor-migrants-819107.html.

[21] "Free Milk for Migrants and Kids in Kerala to Solve Lockdown-Induced Glut," January 4, 2020, https://www.livemint.com/news/india/free-milk-for-migrants-and-kids-in-kerala-to-solve-lockdown-induced-glut-11585758343041.html.

school buildings as night shelters. ArvindKejriwal, the Delhi Chief Minister said that the government has arranged food and shelter for migrants as going back home will defeat the purpose of the lockdown.[22]

Apart from the government authorities, the civil society and activists have also started helping the migrant workers by providing information, distributing soaps, hand-sanitizers, opening up community kitchen. Khushi Ram, a migrant labourer from Haryana, living and working in Delhi, some 120 kilometres away from his own home, is also associated with MazdoorSanyog Kendra (MSK), a leftist activist group for workers' rights. He, along with his comrades, has been organizing food drives for stranded migrant workers, especially in Gurgaon belt. Gurgaon, a part of the National Capital Region is known for the presence of various automobile companies and employs thousands of workers. Many of them are still stranded there. Hence MSK, which is active in the Gurgaon belt, decided to provide relief to the workers. However, they are facing problems from the administration and police. As the borders between Delhi and UP are often not clear, whenever the MSK activists are trying to take food to Gurgaon, UP police are stopping them saying they are not allowed inside the state due to the lockdown and travel ban.

Many, who cannot be physically present to help the workers, have been sending financial help. Groups on social media platforms like Facebook have been formed to provide information about migrant workers. For example, a group called Gana-Tadaroki Udyog[23] started by the progressive activists in Kolkata regularly post news about Bengali migrant workers stranded in other states asking people to help them financially or by providing ration.

Despite all measures, an impending doom of the Indian economy and an extremely vulnerable workforce masks the threat of coronavirus. An alteration in society's perception of migrant workers is not only desirable but imminent. The lockdown has proven that the blue-collar workers shoulder the Indian economy. The country's unskilled and semi-skilled labourers form 90 per cent of the workforce. Their job keeps the economy moving and ensures the smooth running of society. Such a large scale halt of all trades will not only impact the migrant and daily wage labourers but also the Indian society as a whole. Even if the latter recovers from this lockdown and coronavirus, the damage done to the former is irreparable. The way migrant workers' worries were not taken into consideration before declaring the lockdown and their subsequent humiliation, hunger and deaths have exposed the extremely classist nature of the Indian state for the world to witness. It is also helping to

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[22] "Arvind Kejriwal Urges Migrant Workers Leaving Delhi to Stay Back - The Economic Times," March 28, 2020, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/arvind-kejriwal-urges-migrant-workers-leaving-delhi-to-stay-back/articleshow/74862716.cms.
[23](Gana-Tadaraki Udyog)," accessed April 4, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/groups/4351209684904642/?fref=nf.

formulate a stronger class consciousness among the toiling masses with the possibility of the revival of a powerful working-class movement. Nonetheless, the need of the time is avoiding more death due to lockdown. If proper measures by the governments, central and state, are not implemented immediately, then many more will lose their lives to hunger, chaos, and conflict rather than coronavirus. A bite by Sanjay Sharma, a taxi driver in Mumbai, originally from Himachal Pradesh, given to Reuters perfectly sums up the macabre situation faced by the migrant workers in India: "Some people will die of the virus. The rest of us will die of hunger."[24]

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[24] Shilpa Jamkhandikar and Prashant Waydande, "Poor Indians Flee to Villages as Coronavirus Measures Take Heavy Toll," *Reuters*, March 21, 2020, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-migrants-idUSKBN2180KL.

Insecurity and Fear Travel as Labour Travels in the Time of Pandemic

By

Manish K Jha & Ajeet Kumar Pankaj

Amidst the chaos, confusion, uncertainty and fear spreading across the country because of COVID-19, the migrants are trapped in an extremely upsetting situation. And this exceptional situation has brought the spotlight on invisible labour migrants. The sudden announcement of lockdown for twenty-one days with a notice of less than four hours created havoc to the labour migrants in different parts of the country. Though different states had already initiated the process of lockdown from the day of "Janta curfew" on 22 March 2020, the Government of India had officially announced complete lockdown for 21 days from 25 March. Immediately, the migrant workers, in different cities, started thronging bus stops and highways in desperation and hope to get back home. While, on the one hand, the distressing spectacle of migrants desperately trying to flee from cities testified lack of planning and preparation on the part of the state, on the other, it exposed the insecurity, uncertainty and precarity of migrants' life and circumstances. We are aware that circularity and informality are the defining characteristics of migrant labour and the moment their crucial link of rendering their 'labour' is brusquely disconnected, their only ownership in the form of 'physical labour' for any 'exchange-entitlement' collapses. They are left with no other option but to flee from the city.

A large section of labour migrants is engaged in manual labour in informal sectors, such as street vendors, construction workers, service providers, and rickshaw pullers, but due to the lockdown, they became unemployed, which resulted in shortage of food and other essentials required to survive in the city. Most of the labour migrants have a similar story; they were employed in a small unit, which shut down; some got their wages, some were just given enough money to reach home; the contractors and employers asked them to go back to their home, but they were not able to pay the rent and buy food without earning. They had no choice rather depart; with their

lives packed in a small bag they started walking[1]. This is perhaps a classical example to understand the lack of accountability of the state to the labour migrants in the neoliberal regime. State's minimum accountability, lack of social safety net, and hostility to labour's solidarity and resistance resulted in labour migrant as 'disposable, individualised, and powerless'[2].

All of a sudden migrant body turned out to be redundant in the city-space. Most of the migrants perform daily wage labour or are self-employed. Such employment is precarious and day-to-day in nature, with no protection in the event of a sudden termination, as was the reality with the lockdown.While the present crisis affects everyone across the state, the capacity of labour migrants to cope with their impact is severely restricted due to condition of vulnerability associated with the migrant's legal, economic, and social status as well as a practical challenge- impending uncertainty due to lockdown, sense of fear and anxieties. While not all the migrants are equally affected in times of pandemic, those belonging to lower socio-economic strata of society and having a poor capacity to stay in the city, are often among the most vulnerable at the time of increased risk and uncertainty.

Flight and Plight: From Destination to Source

The distressing spectacle of migrants desperately trying to escape from cities and shocking images of thousands of migrant workers thronging near bus stops and embarking on a long and arduous journeyon foot grabbed the attention of the media and society. With the large gathering at transit points and travel in groups, the idea and prescription of social distancing as only viable option to safeguard oneself against the pandemic went for a toss. The plight and flight of migrant bodies propelled discourses where the migrant labourer was either viewed as the subject of pity and charity, or as the carrier of disease and fear. Migrants, invariably, despise both- they neither crave for charity nor are willing to accept the blame for being 'disease carrier'; in both situations, it is indignity thrust on those who utilize their labour to earn and live with dignity.

The Wire[3] reports that at least 17 migrant labourers and their family members-including five children- have lost their lives so far in the course of their desperate efforts to return home since the announcement for the lockdown was made. While 38-year-old Ranveer Singh collapsed due to

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[1] Saba Naqvi, "The Exodus or the Dignity of the Poor," Times of India Blog, March 29, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/voices/the-exodus-or-the-dignity-of-the-poor/.

[2] Lan Anh Hoang, "Governmentality in Asian Migration Regimes: The Case of Labour Migration from Vietnam to Taiwan: Governmentality in Labour Migration from Vietnam to Taiwan," *Population, Space and Place* 23, no. 3 (April 2017): e2019, https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2019.

[3] "22 Migrant Workers, Kin Have Died Trying to Return Home Since the Lockdown Started," accessed April 9, 2020, https://thewire.in/rights/coronavirus-national-lockdown-migrant-workers-dead.

exhaustion and died of a heart attack in Agra, well over 100 km still to reach Badfara village in Madhya Pradesh, five people, including a woman and a child, died after a speeding truck ran over them on the Kundli-Manesar-Palwal (KMP) Expressway in Gurgaon[4]. "The migrant dead continue to haunt the living in the sense that the uncertainty over their fate has dramatic impacts on their family members, possessed ofan agency that can traumatise"[5].The labour migrant's body is reduced to 'bare life', where the state disregards their life and disowns them in the pandemic; migrants'deaths in transit remain a mere accident for the state.Humans trying to get back to the security and familiarity of faraway homes in strange and uncertain times, with no other means to do it except on their feet, were being brought to their *knees*.[6] Baton-waving policemen were making travelling migrants crawl, or duck-walk, or frog-march; the symbolism was unmistakable- they were reduced to bare life. Besides, we have come across heart-wrenching visual images- distressed migrants stuffed themselves inside containers and trucks(meant for transporting supplies) to flee clandestinely; the small children, women and men walking hundreds of miles; thousands stranded at the bus stop and several other similar images.

In another incident, a woman police officer in Madhya Pradesh got hold of one man loitering around, and, with a sketch, wrote on his forehead 'keep off me as I have violated lockdown'. The defining moment of indignity to the migrants by the state and its over-enthusiastic actors got displayed through the horrifying visuals going viral in which several batches of migrant workers, including women and children, who arrived in Bareilly (UP) from Delhi and NCR, were made to squat and sprayed with sodium hypochlorite to sanitise them. While this and other videos of wailing migrants who were locked up immediately after reaching their villages in Bihar were coming, the MHA announced for border closure while lakhs were still in transit. Bhanwarlal, a migrant worker used scissors to gnaw through the plaster on his left leg. It became a national screenshot of the exodus of migrant workers who were walking home to their villages. With media glare and outrage, when the states scrambled to deal with the situation arising from travelling migrants, the Centre asked state governments and Union Territory administrations to seal borders to stop the movement of migrant workers. Directives were also issued to put them in mandatory 14-day quarantine for violating the

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[4]"Exodus of Migrants, Death on Roads, Relief Package: Week 1 Highlights of India Lockdown | Coronavirus Outbreak News,The Indian Express," January 4, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/coronavirus-india-lockdown-week-1-highlights-migrants-6342355/.
[5]Simon Robins, "The Affective Border: Missing Migrants and the Governance of Migrant Bodies at the European Union's Southern Frontier," *Journal of Refugee Studies*, January 15, 2019, https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fey064.
[6]Sunil Menon, "What India Has Now Is A Clone Emergency: Just Ask The Police," March 28, 2020, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-what-india-has-now-is-a-clone-emergency-just-ask-the-police/349605?utm_source=article_sharing.

lockdown. Travelling migrants dying of hunger, or being killed by a moving vehicle, or being shut out due to MHA decree of border closures, etc., speaks volume as to how the border is being 'constructed' and activated within the nation-state. After days of uncertainty, hunger, confusion and hardship, migrants realised that they can be denied entry or sprayed with chemicals or locked up in inhuman conditions and sometimes caught in a situation where they have nowhere to go.

What do all these incidents tell us about the life, livelihood and circumstances in which the labouring poor find them? How does the narrative of migrant as the carrier of the virus and migrant's diseased body being constructed? Why does the policies and practices of the state disregard the presence and concerns of labouring migrants? How does disease and pandemic influence the inter-community tension once the migrants manage to arrive at their native places? How social distancing gets manifested in a socially hierarchical village society?

Lack of Preparedness or Wilful Negligence?

On the eve of March 24, 2020, the Prime Minister, Government of India, announced complete lockdown of the country from midnight with the statement- "it is equally essential for your safety and that of your family, *Jaanhai to jahanhai* [if you have life, you have world][7](*The Indian Express*, 25 March 2020). This decision does not merely make labour migrants feeling deserted but also imposed insecurity and risk to their life. It also brought to the fore some well-known challenges and typical nature of the Indian state in the time of crisis.The failure to assess how daily-wage workers and others in the informal sector would react to such abrupt lockdown indicates that the government lacks vision and foresight. Though the elites and middle classes managed to gather some idea through their access to information, network and other channels and prepared for lockdown accordingly, the poor continued to live and leave amidst rumours, misinformation and fear about the virus and related issues with no effort by the state to reach out to them. The decision caught the migrants unaware and unprepared and forced them to fend for themselves even in the crisis.

The lack of coordination between the central and state governments became quite evident. Even when the situation went out of control due to mass exodus of labour migrants, the blame game between the State and the Centre continued. The lack of preparedness that led to visibility of migrants on the road and the blame game among the political parties once again confirm that migrant body remains a politically contested one in their presence, absence and even in transit. The just-concluded state election in Delhi and the campaign discourse made the presence of migrants amply obvious in the electoral politics. Now, pushing the migrants away from city demonstrated how politics makes migrants invisible in the times of crisis. Yet, we know that their desperate transit presented a huge spectacle where

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[7]Indian express

hardship and indignity became the defining approach of how they were responded to by the central government and by respective states where they were to travel. While these moments were unfolding, a governmental directive advised that state borders should be sealed and the migrants are not allowed to enter, turning their lives in perpetual and sustained insecurity, indignity and risk.

Subsequently, to cover up the lapses, the response of the government in the states like Delhi was portrayed with an element of benevolence when the government advised landlords not to take rent from the migrants. The response seems to be marred either by skewed understanding or wilful ignorance. Only a small number of migrants typically live in a landlord-tenant relationship; a large number of labouring poor either stay on construction site, makeshift slum accommodation or at the other worksites. Thus, rent is only a secondary issue for the exodus of migrants despite obvious risks attached to this movement. There are more pressing and immediate concerns behind the exodus. Reiterating this situation, Abhijeet Banerjee argued, "The economic pressures are obvious. At home, they all might have some land and other resources to survive. A lot of these people, they send money home so, they don't have much to fall back on. Construction sites provide them with a place to stay and now that they are closed, I don't know where they are going to stay"[8]. Besides, like everybody else, in a situation of sickness and suffering, the migrants also fall back on the security of the home and family and on old social networks where their sense of identity and belonging is not yet compromised. Against the dominant perception where poor are not supposed to have awareness and agency to decide for their well-being, finally, the figure of migrants had none but to themselves to rely upon.

While one deals with the flurry of information coming from cities to the villages, once again the idea of 'disciplining' migrant body comes back to us. It displays how the state subtly influences labour migrant's decision to return to their home; the migrants get a sense of rejection from the state, their employer and contractor at the time of crisis. The life of a migrant is governed and regulated through an individual's behaviour in a particular direction within state institutions and outside them. The way the conduct of migrant in the time of pandemic is formed, we might have to get back to the governmentality that concerns, but is not restricted to, the political government of the state and may refer to any form of the more or less calculated direction of conduct for a wide variety of ends (from personal salvation to international competitiveness) by different agencies (non-profits, firms, trade unions, government departments)"[9].After initial lack of planning

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[8]"Migrants Are Panicked as Rules on Ground Not Clear: Nobel Laureate Abhijit Banerjee - India News," March 30, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/migrants-are-panicked-as-rules-on-ground-not-clear-nobel-laureate-abhijit-banerjee-1661166-2020-03-30.
[9]Mitchell Dean, "Govern mentality," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Social Theory*, ed. Bryan S Turner (Oxford, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2017), 1–2, https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118430873.est0657.

and preparedness, the state and its agencies are putting the spotlight back to the migrants by enlisting a series of rules, regulations and prescriptions, so that their stay, mobility and overall conduct are properly viewed and governed. The behaviour and conduct of an individual are being persuaded by multiple authorities and agencies, which include police, health service providers, government officials, panchayat representatives, quarantine service providers, and diverse village community, etc.

Therefore, we need to examine fear, anxiety, and insecurity of labour migrants through their presence, absence and transit. To understand the interface of migrants with multiple agencies and stakeholders in the time of crisis, their experiences need to be captured. Also, we shall engage with the insecurity and anxiety of family of migrants and community due to fear of infection from returned migrants and how all of these might have a lasting impact on the community and family relationship.

Migrants on the Move: Looming Insecurity, Anxiety and Fear

In one manner, the COVID 19 pandemic is turning out to be unique; it is turning the human body into the mere biological body, bereft of socio-political life. In these tumultuous times, humanity and human sensitivity are being compromised under the spell of 'fear'; the fear ranges from material to personal domains. COVID 19 apprehension brings out the fear of the elevator button, of the ATM keyboard, of flat, gleaming surfaces to all kinds of service provisioning. The possibility is quite high that the fear lingers and become part of our life. Besides, the sight of migrant labour walking back to distant villages already produced a historic sense of pathos. This sense is getting manifested among many from government officials to family and community members. The fear is evident from the spray of the chemical by government officials to emerging social tension in the inter-community relationship.

Agamben emphasized that society is getting into the moral value of respecting only bare life:"To protect bare life, people are ready to compromise the normal conditions of life, social relationships, work, even friendships, affections, and religious and political convictions — to the danger of getting sick. Bare life — and the danger of losing it — is not something that unites people, but blinds and separates them."The policies and strategies around the pandemic are being critiqued by some other scholars as making the idea of 'exceptional power and authority' new normal. The separateness and 'social distancing' get social and medical sanction when it comes to distancing with migrants. Human rights violations and dehumanizing acts are getting normalized and securing 'public' sanction. Alt News founder Pratik Sinha noted on Twitter that an appeal to policemen to behave humanely had elicited too many jeering comments that they were being *too* humane.[10]

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[10]Sunil Menon, "What India Has Now Is A Clone Emergency: Just Ask The Police," March 28, 2020, https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-what-india-

Now, this grip of fear encompasses the life of labour migrants not only at the destination, rather it engulfed their life at villages and has caused a deep sense of insecurity in family, and community. Numerous reports stateincidents where villages of returned migrants complained to the police after the migrants returned to their home. These complaints were the outcome of fear of getting infected from the migrants. The sudden change in the behaviour and attitude of family and villagers about their own family and community members illustrates the harsh reality about the belongingness. It seems that labour migrant's sense of belonging and ties with the communities at source are connected with neoliberal political economy that derived from 'possible economic remittances and financial capital'. The neoliberal political economy of belonging automatically excludes people with illness or disabilities[11]. However, in the current crisis of pandemic, labour migrants are not ill or disable but communities and the state perceived them as a potential threat to spread infection of COVID-19. The effect of neoliberal political economy is visible as communities and neighbours of migrants at source are making the distance from labour migrants and stigmatizing them.

The same remittance-sending migrants, in normal situations, used to get a warm welcome by family and community on their return to villages. There has been a pattern that when labour migrants return to their home/village someone from their family or relatives often receive them from the bus station and railway station. Nonetheless, due to the recent pandemic and fear of infection, labour migrants are not only deserted by the state at their destination but also, they don't experience such warmth from family and community. Migrant's existence is itself precarious in multiple and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability of uncertainties at destination and source, state violence, exclusion from public services and basic state protections, insecure employment, exploitation at work, insecure livelihood, and everyday discrimination and isolation[12]. Currently, they are facing stigma in their community that they possibly brought the virus from city[13]. It shows how a productive body of labour migrants, which used to provide capital to family and others like a contractor, and employers, are being treated as the 'body of disease' at the time of health, economic and social crisis.

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has-now-is-a-clone-emergency-just-ask-the-
police/349605?utm_source=article_sharing.
[11]Luca Mavelli, "Citizenship for Sale and the Neoliberal Political Economy of Belonging," *International Studies Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (September 1, 2018): 482–93, https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqy004.
[12]Marcel Paret and Shannon Gleeson, "Precarity and Agency through a Migration Lens," *Citizenship Studies* 20, no. 3–4 (May 18, 2016): 277–94, https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2016.1158356.
[13]Devarsi Ghosh, "Coronavirus: Migrant Worker Who Walked Two Days to Get Home Now Faces Stigma, Uncertain Future," Text, Scroll.in (https://scroll.in, January 4, 2020), https://scroll.in/article/957657/coronavirus-migrant-worker-who-walked-two-days-to-get-home-now-faces-stigma-uncertain-future.

However, the fear and anxiety are not only in the community or villages of labour migrants, but they are also living in the fear of returning to their source of livelihood as the state government and central governments are planning for the preparation of isolation centre for labour migrants. The Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, has ordered to keep labour migrants returning from Bihar and elsewhere in mandatory quarantine for 14 days in isolation camps near borders with UP, Jharkhand, West Bengal, and Nepal. The Bihar government also blames Delhi government and the UP government for arranging bus, which disrupted the lockdown and resulted in a mass exodus of labour migrants[14].It seems that both central and state governments are trying to run away from their responsibility by accusing each other for this chaos. It turns out that the state power and refined control policy of several authorities directly affect labour migrant's chance to enter into their home state.

Similarly, when the state abandoned labour migrants and suspended all the transportation mode, migrants used 'walking' for reverse migration but again the state created new hurdles through police and other state agents to 'discipline' their behaviour and movement. The state government of UP and Bihar tried to suppress the reverse migration after lockdown by using coercion through police. This shows the brutality of the State, which even failed miserably to provide security and livelihood for labour migrants and now restricting their mobility at any cost. This is being done in the name of preventing community spread of the virus.

However, field reality informs us that governing and influencing the conduct of migrants have its local constraints. First of all, the state and its agencies at the grassroots are neither equipped to deal with this unforeseen situation nor their local network allows them to justify the new 'coercive' role. In the context of transnational mobility of migrants, Eule et al. (2018), writes, "States install new hurdles to be cleared, while migrants are forced to invent ever new and trickier strategies of avoiding and resisting the tightened control regimes"[15]. This also gets echoed in Scott's[16]concept of *metis* as the 'sort of practical skills' which continuously gets revised; as the problem changes, so do the solution[17]. The migrants manage to keep themselves present in quarantine facilities for the night stay and move around during the day; it suits both the

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[14]Ashok Mishra, "Bihar Braces Up to Tackle Coronavirus Spread as Migrants Return Home to Villages," March 31, 2020, https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/covid-19-threatens-to-explode-in-bihar-as-thousands-of-migrant-workers-head-back-to-the-state-2558929.html.

[15]Tobias G. Eule, "The (Surprising?) Nonchalance of Migration Control Agents," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 16 (December 10, 2018): 2780–95, https://doi.org/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1401516.

[16]James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Nachdr., Yale Agrarian Studies (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2008): 136

[17]Tania Murray Li, "Beyond 'The State' and Failed Schemes," *American Anthropologist* 107, no. 3 (2005): 389.

residents and those who are responsible for managing the quarantine facilities. In many districts, the migrants who were kept inside quarantine centres as per preventive protocol have jumped quarantine or found reasons to leave the centre. Those returning from other cities and states are being kept in primary schools or other buildings outside the village for a designated period before being allowed entry to their homes. However, in some cases, the migrants escape clandestinely and it is done with mutual support and cooperation through local influence. The issue of how these migrants should be treated is already creating tension in the panchayat or between two or more panchayats. Caste, political affiliation, and local network are already in full play. While some village heads and panchayat secretaries are closely monitoring the migrants, some are still not active or are absent from the village, says an activist.[18] Migrant and their family, as a political figure and electoral constituent for a small constituency, require closer scrutiny to understand how the situation is going to unfold.

Besides, the precaution via 'social distancing' in a society whose social structure is deeply hierarchical along caste, class, gender, etc., is accentuating new fault line. Newer forms of purity-pollution and some kind of untouchability are going to return to villages, and cases of domestic violence will see a sharp increase. Due to fear in returning to cities immediately, there will be greater pressure on land and agricultural activities. One expects the return of some kind of patron-client relation, subtle practices of bondage and new forms of money lending coming back in village society. Dominant communities in the villages have already started deploying fear and anxiety associated with COVID-19 to put the labouring migrants in a complicated situation. The distancing-social, physical and emotional- is going to have a lasting imprint that needs closer investigation.

In the name of a medical emergency, the void being created in citizenship through the withdrawal of public sphere, suspension of rights, tolerance towards 'bare life' and making people easily agreeable to 'state of exception' will find migrants at the receiving end, more than before.We, in fact, live in a society that has sacrificed freedom to so-called "reasons of security" and has therefore condemned itself to live in a perennial state of fear and insecurity[19].In the light of massive outbreak and a large number of deaths in Italy, Agamben's view was construed farfetched and being heavily critiqued amidst exploding crisis. However, it would be unwise to ignore his

[18]Omar Rashid, "Coronavirus | U.P. Villages Tense as Many Skip Quarantine," *The Hindu*, April 3, 2020, sec. National, https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/coronavirus-up-villages-tense-as-many-skip-quarantine/article31251008.ece.

[19]"Giorgio Agamben on Coronavirus: 'The Enemy Is Not Outside, It Is within Us.,'" *The Book Haven* (blog), accessed April 9, 2020,http://bookhaven.stanford.edu/2020/03/giorgio-agamben-on-coronavirus-the-enemy-is-not-outside-it-is-within-us/.

apprehension as there is enough inkling to suggest how polity is going to get shaped once the present phase of medical emergency gets over.

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The Return of Bihari Migrants after the COVID-19 Lockdown

By

Anamika Priyadarshini and Sonamani Chaudhury

On-Foot Voyage Back Home

Amidst apprehensions and speculations, the Indian Prime Minister declared complete lockdown for 21 days on the evening of March 24, 2020. The lockdown was expected to be effective at the stroke of midnight of the 24th itself or, to be precise, after about 4 hours of PM's lockdown address. From next day onwards, the national and international media was brimming with horrific stories of poor migrant workers, set to walk hundreds and thousands of miles without even a proper meal[1]. Many of them were carrying their young children in their on-foot-voyage to home. This return seemed the logical corollary of the lockdown for daily-wager migrants, who constitute majority of the internal migrants' population. Yet, unlike the Government's drive to rescue and save its international migrants from Corona pandemic, there seemed to be no preparedness to arrange for its internal migrants' safe return to their homes[2].

Majority of these workers were returning to UP and Bihar, the two states that send 20.9 million people outside of the state[3]. Together, these states constitute 37% of the total internal migrants who migrate out of their

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[1] Shoaib Daniyal, "India Is Enforcing the Harshest and Most Extensive Covid-19 Lockdown in the World," Quartz India, March 31, 2020,
https://qz.com/india/1828915/indias-coronavirus-lockdown-harsher-than-china-italy-pakistan/.

[2] Coronavirus: India sends military aircraft to Iran to evacuate its nationals. Deccan Herald, March 10, 2020, Retrieved from
https://www.deccanherald.com/national/north-and-central/coronavirus-india-sends-military-aircraft-to-iran-to-evacuate-its-nationals-812235.html

[3] See note on highlights of Census 2011's data on "Migration". Retrieved from August 19, 2019, from http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/drop_in_articles/08-Migration.pdf

states (Jha and Kawoosa, 2019). As per Census 2011, after Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar, the most densely populated state of the country, has the second largest number (-17.2 lakh)[4] of persons migrating out of the state. But considering these two states' respective size and population, it is evident that the ratio of population and migrants from Bihar is much higher than that of UP. Bihar has a long history of migration and the state is widely known as, what historian Anand Yang registers, the prime labour supplying state of India, an image that evolved in mid-nineteenth century, following the advent of railways and emergence of Bengal as the urbanizing and industrializing centre of India[5].

In the absence of livelihood options, migration is commonly envisioned as the way to access employment in rural Bihar. It is even perceived as the "only available livelihood options" for young men in rural parts of districts like Siwan and Saharsa, widely known for massive male outmigration[6]. Majority of Bihari migrants, as International Growth Centre's (IGC) study on rural-urban migration in Bihar suggests, are cyclical labour from vulnerable groups[7]. The study found that a majority of these cyclical migrants migrate for 2 to 3 months before returning home for 3-4 months. This indicates that most of the Bihari labour migrants possibly do not even have a regular arrangement for their short-term stay at the destination state. Needless to say, that a vast majority of these workers are daily wage workers. Sudden lockdown barricaded their access to work and thereby means of subsistence. For most of them, returning home was the only feasible option of survival. As noted above, this step seemed to be the most apparent logical response to the sudden lockdown.

The State's Response

The Bihar Government had declared a lockdown in Patna on March 21, 2020, three days before the national lockdown was announced[8]. Migrant workers, students and even professionals had started returning their homes since the beginning of March 2020. The inflow of returning migrants was possibly triggered by the PM's first Corona crisis related television address to the

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[4] See note on highlights of Census 2011's data on "Migration". Retrieved from August 19, 2019, from http://censusindia.gov.in/Ad_Campaign/drop_in_articles/08-Migration.pdf

[5] Anand A. Yang, *Bazaar India: Markets, Society, and the Colonial State in Gangetic Bihar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

[6] Anamika Priyadarshini, "Tempering Patriarchy and Reinventing Gender: Impact of Male Outfow on Women in Rural Bihar," *Journal of Migration Affairs* 1, no. 1 (September 1, 2018): 111, https://doi.org/10.36931/jma.2018.1.1.111-121.

[7] Indrajit Roy, "Rural-Urban Migration in Bihar - IGC," 2016, https://www.theigc.org/project/rural-urban-migration-in-bihar/.

[8] Ashok Mishra, "Bihar Braces Up to Tackle Coronavirus Spread as Migrants Return Home to Villages," News18, March 31, 2020, https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/covid-19-threatens-to-explode-in-bihar-as-thousands-of-migrant-workers-head-back-to-the-state-2558929.html.

nation on March 18, 2020. In this address, the PM appealed the nation to stay indoors and observe a "Janata Curfew" on March 22, 2020. Thousands of migrants had already returned Bihar before the nation-wide lockdown was announced on the 24th.Ranjana Das, the lead of Oxfam Bihar, mentions in her review of the state government's preparedness to manage the influx of returning migrants due to Corona crisis that about 11,000 migrants had returned on March 22nd alone[9]. The Corona triggered panic had already become a reality much before the migrants began their on-foot voyage to their home-state. Yet, as it was apparent in reviews and reports aired and printed congruently by various media houses, there was no preparation to deal Corona crisis and, more importantly, its aggravation with rapidly increasing numbers of migrants returning from Corona-hit states like Maharashtra and Delhi[10].

A "COVID-19 Emergency Response Team" was formed in Bihar on March 25, 2020, within 24 hours of the lockdown announcement[11]. The team is expected to meet daily to take stock of the situation and decide on future strategies to address this pandemic, known for its geometrical expansion and even developed countries like Italy, Spain, Britain and the US have not been able to save its thousands of citizens from this dreadful disease. The proceedings of the first meeting of this Committee record that the state had only 300 PPE Kits, 11000 N95 Masks and 250 VTMs (50 in government's medical colleges and 200 in the State Health Society) in its stock on March 26, 2020. [12] The status of ventilators and COVID-19 Test Kits seem to be unclear in the meeting minutes. However, acute scarcity of test kits and ventilators is apparent in the minutes. Various agencies like Hindustan Latex Limited, CARE, WHO and few private companies have been approached to procure required equipment for COVID-19 treatment. The status of the state's COVID-19 preparedness is swiftly improving and it is quite possible that it is in a much better position as this article is being written in the first week of April 2020. However, considering the status of the government's stock of essential equipment and kits in the last week of March 2020, there was no way that the government would have examined all returning migrants or even those with all symptoms of Corona.

The Government of Bihar has announced Rs 100 crore relief package for the poor which includes transferring Rs 1000 in the account of all 1.68

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[9]Ranjana Das, "Coronavirus: Why Was The Bihar Govt Silent On The Return Of Migrants?," March 30, 2020, https://www.oxfamindia.org/news/coronavirus-why-was-bihar-govt-silent-return-migrants.

[10]Ashok Mishra, "Bihar Braces Up to Tackle Coronavirus Spread as Migrants Return Home to Villages," News18, March 31, 2020, https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/covid-19-threatens-to-explode-in-bihar-as-thousands-of-migrant-workers-head-back-to-the-state-2558929.html.

[11] See GoB's Health Department's order on "Constitution of Bihar COVID-19 Emergency Response Team (BCERT), March 25, 2020.

[12] See the minutes of the first meeting of "COVID-19 Emergency Response Team (BCERT)" held on March 26, 2020 in the Bihar State Health Society.

crore ration card holders of the state[13]. The package also aims to provide food and temporary shelter to the needy. It has been decided to convert the schools into temporary shelters. Besides, 65 lakh poor families of the state will be provided with three LPG cylinders (free) under the Ujjwala scheme while 25 lakh families may get 210 kg of food grains under the Antyodaya scheme.*ShramikKoshangs* (Labour Funds) have also been constituted at district level. But the main issue the state has to address in its fight of containing Corona pandemic is to address the challenges emerging with the influx of migrants. As senior journalist Ashok Mishra writes in his analysis of Bihar's alarming situation, primarily aggravated due to massive influx of migrants and state's unpreparedness to address the Corona crisis, "Bihar is sitting on a powder keg" (2020). Over 1.80 lakh migrants had returned Bihar by the end of March 2020 and one of the prime challenges for the state had been tracking those migrants. The Government has launched an app (Garuda App) to track the migrants for COVID test and ensure mandatory quarantine of incoming migrants. The list of returning migrants is being prepared and front line workers like ASHA and ANMs are visiting their homes for follow up. At district level, schools and *Panchayat Bhawans* are being converted into quarantine centre for returning migrants. Furthermore, the disaster management department has started setting up the *Aapda Rahat Shivir* with kitchens in the seven bordering districts of Bihar. The main objective of these *Shivirs* is to ensure that returning migrants are kept in 14 days' mandatory quarantine and, if needed, transferred to isolation centres.

Community's Response

Bihar has been one of the largest remittance recipient states of India. A recent study of Indian Institute of Population Science (IIPS) found that remittance comprises prime source of livelihood for majority of rural households in Bihar. The study, titled "Causes and Consequences of Out-Migration from the Middle Ganga Plain" (2020)[14], covered 2,270 households across 36 villages in Bihar. It can be safely argued that IIPS study reflects the larger context of Bihar where remittance constitutes the main source of livelihood. Yet, the returning migrants had to face aggressive response at the border of their home-state and even of their own villages. News of chaotic situation, especially recording of hundreds of barred migrants crying for help, at quarantine centres of Bihar's bordering districts has caught national and international attention. The state government was critiqued for failing to

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[13]Amitabh Srivastava, "Bihar CM Nitish Kumar Grants Rs 100 Crore for Victims of Coronavirus - Mail Today News," accessed April 9, 2020, https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/bihar-cm-nitish-kumar-grants-rs-100-crore-for-victims-of-coronavirus-1660848-2020-03-29.

[14] See B. N. Mishra's review of IIPS study, which was released in February 2020, in "50% of Bihar's households exposed to migration: Study" in Times of India (2020, February, 15). Retrieved from, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/half-of-households-in-bihar-exposed-to-migration-study/articleshow/74141815.cms

ensure its out-migrant population's safety and survival in this time of acute crisis. On the other hand, the state government blamed the recipient states' governments for breaking the lockdown by letting migrants return and augmenting the crisis[15].

Migrants also had to face a non-welcoming response from their communities. Many of those who could manage to reach their native village before the announcement of complete lockdown, had to face aggressive response at their native village as well. For many regular inhabitants, the returning migrants were "the" carriers of the dreadfully powerful novel virus, responsible for over 61,000 people's death across the world[16]. This apprehension also seems rational, especially in the wake of mal-preparedness of the Corona management and control mechanism in the state. But this aggressive and apprehensive approach was one aspect of the state's regular habitants' response to their migrant relatives and villagers. In many cases, especially in the pre-lockdown days, people seemed to be in a mode of denial and remained too engrossed in their lives to comprehend the lethalness of this disease. Physical proximity with the returning migrants was not perceived a potential threat to life. In fact, in some contexts, maintaining physical distance and other measures to contain Corona was not much appreciated until the announcement of complete lockdown.

Lockdown, followed by state's measures to track and enforce 14 days' quarantine and, if required, isolation enhanced the anxiety level of already anxious migrants. In Sitamarhi, one person was lynched to death after he informed local authorities about returning migrants with possibilities of Corona positive cases in his neighbourhood[17]. Stories of positive cases eloping from the isolation or quarantine centres had also been viral and migrants had been very apprehensive about the arrangements of these centres[18]. The minutes of COVID-19 Emergency Response Team clearly reflects that the state had acute shortage of necessary equipment and kits to test and treat Corona patients. Implications of this shortage were apparent in the poor management of quarantine and isolation centres and migrants have been horrified with the very idea of spending two weeks in quarantine or isolation centres. In sum, acute shortage of necessary equipment like test kits and masks, lack of preparedness, unclear messages, rumours, uncertainty and

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[15]Ashok Mishra, "Bihar Braces Up to Tackle Coronavirus Spread as Migrants Return Home to Villages," News18, March 31, 2020,
https://www.news18.com/news/opinion/covid-19-threatens-to-explode-in-bihar-as-thousands-of-migrant-workers-head-back-to-the-state-2558929.html.
[16] See global expansion of corona pandemic:
https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/
[17]Abhay Kumar, "Bihar Man Beaten to Death for Informing about COVID-19 Suspects," Deccan Herald, March 31, 2020,
https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/bihar-man-beaten-to-death-for-informing-about-covid-19-suspects-819595.html.
[18]Manoj Kumar, "Fleeing of COVID-19 Patients, Suspects Poses Serious Challenge to Bihar," The Federal, April 1, 2020, https://thefederal.com/covid-19/fleeing-of-covid-19-patients-suspects-poses-serious-challenge-to-bihar/.

hopelessness imbibed by this life-threatening disease is manifested in people's extreme response to returning migrants. Most of them are either aggressively apprehensive or are expressing an infantile serenity to the disease and the returning migrants, the potential bearers of the virus.

Crisis and its Differential Response

As some of the greatest thinkers of our time like Noam Chomsky[19] and Yuval Noah Harari [20] insist, we will overcome the Corona crisis but its implications on the post-Corona world order will be inevitable. One potential implication of this crisis is that it might further intensify the misery of already marginalized communities like poor, women, Dalits and minorities. Crisis affects people differently and in the absence of an inclusive strategy, policies of crisis management further deepens the divide between the privileged and underprivileged communities. Unfortunately, these underprivileged communities constitute the majority of population. In a poor state like Bihar, proportion of underprivileged people is even higher.

Bihar's massive population of migrants are primarily engaged in informal sector, which comprise about 81 percent of all employed persons in India[21]. Even the people living and working in Bihar as regular or intra-state migrants largely depend on the informal sector, especially as construction and brick kiln workers. With a halt in construction work and no source of regular income during the lockdown, many informal sector workers, including the inter-state and intra-state migrants, are struggling to manage two meals for their families. One of the points raised by IGC study on Bihar's migrant workers is that their status as seasonal migrants jeopardize their access to social security benefits like ration card[22]. Most of them are not even registered. The government's benefits usually reach the registered workers or those with required documents like Below Poverty Line (BPL) cards. But accessing information regarding these policies or availing required documents to access these benefits also require certain level of privilege in Bihar. Like many other Indian states, many eligible poor people of Bihar are neither registered as informal sector workers nor as BPL section of the population. It is unclear how these people will avail relief facilities and services during the lockdown.

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[19] See Noam Chomsky's analysis of corona pandemic's impact on the world order in interview by Sreco Horvat: https://www.pressenza.com/2020/03/noam-chomsky-we-will-overcome-the-coronavirus-crisis-but-we-have-more-serious-crises-ahead-of-us/

[20] Yuval Noah Harari, "Yuval Noah Harari: The World after Coronavirus | Free to Read," March 20, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/19d90308-6858-11ea-a3c9-1fe6fedcca75.

[21] ILO "Women and men in the informal economy: A statistical picture (Third edition)". 2018. Retrieved from, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf

[22] Indrajit Roy, "Rural-Urban Migration in Bihar - IGC," 2016, https://www.theigc.org/project/rural-urban-migration-in-bihar/.

Another group, which will possibly be the hardest hit by the Corona crisis, are poor women of Bihar. Despite the state's initiatives of feminizing politics and development policies, the state is known for its perilous gender gap. Undoubtedly, mobility of women has increased in the recent past with their increasing access to newly emerging professions like ASHA and Mamta or increasing recruitments of ANMs, Anganwadi Workers and teachers. Yet, the state has an alarmingly low female workforce participation rate of below 4 percent[23]. Several researches indicate strong correlation between women's economic participation and the status of their health survival.[24] It can be safely argued that already devalued poor women's access to state sponsored relief measures will be further jeopardized in this phase of crisis.

Ironically, neither the central nor the state government's Corona pandemic relief measures reflect concern on severe consequences of this pandemic on women. Ashwini Deshpande, one of the leading feminist economists of the country, finds Corona management and control measures "yet another instance of a gender-blind policy that ignores its disproportionate impact on women"[25]. Lay off of workers with falling demand and uncertain supply chain has been a normal business strategy. The trend is continued despite government advisory asking business set-ups not to lay off workers during COVID-19 situation. Women workers are generally the first ones told not to come to work unless called. In many cases, their due wages are pending with the employer. Since majority of women workers in Bihar are engaged in almost non-recognizable or unaccounted forms of informal work, their absence from the workforce will continue to remain an invisible phenomenon. What might be evident in near future and draw attention of concerned authorities as prime gender concerns are: increase in domestic violence and unwanted pregnancies.

Domestic Violence and Supply of Contraceptives: Two Urgent Gender Concerns

Rising domestic violence in some developed countries during the lockdown have made international news in the recent past[26]. Though instances of

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[23]NSO Periodic labour force survey, October-December, 2018. Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, Government of India. 2018. Retrieved from, http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Quarterly%20Bulletin%20Oct-%20Dec%202018.pdf

[24] Satish B. Agnihotri, "Workforce Participation, Kinship and Sex Ratio Variations in India," *Gender, Technology and Development* 1, no. 1 (January 1997): 75–112, https://doi.org/10.1080/09718524.1997.11909833.

[25]Ashwini Deshpande, "Protecting Women Is Missing from Pandemic Management Measures in India," Quartz India, March 28, 2020, https://qz.com/india/1826683/indias-approach-to-fighting-coronavirus-lacks-a-gender-lens/.

[26]Sarah Fielding, "In Quarantine with an Abuser: Surge in Domestic Violence Reports Linked to Coronavirus," *The Guardian*, April 3, 2020, sec. US news,

lockdown-induced-domestic violence have not yet appeared as striking headlines of local newspapers in Bihar, there is a strong possibility of non-reporting or underreporting of such incidences of crime against women. Women help lines and other avenues to protect women from abuse and domestic violence have also been affected in the lockdown. The top most priority of this time for the state government is to track potential carriers of Corona virus and treatment of confirmed positive patients. Possibility of increase in domestic violence as women are destined to live 24X7 with their abusive spouses during the lockdown does not emerge as one of the prime concerns of Corona times in Bihar.

Another important Corona triggered trend in India is: an unprecedented hike in the demand for contraceptives. Several reports underscore that people are storing contraceptives along with grocery and other essential items[27]. But, as some reports rightly points out[28], usage of contraceptives will presumably increase in this phase when people are bound to live at homes with their partners without much to do. In case of Bihar, possibility of increase in the usage of contraceptives with increasing number of returning migrants cannot be denied. Considering high unmet need, low usage of contraceptives and high fertility rate, this concern should be integral in state's Corona crisis management strategy.

As per NFHS 4[29], Bihar has the highest total fertility rate (3.2) in the country. With 3.6, this rate is even higher for rural Bihar. Though proportion of non-user (contraceptive) women whom any health worker ever talked about family planning had increased between 2006 and 2016[30], proportion of contraceptive user women (24%) in the state is less than half of the national average (53.5%). Proportion of non-users is substantially high in the state, and as NFHS 4 data reflects, female sterilization (about 21%) continues to be the most popular method of family planning. Usage of pill and IUD/PPIUD is as low as 0.8 percent and 0.5 percent, respectively. Rate of male sterilization is nil in the state and, at 1 percent, usage of condom is also negligible in Bihar.Total

https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/apr/03/coronavirus-quarantine-abuse-domestic-violence.

[27]SonilDedhia, "Coronavirus Outbreak: Condom Sales in India Go through the Roof," Hindustan Times, March 24, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/sex-and-relationships/coronavirus-outbreak-condom-sales-in-india-go-through-the-roof/story-ibQPGqpFNs469BBWkuWjcK.html.

[28] See Economic Times review "Intimacy in the time of corona: Home-bound couples find love as sale of condoms goes up" (2020, March 24). Retrieved from, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/intimacy-in-the-time-of-corona-home-bound-couples-find-love-as-sale-of-condoms-go-up/articleshow/74793351.cms?from=mdr

[29]NFHS-4 "State fact sheet-Bihar" (2015-16). Retrieved from, rchiips.org/NFHS/BR_FactSheet.pdf

[30]NFHS-3 "State fact sheet-Bihar" (2005-06). Retrieved from, rchiips.org/NFHS/pdf/Bihar.pdf; NFHS-4 "State fact sheet-Bihar" (2015-16). Retrieved from, rchiips.org/NFHS/BR_FactSheet.pdf

unmet need of contraceptives in the state is 21.2%, about 8% lower than the national average.

NFHS data reinforces the fact that, along with multiple burdens at domestic fronts, women are bound to bear the burden of planning their families as well. Gender norms, especially women's restricted mobility and constrained access to public health services and contraceptives play a crucial role in prevalence of female sterilization as the most preferred family planning measure. Front line workers like ASHA and ANMs are expected to be the family planning councillors and prime suppliers of contraceptives to rural Bihar's married women. But in the Corona times, front line workers have been assigned the responsibility to track and follow up the migrants and potential cases of corona in rural Bihar.

Probability of augmentation in the proportion of unmet need of contraceptives in this context is inevitable. The stringent gender norms often obstruct young women's access to contraceptives and even contraceptive related information. Even if they are aware about contraceptives, they are not expected to discuss their family planning related concerns with their spouse either. It is true that government's various policies have succeeded in rupturing gender norms in the recent past and women in rural Bihar have been more active and mobile than ever. However, as the NFHS 4 data show, decline in contraceptive usage and strikingly low usage of condoms does not reflect an empowering scenario for women on the front of family planning. Possibilities of increase in unwanted pregnancies to add to the generation of "quaranteens"[31]in Bihar seem to be very high.

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[31]See Economic Times review "Intimacy in the time of corona: Home-bound couples find love as sale of condoms goes up" (2020, March 24). Retrieved from, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/magazines/panache/intimacy-in-the-time-of-corona-home-bound-couples-find-love-as-sale-of-condoms-go-up/articleshow/74793351.cms?from=mdr

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The Sudden Visibility of Sangram Tudu

By

Rajat Roy

Sagram Tudu is from Malda's Gajol area. A 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 Bangaluru'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 Lockdown 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 lockdown. Once the lockdown 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 lockdown 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.

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 the lockdown 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 a desperate bid to reach their homes 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 awhile 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 a 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 lockdown 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.

In recent years, Kerala has become a favourite destination for migrant workers from West Bengal. The wages are good, the 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. There are nine from Murshidabad and rest are from South Dinajpur's Tapan area. They were engaged in the construction of a new school building and staying at the site. After the lockdown, 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 lockdown 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 tickets 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 a relatively seasoned worker and this is not his first trip to Kerala. But he has not got wages for the last two months, as was the standard practise with many a contractor. Some workers take minimum money for their food and sundry expenses and the 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 lockdown has upset their calculations and they are looking at an uncertain future.

While it has been widely reported that Kerala government has been doing an extremely good job in helping the 'guest' workers in their state, a number of camps have been opened and people are given shelter there and being fed, some of the migrant workers who are not staying in those camps are having a different experience. Like other parts of Kerala, Kannur is host to migrant workers from West Bengal, UP, Bihar, Assam, Orissa and many other states. Ajay Rajnish is an independent welder in Kannur, and he is there since 2007. He has got an identity card from the local panchayat, brought his family and stays in a rented house. Ajay has come from UP. His village is located in Unnao district. Ajay rues that some agencies (he is not sure if it is government or private) are offering cooked food. But they are charging Rs.25 per meal. He, his wife and daughter would need Rs.150 a day to have that cooked food. Instead, he bought some ration on credit and preparing the meal at home. His landlord is helping, after knowing his condition (Ajay does not have much cash with him), the landlord has agreed to have deferred payment of rent (Rs.4000/- a month and electricity bill (Rs.500/).Ajay is not sure how long he would be able to sustain in this manner. He laments, "Corona main to baad main marenge, pahele to bhukhe marenge (By the time Coronavirus catches with us, we will all be dead of hunger)".

Shri Harrisa, Assistant Collector, Kannur has responded to queries made by this author by 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 a 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 lockdown.

89 community kitchens are working in Kannur district. Guest workers are provided cooked food in the 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 honourable CM has directed, all care possible is being extended to our guest labourers.

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 a 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.

The migrants, stranded in other parts of India, are still sending distress calls to West Bengal government, elected representatives of their respective areas, and also to some civil society organisations' helplines. Bangla Sanskriti Mancha, an organisation established in the wake of the spurt of communal riots in the state by some academics and professionals, has now grown in stature as it has actively started working for the migrant workers stranded in various states.

Although Bengal has 10.33 million migrants in the state and a huge number of people have gone 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 database of all those migrant workers in their

respective districts. But nothing happened to that end and there is no database 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.

Now, in the hour of crisis, the administration has become dependent on civil society organisations like Bangla Sanskriti Mancha and some other for particulars of workers stranded in various states. According to Samirul Islam, the president of Bangla Sanskriti Mancha, they have collected data of more than 50,000 such migrant workers and the list is still growing. After they opened the helplines, they got all this information in the last 15 days and handed over to the respective district administrations. After receiving the SOS from the migrant workers, they immediately try to locate people in nearby areas who can offer some help. They connect the stranded workers with them and also arrange for some material help. "Unlike other NGOs, we don't seek fund from various donor agencies. It is our members' contribution that makes the fund," explains Samirul. Indeed, a group of motivated professionals and academics have formed its working committee and the organisation is spreading its member base in districts fast. Already, they have prepared more than 30,000 alcohol-based sanitizers and distributed that among tribal people, police, hospital workers and conservancy workers in Birbhum, Malda and some other districts. Impressed with their work, the SP, Birbhum has given them 200 litres of ethyl alcohol to prepare more sanitizer. Now, they are focusing on villages where poor and helpless people are in need of immediate intervention. The organisation, with its growing number of members in districts like Birbhum, Murshidabad, Malda, Howrah are trying to help organise dry ration for the needy people.

In the colonial period, the State remained oblivious to the distress of the subject people. During the great famine in Bengal in 1943, while millions perished, the administration did nothing to help people. Whatever little was done in terms of running 'Langar' and feeding famished people, was done by civil society. In the post-colonial era, it is the State, which has come to stand as the major dispenser of relief in the time of distress, But, despite an all-out effort put out by the state government, there are many a gap here and there. The civil society has come out to fill in the gaps. A small group of young men whose bonding is through practising martial art karate started a helpline at Bolpur-Santiniketan. They focused on senior citizens by attending to their needs of medicine and essential commodities. Also, they feed around 400 street dogs (in the lockdown period many of the street dogs go hungry) in Bolpur and Santiniketan on a regular basis. Elmhirst Institute at Santiniketan works mostly with destitute girl-child and women. Besides helping poor villagers in accessing medical help in two government hospitals in Bolpur, they actively intervene and rescue minor girls from early marriage and trafficking. One such marriage of a minor girl was successfully stopped with the help of police in a village near Sainthia in the ongoing lockdown period. At Darjeeling, Penchen Dhendup and his friends started delivering essential medicines to locked-in people. They get medicine, sanitizer and masks from a medicine dealer Jankalyan at 50% discount and deliver the same at the

discounted price to people at Darjeeling, Bijanbari, Sukhiapokhri and some other places. According to Dhendup, since the distribution of ration is being looked after by GTA people, they decided to focus on medicine. According to Prof. Naser Ahmed, president of All India Minority Organisation, an organisation devoted to social work, is now engaged in relief work among migrant workers and their families. They have already raised Rs.10 lakh centrally and out of that Rs. 7.5 lakh have been distributed to a number of migrant labours who are stranded outside the state. They have also bought 500 quintal rice, 200 quintal dal and giving three kgs to each of the people. In Malda district alone, they have distributed dry ration to 10,000 people. Their members are encouraged to raise further resource at the district and bloc levels so that the relief work could continue.

The Narendra Modi government announced to give free rations for three months to 80 crore people in the country. The Supreme Court has also commended the government announcement, that it would give 80 crore people 5 Kg of rice or wheat and one kg of pulses of their choice free of cost for the next three months. The Government of India's announcement was followed by West Bengal chief minister Mamata Banerjee that her government would give free ration to 8.5 crore people in West Bengal free ration for the next six months starting from 1 April. But the ration dealers are still continuing to give 2 Kg rice instead of 5 Kg to all cardholders. The food coupon for another 1.5 to 2 crore people in the state who do not have any ration card, old or new, is still awaited and non-availability of the full quota of ration at the ration shops in the villages is fomenting bad blood between the dealer and the customers. After some incidents over the issue of distribution of ration in some districts, some 3-4 dealers have been arrested in Bengal for alleged malpractice, and the tension is still brewing in the countryside and threatening to spark off another ration-riot as we had seen in 2008.

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 the 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 does 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 lockdown. 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 the 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. The 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. Even if it is considered that during the period of 2011-20 the migrant population in these states did not grow because of the long period of economic recession and the steady rise of the rate of unemployment in the country, and even if we consider that a good number of migrant workers slipped through the lockdown 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.

Though the migrant workers lived an 'invisible' existence in normal time, the Corona induced lockdown 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 lockdown 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 a huge number of workers in unorganised and organised sectors made, 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 the 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.

Glimpses of Life in the Time of Corona

By

Madhurilata Basu & Sibaji Pratim Basu

"And once the storm is over, you won't remember how you made it through, how you managed to survive. You won't even be sure, whether the storm is really over. But one thing is certain. When you come out of the storm, you won't be the same person who walked in. That's what this storm's all about."

— Haruki Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*[1]

We can only surmise the mid-night effects of the Indian Prime Minister's late evening or mid-night announcements. Remember his famous 'Mitron'-Speech before the demonetisation on November 8, 2016, or, the launching of GST at the midnight of 30 June/1 July 2017? And now, the announcement on March 24 about the 21-day 'Lockdown' to combat COVID-19 which was also to have been effected from the mid-night! Perhaps he is haunted by the memory of the famous Freedom at Midnight speech of Nehru (his *bête noire* or perhaps 'alter-ego') on the eve of independence. Thus, like demonetisation the lock-down was implemented from the midnight of 24-25 March giving little chance to millions of people across this vast country for minimum preparation and to some extent also to the state governments and the health regimes, which are leading the battle against Novel Corona from the front. The government did not appear to be particularly prepared either. And the experiences that the plebeians of this country have passed through during the first week seemed like a nightmare! The virus is wreaking havoc not only on human lives but their very existences.

The Marching Migrant Workers

Take for example, the case of migrant workers. The hasty announcement of the unprecedented lockdown gave hundreds of millions of Indians less than four hours to prepare. The Prime Minister assured Indians that essential services would continue, but was vague regarding how people would be able

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[1]Murakami, *Kafka on the Shore*, Vintage Books, London, 2005

to buy food and other necessary items. As a result, people rushed to shops to stock up before the decree took effect. People were seen lining up outside stores late into the night and traffic congestion was reported from across the country. In this situation of panic, scarcity and uncertainty, the lockdown has triggered a massive exodus of migrant labourers and wage earners from big cities back to their faraway homes in villages or small towns. Defying curfew/lockdown, the migrant workers (devoid of bare minimum essentials for survival) were seen from Delhi and several states' capital cities trudging for miles and miles (some even walked up to 900 kilometres) on highways to get back home!

Most of these poor migrants are daily wage workers who are now out of work as businesses and establishments have shut down. In the absence of money and jobs, and bereft of any food, savings, or shelter in large cities, they are desperate to reach their villages. "The staying power of India's poor is very, very short. People like casual labourers, rickshaw pullers and migrant workers are basically living from hand to mouth at the best of times," said Jean Dreze, during a telephonic interview with *NPR*[2]. "Now suddenly overnight they are told that they have to spend 21 days inside their homes? Naturally, many of them are already running out of food", he further observed.

But with railway and bus services suspended amid the lockdown, there were few options other than simply packing up and trying to walk the vast distance back home. Many are being sent back from the borders by stick-wielding cops for violating social distancing norms amid the lockdown. Many died during this 'long march'. So far, at least 22 have died. Along the way, going without meals and water, some have faced police brutality, the most recent instance being the police tear gassing and arresting migrant workers in Surat. In Uttar Pradesh, the police sprayed returning workers with bleach, purportedly to disinfect them.

As the humanitarian crisis unfolds, the harrowing plight of migrant workers continues to surface. With the media and civil society raising a hue and cry, buses were finally arranged to take the migrants back to their villages. State governments, meanwhile, are scrambling, often in partnership with local communities, to provide rations and shelter for the now suddenly visible migrants. The mismanagement of the pandemic has also thrown the lid off the desperation that drives the poor to work in the cities. Largely invisible in the census and in national sample surveys — and consequently to administrators — seasonal migrants are a dark and discomfiting reality of urban India. Mostly, they occupy the lowest paying and informal market jobs in key sectors such as construction, hotels, textiles, manufacturing, transportation, services, and domestic work. As most find work as unskilled labourers since they enter the job market at a very early age, they experience

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[2]https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2020/03/31/822642382/coronavirus-lockdown-sends-migrant-workers-on-a-long-and-risky-trip-home Last accessed on 03/04/20

no upward mobility and remain stuck in the most unskilled, poorly paid and hazardous jobs for their entire work-life span.

The government's neglect of the internal migrant population is a travesty, considering welfare and infrastructure programmes have been clearly provided for the urban poor in the 11th and 12[th]Five-year plans. These include basic amenities like shelter, water, sanitation, toilets, access roads, and infrastructure facilities. However, the benefits are clearly not reaching them. Blame it on bureaucratic apathy, an inefficient outreach, or policymakers' myopia — or all three. To make matters worse, migration is often enmeshed in 'nativist' politics. Internal migration is frequently associated with the rise of anti-migrant politics across India (Shiv Sena and Maharashtra Navnirman Sena, especially thrive on it), as parties cater to 'nativist' sentiments or as new parties emerge to cater to such sentiments.

The role and attitude of the most of the state governments towards the migrant workers are recently revealed by the Interstate Migrant Policy Index 2019 (IMPEX 2019). This index is compiled by India Migration Now, a Mumbai-based non-profit organisation that analyses state-level policies for the integration of out-of-state migrants. It has revealed in its report the widespread apathy and discrimination toward migrants by state-level policymakers and unsympathetic policies towards the migrants. "Almost all states are apathetic to the needs of migrants, which stops the latter from accessing jobs, education, welfare entitlements, housing, health benefits and even voting in elections,"[3] states the report. "Often, even if states make provisions for migrants' access to benefits and support, no measures are put in place to make migrants aware of the relevant schemes and policies or to facilitate this access. Migrants have little or no state-level support and are often made scapegoats by local law enforcement and politicians for any trouble. They are underpaid, underserved and unable to be fully productive."

Crisis of Caregivers

"*One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness unconscious.*"

-Carl Gustav Jung, 'The Philosophical Tree' (1945)

While almost the whole world is battling against Covid 19, it is also battling xenophobia and racism. When the epidemic of yellow fever hit America, European migrants were the 'other' and as a result faced stigma. During SARs it was the Chinese, during Ebola it was the Africans and now during Novel Corona, it is once again the Chinese or Asian looking migrants that are facing stigmatization. Within India as well, people with Mongoloid features are facing stigma. Filipino nurses top the list of foreign trained nurses in many of the western developed countries. Shortages and uneven presence of healthcare workers, has resulted in rise in international migration of health workers, with

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[3]As Quoted by Neeta Lal, 'Covid-19 and India's Nowhere People', in*The Diplomat*, 1 April 2020 https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-and-indias-nowhere-people/ Last accessed on 02/04/20

complex patterns of migration. In America for instance, according to a 2016 data, thirty percent of registered nurses were from the Philippines, followed by a six percent from India and a five percent from Nigeria. In case of UK, two top countries of origin were the Philippines and India respectively. Philippines and India together account for almost forty percent of total foreign trained nurses there. Foreign trained nurses are never at an advantageous position and international migration makes their position even more vulnerable, despite some benefiting from forming ties with other foreign trained nurses and developing a network for both personal and professional well being.

However, as stated earlier, with the onset of Novel Corona, our darkest parts have been unmasked. Recently, in a report on the BBC, a Filipino nurse in England reported how she was being shouted at while being on public transportation. She was shouted at and asked to stop the spreading of the virus. In another case, the parents at the Royal Children's Hospital had refused to let doctors and nurses with Asian features, treat their children. Other reports had surfaced from Germany where patients had objected to wait in the lobby in the presence of other Asian patients.

Within India, nurses in Bangalore, Kolkata, Chennai and several other parts, had revealed the dark side of humankind when derogatory remarks were passed at nurses from India's northeast, or nurses were asked to vacate the apartments they rented in the cities they worked. Xenophobia, racial profiling and stigmatization of healthcare workers are instances of a sad, perhaps cruel, reality in the present time. As if this wasn't enough, another criminal act of which the government is responsible is putting the healthcare workers at further risk. Nurses and even doctors have complained about the paucity of personal protection equipment, organizations that were given responsibility to make safety gears feared acute shortage of working capital due to the announcement of lockdown. In such a situation the Ministry of Textiles wrote to Ministry of Finance, to look into the aspect of capital crunch for the eleven manufacturers responsible for making safety gears. There was thus an avoidable delay in placing the orders for the safety gears. India continues to spend around five times more on defence than on health. In 2017-18 it was 5.3 times more, in 2018-19- it was 5.17 times more and in 2019-2020 it is 4.7 times more.

It might seem that for a country like India to survive, we need a perpetual presence of fear of another, to hold us together. Geopolitically it is, most of the times, Pakistan, or China; community-wise, it is the Muslims. Even now, in trying times like this, we need the fear of the 'other' – the 'carriers' of virus. Sometimes they are migrant workers, or, the domestic workforce, working in big cities, who are feared to be dirty and hence carriers of a virus! Although, the fact is just the opposite: the corona virus was spread throughout the world by the rich jet flying classes. Likewise, even the health-workers working in adversarial conditions may be seen with suspicion, especially, if the caregiver is from India's northeast and bear some 'Mongoloid' physical features. In Kolkata, some of them were harassed as 'Chinese' and the 'originator' and 'carrier' of Covid-19! The following lines of

Ashis Nandy may help us understand the core of the situation: "If the past does not bind social consciousness and the future begins here, the present is the 'historical' moment, the permanent yet shifting point of crisis and the time for choice"[4].

Corona and a Community: The Incident of Nizamuddin

When the unbearable spectacles of millions of migrant workers were earning critical attention of the media (including the all pervasive 'social' one) in India and beyond – a different picture from Nizamuddin West of South Delhi shocked us and diverted our attention from the tragic issue of the migrant workers.

It all began in early March as Coronavirus cases kept surging in India and the world over. About 2,500 people belonging to several nationalities had attended prayer gatherings organised by the Tablighi Jamaat – a global Islamic evangelical movement of Indian origin that started in 1927(?) from Mewat near Gurugram – at a six-storey building in South Delhi's Nizamuddin West area. The Markaz is a transit point for the India-bound Islamic missionaries and it is from here that they set out in groups to other states where they stay in local mosques as a norm. Although the faithful keep assembling at the Nizamuddin venue throughout the year, in the month of March, there was a surge in the number of visitors from within the country and abroad. According to available reports, it was a scheduled congregation at the Markaz or International Headquarters of the Jamaat between March 8 and 13. By March 10 the people started gathering.

Among the participants, foreign nationals from Indonesia, Jordan, Yemen, Saudi Arab, China, Ukraine, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Bangladesh were present. "After the lockdown, many of them left the place but around 1,600 were stranded inside the building including 200 foreign nationals," said a Delhi police official. As a result, the Markaz has become what many call a 'Super-Spreader', leaving a trail of infection and death from Kashmir to the Andamans. At least 10 people present at the Markaz anytime in the first two weeks of March have succumbed to the disease. According to latest reports, more than a 100 attendees, including 50 in Tamil Nadu, 24 in Delhi, 18 in Kashmir, 15 in Telangana and nine in Andaman and Nicobar had tested positive for the disease.

And within hours, the blame game started. Many feel that timely action by the Delhi Police, Delhi government and the Centre could have prevented thousands of preachers from spreading Coronavirus in the country. The Ministry of Home Affairs, on March 21, informed the state governments about 824 foreign nationals who visited the Markaz and then travelled to other states, but the Delhi Government and Delhi Police reportedly made no effort to stop the entry of any person or to vacate the premises. Denying the charge of 'negligence', Arvind Kejriwal, Delhi CM, termed the gathering as

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[4] Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism*, Oxford, Delhi, 2009, p 62.

"criminal negligence". However, the Markaz authorities claimed that they had informed the Delhi Police and Delhi government about the details of people staying inside their premises. In a statement the Markaz held: "On March 21, a large group of visitors who had to depart by railways got stuck at the Markaz." Thus the Markaz spokespersons argued that its members were trapped because of the lockdown.

There is little doubt that such an incident leading to dangerous outcome should not at all have taken place, especially when the Corona pandemic was claiming lives by the thousands in different parts of the world. Yet, the manner in which it was cynically exploited to stoke naked communalism, on social media and TV channels, had a singular aim: to give a communal colour to the fight against corona virus. 'Coronajihad' was one of the top trending topics on Twitter. BJP leaders such as Gautam Gambhir, B.L. Santhosh and Sambit Patra fuelled the denunciation parade, warning of a "disaster of gigantic proportions" from the "criminal negligence". Through his opening "monologue", Arnab Goswami on Republic TV sought to frame the event as a Muslim conspiracy to defeat India. Later, this line was mirrored by most English and Hindi news channels. However, as always, the followers of this line turned a blind eye on the other religious gatherings in the country in the time of corona. For instance, even the Tirupati temple was open to tens of thousands of devotees at the time of the Tablighi congregation, but the irresponsibility of certain Muslims has been painted with menacing ideological motivations. Again, on the 24th March (the Day 1 of lockdown), defying the lockdown on the very first day, Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister, Yogi Adityanath, attended a Ram Navami event in Ayodhya. He even tweeted photographs of the event, saying the first stage of the "grand Ram Temple" had been accomplished.

Although it is a paradox that the coronavirus provided the perfect opportunity to cleanse the vitiated atmosphere of Indian politics affected by narrow nationalism over the last six years, it seems that we are back to square one. Before the Nizamuddin incident came to the light and was subjected to blatantly communal publicity, the spread of corona provided an opening for collective healing of partisan wounds. Momentarily, the seemingly existential issues of the past — the Citizenship (Amendment) Act, Kashmir, JNU violence, Delhi riots, the migrants' existential plight, the supply of essential supplies to the poor — had been swept back to the recesses of public consciousness[5]. Everyone was facing a common enemy: *the virus*. But the showcasing of the Nizamuddin incident in a communal way might have two implications for future: like the Jews during the Bubonic Plague in

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[5] Asim Ali, 'Coronavirus was a test of secular nationalism. Then Tablighi Jamaat became the scapegoat', in *The Print*, 03/04/20
https://theprint.in/opinion/coronavirus-test-of-secular-nationalism-tablighi-jamaat-became-scapegoat/392764/Last accessed on 03/04/20

Europe (1348-1351)[6], the Muslims may be made 'scapegoats' for spreading the virus. Second, they may be further excluded from the Indian nationhood itself.

A Populist Leader in the time of Corona

As we pass through the crippling lockdown time, it becomes clear to us that more than the central government and its agencies, the state governments are the frontier colonels deputed on the battle-line against the pandemic. And among the Chief Ministers of Indian states, Mamata Banerjee is waging a battle as never before in West Bengal.

Known as a street-fighter, Banerjee has come a long way: from a firebrand students' and youth leader to the mass leader of popular protest movements, and now the Chief Minister. During her nine years' rule she has tried to combine the traits of populist politics and policies with the formal administrative structure and processes. For this, she received accolades from the urban and rural masses (mostly from the marginalised and semi-middle classes) and wraths from the elite and educated *bhadrlok* community, to use J. Broomfield's celebrated term. However, her tireless efforts to combat corona in the state has brought out a new side of the populist leader.

Banerjee has a reputation of being a mercurial and often short-tempered person. But following the novel coronavirus outbreak people are seeing a different side of her. "From being a firebrand politician, she has rapidly transformed herself into an able administrator with a humane touch", writes *Deccan Herald*[7]. Her restrained yet affirmative address to the people and the media about the outbreak has been lauded even by the Opposition parties. Banerjee conducted surprise visits to hospitals treating novel coronavirus patients and quarantine centres in Kolkata.

The Chief Minister who is known for her outspoken criticism of political rivals has carefully avoided any such criticism following the outbreak. During a recent all-party meeting about the novel coronavirus outbreak, her cordial gestures to the Opposition leaders were appreciated by them. Second, from the beginning of the outbreak, she has urged time and again that the state governments should take care of the migrant workers settled in different states within the country, and that they should not be pushed back to their places of origin in the days of the pandemics. Third, she has arranged free rations for the poorer sections of the state for the next few months. Fourth, since the disease has a record of transmission through travels, she demanded

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[6] Sammuel K Cohn Jr., 'The Black Death and the Burning of Jews', *Past & Present*, Oxford University Press, No. 196, August 2007. As the plague swept across Europe in the mid-14th century, nearly half the population of the minority Jew community were wiped out mostly by lynching and burning alive throughout Europe.

[7] Soumya Das, 'How coronavirus outbreak transformed West Bengal CM Mamata Banerjee', *Deccan Herald*, 25 March, 20 https://www.deccanherald.com/national/east-and-northeast/how-coronavirus-outbreak-transformed-west-bengal-cm-mamata-banerjee-817560.htmlLast accessed on 02/04/20

cancellation of flights from the very beginning. Finally, although she is firm on the implementation of lockdown, she also saw that it should not turn into a 'ruthless' process. However, with little money and men in hand, and with the mounting pressure of the popular expectations that 'Didi' (the elder sister as she is popularly called) will solve every problem during the crisis, one needs to see how she manages to pass through the ordeal.

Postscript

Where to after corona? Are we moving towards a post-political phase after this? It seems we have already stepped in it. By obeying every order of the state without a question in the name of an all-out "war against the enemy", by subjugating ourselves to the disciplining mechanism, we chose to forget how even in the time of the pandemics, 22 Congress Members of Legislative Assembly of Madhya Pradesh were flown to Bangaluru and kept almost as hostages behind closed doors at a resort to topple the government. Are we not juveniles and out of our minds, when we clap or beat the steel plates "to pay our respect to doctors" in the evening, or light lamps at night to show "solidarity with fellow countrymen" as ordered.

Something similar has been recently expressed by Giorgio Agamben[8] in a different context: "There have been more serious epidemics in the past, but no one ever thought for that reason to declare a state of emergency like the current one, which prevents us even from moving. People have been so habituated to live in conditions of perennial crisis and perennial emergency that they don't seem to notice that their life has been reduced to a purely biological condition and has not only every social and political dimension, but also human and affective... [O]ne will seek to continue even after the health emergency, experiments that governments did not manage to bring to reality before: closing universities and schools and doing lessons only online, putting a stop once and for all to meeting together and speaking for political or cultural reasons and exchanging only digital messages with each other, wherever possible substituting machines for every contact — every contagion — between human beings."

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[8]Giorgio Agamben: "Clarifications", 17 March 2020https://itself.blog/2020/03/17/giorgio-agamben-clarifications/?fbclid=IwAR2PC4fbiKzNAFE-OkJSORSXFC9hs5Vuj1YBvJJyTva6_X2HzgjSFaTGoOU
Last accessed on 03/04/20

Migrant Workers and the Ethics of Care during a Pandemic

By

Ambar Kumar Ghosh and Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury

Hence, they started walking for miles and miles on highways, carrying their belongings on their heads, babies in arms, and struggling elderly family members alongside. They were migrant workers mostly belonging to the unorganised sectors fleeing *en masse* from Delhi to their native villages. They were neither bothered about the rules imposed by the government during the 21 days' lockdown to curb the spread of the pandemic nor were they frightened about the impact of the novel corona virus. What forced them to flee was the fear of starvation. They were the migrant daily wagers, the 'invisible population', the marginal, 'nowhere people' in our society. The images of this tragic 'long march'[1]were portrayed extensively in the dailies, became viral in social media and captured slots for discussions in television screens for several days.[2]

The announcement of the Narendra Modi government for complete lockdown, which started since 24 March, caused sudden halt in all sorts of economic activities including complete shutdown of factories, markets, construction sites, food delivery systems all over India excluding necessary emergency services. This sudden lockdown, which included suspension of work and loss of wages,- made the current situation even graver for the survival of these daily wage earners. The journey of these migrant workers from exile to home became a nightmare. Some migrant workers died on the

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[1]Subir Bhaumik, "Insensitive Modi forces the poor to go on a 'Long March', *South Asian Monitor*, 30 March 2020 https://south-asian-monitor.com/en/column/insensitive-modi-forces-the-poor-to-go-on-a-long-march
[2]Omar Rashid, Jatin Anand and Ajeet Mahale, "India Corona virus Lockdown: Migrant workers and their long march to uncertainty", *The Hindu*, 4 April 2020 https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/india-coronavirus-lockdown-migrant-workers-and-their-long-march-to-uncertainty/article31251952.ece

road before reaching their destination. A report says that the number was nearly 22 though the actual count could be much higher.[3]The harsh realities of the lockdown forced them to realise if Corona virus did not kill them, hunger would. Apart from Delhi, the movement has been significant from states like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where the corona virus has taken a substantial toll. In this unprecedented situation, what would be the fate of these marginalized migrant workers in India? Are they not entitled to get minimum necessary support from the state for their survival in this crucial time? Keeping these questions under consideration, the present essay re-interrogates how the concept of political ethics of care on part of the Indian state towards its migrant workers is unfolding in the contemporary crisis scenario.

Modern State and its Duty to Care for Migrants

The dual imperative that drives the modern state is its simultaneous role as the custodian of legitimate coercive power as well as its role as a caregiver.[4] The approach of the states towards the refugees and migrants residing on their soil has been historically premised upon 'calculated kindness' which is shrouded in constant ambivalence between antagonism and hospitality. The ambivalence stems from the fact that the migrants and refugees are perceived as the 'alien other' and they are 'illegitimate encroachers' in the territory of the host state. Such a concept of 'us and them' is premised upon the territorialized and ethnic idea of identity based on national and sub-national consciousness. The migrants and refugees who are involuntarily displaced or have voluntarily moved to an alien land for security or better livelihood opportunities remain at the social, political and economic margins in their host states. Such apathy and indifference towards them are not only prevalent in cases of transnational migrants who reside in other countries but also in the case of inter-state migration within a country. The plight of the economic migrants has been more acute in this context as their movement from their native place to their host state where they work is seen as a voluntary act where the narrative of 'sympathy' which is still associated with the persecuted refugees is absent. Hence, the idea of the 'intruding other' that has always seen the migrants as the outsider has invoked two kinds of responses that define the duality of state behaviour. First, the state unleashes its coercive power to constantly 'regulate' or 'discipline' the economic migrants. Secondly, the state tries to exhibit selectively its caring demeanour as acts of generosity towards these apparently 'illegitimate' migrants, who are the potent sources of cheap labour for the host state. But such a discourse of state care has always been shaped

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[3]*The Scroll*, "Covid-19: At least 22 migrants die while trying to get home during lockdown", 29 March 2020https://scroll.in/latest/957570/covid-19-lockdown-man-collapses-dies-halfway-while-walking-home-300-km-away-from-delhi

[4]Ranabir Samaddar, "Post Migration situations as exceptions of history", *Int. J. Migration and Border Studies*, Vol 2 No. 2, 2016

from a position of charity on the part of the state as 'discretionary' compensation for the 'rightlessness'[5] of the migrants.

Hence, the unreliability of the notion of ethics of care of the state is largely limited to what 'self-care' allows us to care for 'others'[6]. Since the migrants are the 'other', so the assurance regarding the state's role as a caregiver towards the migrants cannot be entirely premised upon its sense of generosity as it is 'calculated' in nature. Therefore, it is imperative to contextualize the discussion on the protection regime of the economic migrants in terms of the indispensability of their right to basic requisites for survival. It is this right to survival of the economic migrants that makes it incumbent upon the states to fulfill their duty and not solely on their 'charity' of caregiving. The inevitability of humanitarian assistance from the host state should be juxtaposed beside the inalienability of the human rights of the migrants. As they remain perennially at the margins of the society, shrouded in an abysmal web of physical and economic vulnerability, the invocation of their substantive legal and social rights becomes crucial. Moreover, the resilient existence of the welfare state all over the world, despite the neo-capitalist onslaught of globalisation, makes the case for state's duty of caregiving more compelling. The state's commitment towards the amelioration of the marginalized, vulnerable section of the society is a need of the hour while dealing with the rights of these people, especially in times of crisis, which aggravates their vulnerability and threatens their survival.

Migrant Workers and their Vulnerabilities in India

Indeed, one such grave contingency that has currently grappled the world is the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Presently, all the countries that are battling against the spread of the contagious infection, have adopted urgent measures of complete lockdown for ensuring the essential practice of social distancing. However, the mandatory requirement of the stagnation of all economic activities has put the economic as well as health security of millions of the daily wage migrant labourers in deep uncertainty. As the world is struggling to protect itself from the virulent scourge of the coronavirus, the economic and social vulnerability of the marginalized economic migrants all over the world has once again reinforced itself in its crudest manifestation. These migrants, whose clamour for returning to their homes we described at the beginning, are engaged either as daily wage labourers in the formal economy or as a part of the informal economy. They are the ones who are exposed to the threats of not only joblessness and destitution but also directly exposed to the risk of the unfolding contagious health hazard. What has pushed these menial migrant workers to the point of an insurmountable crisis is the fact that their status as 'migrants' in the host state where they work deprives them of all sense of belongings. Such a lack of the sense of

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[5]Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989
[6]Ranabir Samaddar (eds). *Refugee and the State: Practices of Asylum and Care in India 1947 to 2000*. New Delhi: Sage, 2003, pp 95-115.

belongings stems from their migrant status in their workplace away from their native home, which they left to escape the menace of starvation. But abandoning of their homes in search of a job as means of survival is not the end of their suffering, rather a new beginning of a life in 'exile' where injustice has been the defining principle. They are often engaged in menial jobs with meagre income and no social security as daily wage labourers, domestic help, rickshaw pullers and other vocations in the unknown urban conglomeration where they reel under the perpetual gaze of the administration and the local populace as the 'outsiders'. They often remain figuratively as well as literally at the margins of the society working in sub-human conditions and residing either in squalor slum colonies or even on roadside pavements in an 'exile' bestowed upon by fate. Not only are they subjected to suspicion, but have been perennially denied their basic rights that are not incumbent over the generosity of the local administration where they work, but are constitutionally guaranteed.

We must not forget the fact that these migrant labourers who have hit the streets amid the lockdown are mostly Indian citizens with the legal right to move freely within the country to work and are entitled to social protection from the state. Article 19 (1) clauses (d) and (e) of the Indian Constitution guarantees all citizens the fundamental right to move freely throughout the territory of India, as well as reside and settle in any part of India. However, their citizenship rights are confined to the mere legalistic entitlement to an identity without much access to the more substantive social and economic rights. Thus, their 'thin' citizenship status without meaningful assistance from the state, which they are entitled to, keeps them at the periphery of the political, economic and social paraphernalia which constantly denies or overlooks their existence. These workers have to face the wrath of state's coercive power in their daily struggle for existence. Difficult living and working conditions, exposure to occupational health hazards, violence at the workplace, exclusion from the access to public services and limited social protection for migrants due to regulatory procedures in destination states and the lack of inclusion of migrants in the socio-political dynamics of the city, mark the life of the migrant workers.[7] But the state's continuous abnegation of its responsibility as well as its ethics of care towards these migrant workers have only given them multi-layered vulnerabilities, both material and psychological, that have rendered them as the 'nowhere people'. Once again, their vulnerabilities and the state's apathy resurfaced in the public glare as India battles the spread of the pandemic. Lack of assurance from the host state for their security and giving them basic necessary material for survival in the time of pandemic made them desperate to flee for their native villages where they feel they will be safe and secured living with their near and dear family members.

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[7] A Report by *United* Nations in India https://in.one.un.org/page/decent-work-for-migrant-workers-in-india/

COVID 19 and the Alienation of the Migrant Workers

As the government of India announced its decision to impose 21-day nationwide lockdown in order to contain the spread of the corona virus on 24 March 2020 at 8 PM (which was implemented from midnight on that very day) suddenly, the already difficult lives of these migrants residing in various cities in India were brought to a standstill. It is palpable that the government did not take the concern of the migrant workers under consideration before announcing the lockdown. As they were quickly disbanded from their workplaces, which were closing due to the lockdown and as they do not receive any social security assurance like advance payment or pay without work from their employers, they were immediately rendered jobless. Since, they barely have any savings to sustain the expenses of the city life amidst the lockdown and did not have a home to dutifully practise social distancing, their lives once again confronted the uncertainties. Once again, state's apathy caught them flabbergasted as the train and bus services were drastically suspended within a few hours of the Prime Minister's address regarding the lockdown. The images of last fleets of buses and trains jam-packed with these migrants in Mumbai and in other cities leaving for 'home' and fleeing the horrors of the antagonistic cities which they serve through their labour would go down as a manifestation of their desperate urge for survival in response to state's indifference towards their plight. Those who could avail the last crowded vehicles, braving the tempting need for social distancing, that would carry them to their homes were the luckier ones.[8] From the very next day, as all the mediums of transport became suspended, the possibility of their 'return' to their native places became distant reality. Some camped in the railway stations and bus stands without food and even access to toilets. It was their last hope of some means to escape this crisis. Many were also stranded in transit as they started their journey from their workplaces apprehending the lockdown but were stuck in between due to the sudden enforcement of the lockdown without any prior notice.

The Howrah station in Kolkata became one such site of their suffering and longing for the return to home of these people. *The Hindu* reports that one migrant worker from Chennai narrated her suffering at the Howrah station as she waited for a train to return home. She told that she was worried about her five children back at home with whom she could not communicate as she was stranded at the station. Once the platform was vacated, she was shifted to her temporary home at the passengers' area where another group of five hundred people were waiting with her. There was only one toilet for women, which was also being used by men and the entire station had turned into a giant stinking toilet and all men and women were

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[8] Olivia Bensimon, "Indian migrant workers flee New Delhi in crowded buses amid coronavirus lockdown", *New York Post*, 28 March 2020
https://nypost.com/2020/03/28/indian-migrant-workers-flee-new-delhi-in-crowded-buses-amid-coronavirus-lockdown/

sitting close to each other like a match box, waiting to explode.[9] The widely circulated imagery of the massive crowd of thousands of migrant workers assembled in Anand Vihar, the inter-state bus terminus in Delhi demanding to be allowed to return home in the middle of the lockdown, is indicative of how alienated the state is from the sufferings of these people. In a report covered by *The Economic Times* on this huge gathering in Delhi, one migrant worker working in construction sites who was accompanied by his younger brother revealed that, after the announcement of countrywide lockdown, he became unemployed. Since it would not be easy for him to survive in Delhi in the next 18 days of lockdown as he had only about Rs. 1000 as his savings and wanted to spend it on his journey from Delhi to his native place.[10] On the other side of the spectrum, the long march embarked by the migrant workers that we referred to at the beginning of our discussion further illustrates a strong sense of monetary loss, insecurity, helplessness, and state's insensitivity.

The initial display of indifference from the state towards the migrants where they work shows how the process of 'othering' of these 'outsider migrants' took place as they were not the state's own people. Hence, at the outbreak of the health crisis how the exclusionary sub-national identity pushed the migrants at the margins are noteworthy. Seeing their condition, a crucial question that needs to be posed here is whether their suffering is a direct consequence of the state's dereliction of its constitutionally obligated duty to care for these vulnerable sections. Does the right to life enshrined in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution which also includes the right to a healthy and dignified life has any consequential meaning for these thousands of migrant workers oscillating between the dual threats of disease and starvation with an added anathema of state repression? Doesn't the state where these migrants work and play an important role in their economy by providing cheap labour have a responsibility to provide them with adequate rights as citizens?

State and its Paranoia

As the images of apathy of these crowds of migrant workers began to spread on media, especially on social media, these hitherto faceless and invisible people suddenly captured the imagination of the society and the state. However, more than sympathy, it is the fear of the spread of the corona virus due to such huge migrant gatherings that catapulted the respective host state

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[9]Suvojit Bagchi, "Howrah Station turns into "hell hole" for hundreds of stranded passengers", *The Hindu*, 25 March 2020
https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/kolkata/howrah-station-turns-into-hellhole-for-hundreds-of-stranded-passengers/article31161213.ece
[10] Sanjay Singh, "Migrant workers crowd Anand Vihar bus terminus to return to their villages", *Economic Times*, 28 March 2020
https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/migrant-workers-crowd-anand-vihar-bus-terminus-to-return-to-their-villages/articleshow/74863940.cms?from=mdr

governments to spring into action. The action has largely been two-fold. First, the migrant workers who threatened to walk down hundreds of kilometres to their homes were initially blocked and manhandled by the public at the state borders and were put in 'crowded quarantine' jails to stop their march towards home. When such repressive measures were found to be counterproductive, the state government in a unique show of solidarity coordinated to send a section of migrants back home in buses. Second, in order to stop the upsurge of the migrant workers, their host states persuaded them to stay back during the lockdown and arranged for their lodging and food at the state expense they were termed as 'guest workers'[11], underlining their 'outsider status' in more presentable nomenclature. The state Chief Ministers were also found calling each other to request the host states to kindly take care of 'their people.'[12] West Bengal Chief Minister's letters to the Chief Ministers of 18 states urging them to take care of the migrants from Bengal and her assurance to provide protection to migrant workers from other states is a case in point. This is done so that the migrants don't march in their home states without medical tests as they are perceived to be the potential carrier of the virus. The images, in which disinfectants were sprayed on the migrant workers in Uttar Pradesh in order to 'clean' them of any potential infection that they might be carrying, are emblematic of the insensitivity of the state towards the migrants.[13] Under such circumstances, the migrant workers who have been always at the receiving end of their home states' as well as host states' neglect, seen many a time rejecting the relief offered to them in disbelief, suspicion and distrust towards the state. One such stranded migrant was heard saying to the government, "Either you start the trains so we can we go home or you stop the lockdown so we can start our work".[14] According to *The Economic Survey of India 2017*, inter-state migration in India was close to 9 million annually between 2011 and 2016.[15]The number may be increased presently but the question remains same: what would be the fate of these migrant workers?

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[11] P Krisna Kumar, "Sudden protest by migrant workers in Kerala over food, accommodation and transport" TheFrontLine, 29 March 2020
https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31200529.ece
[12]Surith Sankar Chattapadhay, "Mamata asks 18 CMs to take care of labourers from Bengal in their States", *The FrontLine*, 26 March 2020
https://frontline.thehindu.com/dispatches/article31175059.ece
[13]*Al Jajeera*, "Migrants in India sprayed with disinfectant to fight corona virus", 30 March, 2020 https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/03/migrants-india-sprayed-disinfectant-fight-coronavirus-200330135052425.html
[14]Interview of a mill worker MayaramTiwari, 35, from the northern state of Uttar Pradesh published in Alexandra Ulmer&ShilpaJamkhandikar."India's stranded migrant workers struggle under virus lockdown", Reuters, 2 April 2020
https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-india-sanitation/indias-stranded-migrant-workers-struggle-under-virus-lockdown-idUSKBN21K19V
[15] Neeta Lal, "Covid 19 and India's Nowhere People", *The Diplomat*, 1 April 2020 https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/covid-19-and-indias-nowhere-people/

Social Distancing, "Touch-Me-Not" and the Migrant Worker

By

Ishita Dey

Intimate Labour and City's Service Villages

Amidst the lockdown, India's middle class woke up to images of lakhs of migrant workers walking along National Highways to fight their own battle against global pandemic–COVID -19. Newspaper reports told us that migrant workers were leaving for their homes. These images of migrant workers walking amidst government health advisories showed their lack of trust in the state.[1] Cities are built on the labour of the migrant informal workers. However, as CRG's work on transit labour shows that the city is always comfortable with the transient nature of migrant labour and is comfortable with being 'serviced' by the migrant labour. Delhi and Kolkata have been no different. If modern satellite towns were built on the dispossession and displacement of peasants (case being Rajarhat adjacent to Kolkata), Rajarhat model of development also shows the state's need to keep certain villages intact in the making of the city so that they could 'service' the city. The urban planners used an interesting term for the villages that were not to be uprooted. These were called 'service villages'. These villages were kept in the urban planning so that the flat owners could have easy access to 'intimate labour' - a term I borrow from Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salzar Parreñas. "Intimate labour" refers to the work of forging, sustaining, nurturing,

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[1] See Partha Mukhopadhya, Mukta Naik "Migrant workers distrust a state that does not take them into account", *The Indian Express*, 31 March 2020.
(https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/coronavirus-lockdown-covid-19-deaths-cases-mass-exodus-migrant-workers-6339152/, Accessed on 1 April 2020)

maintaining and managing interpersonal ties[2]. It involves 'touch' between individuals and touch with contaminated objects and therefore social registers of stigma and contamination are part of daily experiences of domestic workers. Their work involves greasing, scrubbing and therefore they are perceived to be as 'smelly, not clean'. In other words, there is a sensory surveillance on what they are allowed to touch and are not left with much choice as to what they come in contact in their daily life of work. For instance, during one of the interviews I conducted in 2019 for a project on smells one of the workers complained how her employer would hide stained bed sheets by soaking them in the bucket. She added, 'By the time I would realise that those bed sheets are stained it would be too late. I might have started to scrub and clean…'. Though the workers are forced to negotiate terms of intimacy, employers maintain distancing practices through separate washrooms (if they are allowed to), utensils and avoidance of touch with objects they might clean (such as places of seating). In other words, given the existing practices of social codes of distancing due to existing structural inequalities produced by caste-class-gender how do we understand intimate labour in times of COVID. With lockdown, part time domestic workers are forced to remain confined in their transitory homes in cities - resettlement colonies, squatters, slums and rented accommodation and live-in domestic workers are forced to live a life of exile at their workplaces. Studies show that most part time domestic workers migrate as part of families migrating to cities in search of livelihood and better life. Often accompanying their husbands or parents to cities, they join this line of work as some of the skills are familiar in their domestic lives. Some of them are also trafficked into cities in lure of better livelihood. Various census records, National Sample Survey Data are testimony to the circular nature of the internal migration and reasons of migration which are never voluntary. 'Forced' migration and transient forms of labour are integral to the lives of migrant workers and the case of domestic workers is no different. COVID 2019 therefore remained a threat in the lives of these migrant domestic workers with no access to information about a disease which spreads through contact and touch.

Touch, Contamination and Lives of Domestic Workers

Since 2015, I am associated with Shehri Mahila Kamgar Union in Delhi. As its name suggests it is a union for women workers 'servicing' the city. On 26 March 2020, I received a call from Anita Kapoor (one of the main organisers of the union) that we need to organise something, else people will be on streets. She left another message, 'Arrange something for union members, I am reaching out to others because there is a group of construction workers who need cooked food. Let me call others'. After a few WhatsApp messages, Instagram posts and some coordination with our volunteers we identified a

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[2]See Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, 'Introduction' in Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas (eds), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies and Politics of Care* (Stanford, California :California University Press, 2010),pp. 1-12.

local person who could receive money on his account, and till 5 April 2020, we have distributed dry ration to 150 women. Maintaining 'social distance' has been a challenge in lanes and bylanes of Gautampuri Resettlement Colony. At times volunteers have resorted to home delivery, at times they have distributed slips with time to collect ration from the designated shop. In a colony where at least five members stay in one room, social distancing is a nightmare. One of the members lamented, 'Where is the space? How do we avoid each other in this tiny space?' The local school where cooked food is being served is over-pouring with people. Volunteers struggle to feed and ensure 'social distancing' as migrant workers sit in rows waiting for their daily quota of cooked food. After initial reports of police beating they fear that local people are scared to go to the neighbouring school. Challenges of lockdown in this resettlement colony are multi-fold – one of them being who not to 'touch' and how to avoid 'touch'.

Due to closing of interstate borders, after several failed attempts someone with a curfew pass manages to reach 50 odd families living in Gaddakhod, Faridabad (another area where the union works)– a settlement that is beyond the administrative landscape, yet its citizens do have the requisite identity documents that are required to show permanent address, complete police verification at gated colonies where they serve as security guards, caregivers and domestic workers. Prior to lockdown, the workers earned a source of living through 'touch' unaware of this deadly pandemic or travel histories of their employers. Their work included washing utensils, mopping, sweeping, dusting, cleaning toilets, scrubbing, washing clothes and 'deep' cleaning contaminated surfaces, objects, and human bodies with 'bare' hands and at times with 'gloves'. While travel advisories were being issued to control, contain 'touch' from foreign lands, there were minimal attempts to reach out to scores of workers in this country whose work involves 'touch' with 'contaminated' surface and bodies.

Post lockdown, industries put the gaze and responsibility on the labouring body. One such example being the assurance on Zomato websites – regular temperature checks of workers, Rider Hand Wash, Well Sanitised Kitchen. The customers could opt for 'contactless delivery'. Given the history of sanitation workers in this country and the long-standing battle to challenge social ostracization and stigma around 'touch', COVID -19 health advisory of 'touch me not' is an irony to the living testimonies of the migrant workers. As the lockdown deepened, police surveillance around their temporary homes was tightened to reinforce new rules of 'touch' and there were cases where people were sprayed with disinfectants so that they do not contaminate on their way back to homes. Given that the spread of the pandemic is centred around avoidance of 'touch' it becomes important to reflect on 'materiality of touch', and its 'sociability' in the context of COVID, migrant workers and health advisory of social distancing. For this, I turn your attention to Aniket Jaaware's work.[3]

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[3] See Aniket Jawaare, *Practicing Caste. On Touching and Non-touching* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019).

'Touch', 'Sociability' and 'Migrant Body' as Contaminated

Ever since the health advisory of social distancing has been issued, there has been a concern about 'materiality of touch' – one of the primary elements being 'contact'. Reducing human to human contact is at the centre of this health advisory, exceptions being those bodies that need medical attention and those who are the medical providers, and are part of essential services. An understanding of labour cannot be isolated from a study of the formation of senses and therefore it is important to remind ourselves of what Marx had commented on senses. In *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844,* Marx writes that 'the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present'. Sensory studies scholar David Howes takes us back to Marx's work to revisit the sensory deprivation that is necessary to the creation of the proletariat. It is through sensory deprivation that the worker finds herself reduced to fulfilling one need - hunger. David Howes feels that developing on Charles Fourier, Marx attributed 'the alienation of senses in capitalist society' on the demands for a need of private property.[4] If we go back to the first thesis of formation of five senses as crucial to the experience of labour/ thereby work; it is important to study one of the senses that has come under surveillance in the light of COVID – touch.

One way of approaching the problem would be to offer an empirical reading of preparing a list of 'whose 'touch' is dangerous – a measure that seems to have been taken in people with travel histories to certain countries, or people belonging to a certain faith being part of a certain gathering and state government/s successful and unsuccessful attempts to identify the list of people who came in contact with anyone who has been tested COVID positive. 'Tracking' seems to be the buzzword in the administration and medical fraternity as a preventive measure. It is here that an exposition of the sensorium of touching needs introspection.

Aniket Jawaare argues "touching", like other senses – sight, smell and taste can be experienced on the outside. This is unlike hearing, which can be experienced inside. Touch can be felt and experienced through nerves. However social codes around touch often determine the relationship that bodies establish with the surfaces they come into contact. Sociality of touch is a relationship of inequality. However, for a moment let's pause the question of 'who' and dwell on 'how' touch is 'practised'. To draw from Jawaare, there can be many elements to touch, but there is only one form – contact. A social history of contact in India can be best found in critical studies on caste that has moved beyond the binaries of sacred/ profane, purity/ pollution, touchability/untouchability. However, all of these binaries can be associated with good touch and bad touch and there is an overarching emphasis of who is denied of touch rather than restoring the agential quality in touch. Every act of contact, good and bad touch, therefore, has a social context. The act of touching oneself is both good and bad depending not on the doer but the

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[4]For details see David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2003), Chapter 8.

social reception of the act – in other words, ethics that govern the sociability of the touch.

Jawaare's discussion on untouchability is illuminating. He argues that untouchability is practised not only by who touches you but who retains the agency to touch. He explains this by saying even if the Brahmin touches and one remains passive then that touch becomes contaminating. It is by 'retaining the agency of social touch with oneself' one retains one's caste. Therefore, the above binaries fall short of understanding the experiences of migrant workers who were sprayed with disinfectants or the Indian State's explanation to the Supreme Court that one third of the migrants are infected and therefore could be a threat to their villages.[5]Indian state is not only deciding 'good' and 'bad' touch but also restoring codes of 'touch' based on pre-existing social norms of exclusion. The challenge the state faces is that touch is subjective, experiential and therefore the only success stories of 'touch-me-not' are how drones are being used to spray disinfectants in public places.[6] Despite promises, the state is struggling and fails to acknowledge already existing inequalities produced through a history of 'social' distancing around touching and not touching existent in India.

Migrant workers rank at the bottom of existing social distancing and COVID health advisory has further distanced themselves in the name of 'touch' and fear of contamination. The images of the long walk, being hustled into buses for homes clearly show how the state does not want to restore the agential right of touch to the migrant. Metaphorical expressions around touch have always sat well in times of distress. Phrases like 'touching lives', 'touch matters', removing social stigma around touch has been central to campaigns around certain diseases, particularly HIV AIDS, and Tuberculosis. Thefear of one-third migrants' being a threat to their families reveals the sociability of migrant workers in today's India. The migrant worker is an easy threat, and target of being contaminated because their sociability is guided by temporariness of livelihood, and life. I would not be so quick to argue of deprivation of senses; however, COVID 19 also shows how "touch" has reconfigured our sociability.

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[5] For details see 'The Centre will stop migrant workers from returning to their homes since it is risky for them and for the people in the villages, solicitor general Tushar Mehta told the court in response to petitions seeking shelter, food and other facilities for the migrants—said to number more than half a million—walking home, often hundreds of miles away'. Japnam Bindra, Neetu Chandra Sharma. 'Corona
virus: Govt tells SC one-third of migrant workers could be infected', *LiveMint*, 1 April 2020.
(https://www.livemint.com/news/india/covid-19-govt-tells-sc-one-third-of-migrant-workers-could-be-infected-11585643185390.html; Accessed on 4 April 2020).
[6] For details see GarimaBora,'Covid-19: In the times of 'touch-me-not' environment, drones are the new best friends', Economic Times, 1 April 2020
(https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/small-biz/startups/features/covid-19-in-the-times-of-touch-me-not-environment-drones-are-the-new-
bestfriends/articleshow/74924233.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst;Accessed on 5 April 2020)

Conclusion

Perceived as a threat, fear of spreading contamination, migrant bodies face new challenges of ostracization and social stigma as new surveillance mechanisms are enforced. The gaze is on the 'migrant's body' – the domestic worker, the vegetable vendor, the garbage collector, the caregiver and other service providers inherent to the life of the city. They stand at the risk of being contaminated as some of them are compelled to 'risk', 'defy' and stay in 'touch' amidst lockdown. Given the social history and stigma of ostracisation in India associated with certain forms of work especially work related to waste, 'touch' remains central to working lives in times of COVID. 'Not touching' is a distant metaphor in the lives of many migrant workers and their long walk shows how 'touch' has been normalised in the history of migrant labour in India. It also shows that through invisible measures of 'touch' the city has always failed the migrant and COVID 19 was no different.

Bringing the Border Home:
Indian Partition 2020

By

Samata Biswas

In Rittwik Ghatak's 1965 film *Subarnarekha* (the third and final one in his partition trilogy, after *Meghe Dhaka Tara* and *Komal Gandhar*), the moral compass of the narrative, Haraprasad, speaks about the generation after his. They are those who have not witnessed the atom bomb, the war, the famine, riots and the partition. Born many years after *Subarnarekha*, people of my age bracket, could, for a long time, think of such a statement to be about us.

"এটম বোমা দ্যাখে নাই"

"দ্যাখে নাই। দ্যাখে নাই?"

"Never ... যুদ্ধ দ্যাখে নাই, মন্বন্তর দ্যাখে নাই, দাঙ্গা দ্যাখে নাই, দেশভাগ দ্যাখে নাই"

Image 1: 'They haven't seen the atom bomb'. They haven't. They haven't? Never...They haven't seen the war, haven't seen the famine, haven't seen riots and have not witnessed the partition'. Source: Subarnarekha (The Golden Thread), 1965.

This piece that I set out to write, becomes difficult not because the security of such an existence is irrevocably lost to me, but because of the realization that that the borders that the partition narratives of the subcontinent invoke, are much closer than we had ever imagined. While I sit in the relative comfort of home, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers around India, still walk towards their homes—battling a loss of health, of income, the shutting down of state and district borders, inaccessibility of food, stigma, apathy and state violence. The difficulty also stems from knowing that this relative comfort of one's existence so far has been the result of systemic inequalities, of visible and invisible boundaries that are redrawn everyday, but now more starkly than ever before.

Borders, Visible and Invisible

In this interrupted academic semester, I have been teaching Partition Literature, for the first time in my life. We began by looking at Govind Nihalni's long telefilm, *Tamas*, and moved on to "Toba Tek Singh", boththe story and the poem, read "Leaf in the Storm" by Lalithambika Antarjanam, reached *Subarnarekha* by Rittwik Ghatak, and then educational institutions were declared shut, followed a week later by a statewide lockdown, and then nationwide. Teaching Partition Literature was a conscious decision on our part, following the intense debates and agitations surrounding the National Register of Citizens and the Citizenship Amendment Act (2019), but also from encountering diverse popular cultural explorations of the partition in the last year. We visited two Durga Puja pandals in Kolkata that dealt with memories of the partition and the whimsy of the state machinery. Prafulla Kanan Paschim Adhibasi Brindaan organization set at a locality that has grown large with people coming over from east Bengal and later east Pakistan from 1947 till well into the 1990s. In a sprawling field, they had built a giant shelter, filled with mannequins dressed in military attire, fighter planes, and replicas of bombs, passports, and barbed wires everywhere. I have only ever seen a border in my life, that between Mexico and the United States, but having taught Amitav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* for several years, I kept on thinking about *Thamma*'s(grandmother's) dilemma. *Thamma* with her home in Dhaka and brief married life in Rangoon, moved to Calcutta as a young widow. Throughout the heady years of bringing her son up, the years of nation-building and mentoring her grandson, the desire to go back home kept on nagging her. And finally, when in 1964, she could travel to Dhaka, she kept on looking down from the airplane, searching for the big red line, some symbol, some signal, demarcating the boundary that had come to signify her divided existence, where she needed a passport to go home.

The theme for Rajdanga Naba Uday Sangha's Durga Puja Pandal was 'Thikana' (address). Humanity is represented as shuttle cock, placed and displaced at the will of the state machinery. Image 2 is an old woman, reaching out towards the observer, the well-dressed Puja tourist, in a field of carelessly tossed shuttlecocks.

*Image 1: Barbed wire and passports were present in profusion at Prafulla Kanan, the
barbed wires representing the actual, visible boundaries, and the passports,
the access to the invisible ones. In this installation,
the walls are covered with both passports and barbed wires.
Source: Prafulla Kanan Paschim Adhibasi Brinda Durga Puja Pandal, 2019.
Photo: Author*

Image 2: An old woman reaches out to you, barbed wire behind her, in a field littered with
shuttle cocks. You look at her, incapable of helping,
aware that your borders are unbreachable.
Source: Rajdanga Naba Uday Sangha Durga Puja pandal, 2019.
Photo: Debalina

But why do I go back to thinking about the partition, when the present is witnessing the single largest movement of people across India, since then? In our class discussions, we kept on coming back to thinking about the legacy of partition—the continuation of questions, narratives, issues and concerns that were already mentioned in partition texts, and we continue to grapple with, equally unsuccessfully – in me, and in our students, a decade and a half younger than me. The search for home, the impossibility of finding it, the sectarianism rampant even during tremendous political and human upheaval, the double marginalization of women and Dalits, private accumulation of wealth and profiteering – and the shaky faith in the nation-state. *Subarnarekha* begins with the establishment of a school in one of the refugee colonies in the city of Calcutta. But when a Bagdi woman from Dhaka seeks shelter there, she is turned away, because only people from Pabna district have settled there. It is as if the border that each of them had crossed and had assumed that they had left behind, had already entered their new nation state, one that they had been hailing a moment ago. It is almost as if the burden of the border cannot be put down.

Image 3: The barbed wire that marked the boundary of what the visitors could see, at
Rajdanga Nabauday Sangha Durga Puja Pandal, 2019
Photo: Samata

Former refugee colonies may still be more porous today, than the present day gated community—a community that becomes a community by virtue of having a gate. A gate is that boundary which can be maintained on the basis of the requirements of those on the inside. Often, the gate on in such housing complexes and the roads they barricade, are public roads, but the existence of the gate makes it private. Outsiders in such an instance come to be closely monitored, but so are some of the insiders—the domestic worker, the cook, the nanny, the security guard who patrols the gate and the driver.

More often than not these domestic workers are internal migrants, having travelled from other parts of the city, of the district, of the state, of the country. The gap between their employers and themselves is not merely

economic, but also ideological—one that leaves them perpetually on the outside of the gate. From 15th March onwards, many parts of India, but very prominently Karnataka and Maharashtra, witnessed large groups of migrant workers gathering at railway stations, trying to get back home. Restaurants had started to shut by this time, many non-essential services were reducing their workforce, caught between a lack of work and hence income, and no guarantee of a place to stay—they chose to try their luck back at home. This was not in anyway different from what the overseas migrants had chosen to do, in which the Central government was a willing participant. India brought back 75 Indian nationals from Wuhan in China, 263 from Italy and 389 from Iran.

Image 4: A compilation of two collages collected from Facebook. In both the photo on top of from 1947, the partition of India, and the one at bottom is of migrant labourers walking home, or looking for transport to take them home.
Source: Facebook pages of Samata Biswas

In contrast, the rapid shutting down of passenger trains and interstate buses created a situation that escalated between 15th March to 25th March, and from 26th March onwards newspapers and television channels started showing

images of innumerable people, carrying their luggage on their heads, setting out for home. Several social media users were quick to compare these images with those from the partition of India.

The borders that we inhabit and maintain in our everyday life, do not always have to be marked. Caste, religion, age and gender, origin and class are many such invisible yet indispensable boundaries with which we order our lives, boundaries that become more securely drawn in times of an epidemic. Chandra NathSaha's impression of such a boundary is below, between the India that waits for the bullet train, and the India that doesn't have buses to ride on.
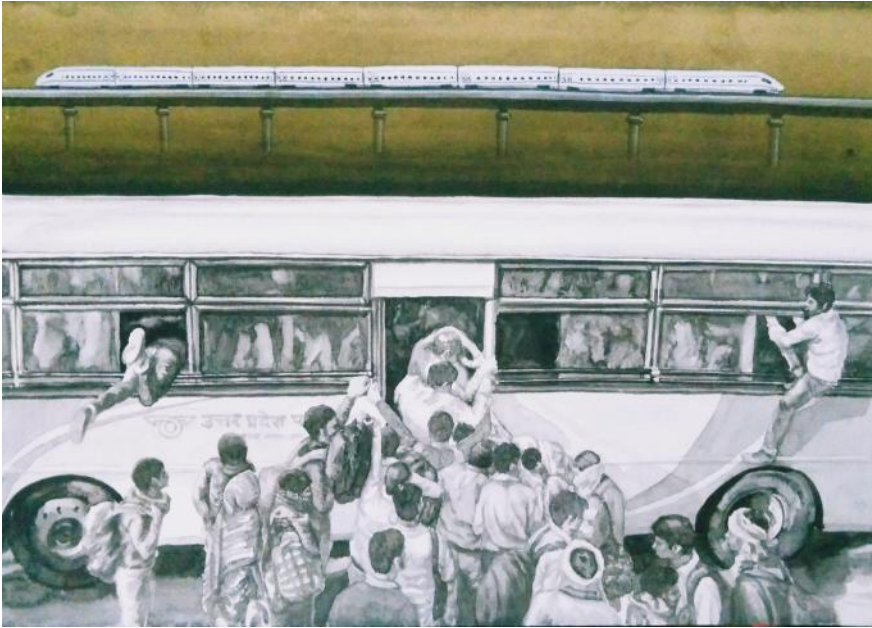

Image 5: 'Make in India. Made in Japan'. The top shows a bullet train that was promised two elections ago, one that will carry affluent passengers between Mumbai and Ahmedabad. The bottom is an overcrowded Uttar Pradesh State Transport bus, trying to ferry migrant labourers home from Delhi. Needless to mention the bullet train, if operating, will be forever out of reach of those trying to get on the bus.
Artist: Chandra Nath Saha (Tilak). Reproduced with permission

Another such division I see everyday from my balcony. Living in a small block of flats, right in front of a North Calcutta slum, householders like us are extremely adept at fine-tuning these borders, in ways that they finally become embodied. Most of the domestic workers who come to this block of flats come from the slum in front. They have access to homes, staircases and the common area, but not to the terrace where some of them wanted to hang their clothes to dry. They are encouraged to wash our dishes, mop our houses and clean our clothes with extra vigour, but the bodies that clean these, are considered too unclean to use the bathrooms where they sit and wash clothes.

Despite repeated appeals for social isolation, most householders have encouraged their domestic workers to come to work over the last two weeks. But, the day someone was taken to the hospital with fever, the gates of the building shut, and would not be reopened till his test came out as negative for COVID-19. The worker's body does not only provide the labour that enables us to enjoy our leisure—it is also marked as a site of pollution, of contagion. Image 6 below, also from Chandra Nath Saha (Tilak) highlights the borders that lie on our bodies. When one set of migrants come home, they are treated with bodily dignity, cursorily scanned and allowed to pass, their privileges intact. For another, even the dignity to remain upright, to resemble the homo sapiens at the end of the evolutionary chain is removed, bodies sprayed with insecticide, coiled tightly, looking away.

Image 6: 'Make in India. Made by Virus'. Two groups of people inhabit two sides of the divide, the same figure hover over them. Clad in the elusive Personal Protective Equipment, on one hand they spray something on the group sitting huddled, on the other they check the group standing upright, for their temperature. Although resembling a medical professional, standing on a sunflower guarded by an emaciated lion, this figure has all the authority of a ruler or the divine, suitably elevated above their subjects. Artist: Chandra Nath Saha (Tilak). Reproduced with permission

The integrity and dignity of the human body is central to rights discourses, but also to philosophical understandings of our being in the world. Not surprisingly, in discussions around racism or colonialism we repeatedly come across instances of dehumanizing the target of racism or colonialism. The native is primitive, savage, animal-like, barbarian, the slave's body is a testimony to their animal-like character, always already less than human. The

differently abled is also at the same time not considered capable of living a full life with the usual dignities. It is precisely for this reasons that punitive regimes, prisons, hospitals and asylums work best when able to compromise the integrity of the body. The fruits of the body's labour is more and more alienated, the lower one goes in the class hierarchy. Therefore, construction worker never have access to the shiny buildings they build, sanitation workers cannot roam about in the malls whose bathrooms they clean, or ride on the airplanes that land in their airports, domestic workers hardly ever eat what they have cooked and security guard is always the first suspect when there is a theft under their watch.

We were told COVID-19 is a great equalizer, it can attack everyone, and no one is immune to it—irrespective of class, caste, gender, age, ability, language, religion, and region—and other basis that divide humanity into groups. India has probably not yet witnessed the eye of the CoVid 19 storm yet, but what it has witnessed is the coming together of every Faultline that divides us as a people. Not for nothing is the biggest weapon to fight this 'war' is called *social distancing*. Because it once again points at the distances that are inherent in our societies, the distances that make life easy for some of us, obscuring the labour that goes into creating that life. As a society we have distanced ourselves from those that have built our cities, those that grow our food and those that deliver them, those that clean our roads and offices and those who care for our elderly, and our children.

What happens when we encounter those, whose bodies and dwellings have been open to our gaze all this while? For people who live on pavements and those that live on platforms, the boundaries of their bodies have to constantly negotiate with other bodies, people whose claim upon the spaces their bodies inhabit is more, backed by the police man's stick. The solution has been to hide them from sight, to put up barriers/ banners/ cloth-covers, as if out of sight will indeed keep the contagion away from those that are socially distant from them. Pavement dwellers are routinely removed during every festival, lest they obstruct the flow of people. During this celebration of distance, one wonders, were they also sanitized when gigantic trucks sprayed disinfectant on the streets where they live?

Image 7: 'Chhobi 2'. A group of labourers walk on the highway. Their belongings and their children balanced on their heads and their shoulders.
Next to the highways is a row of high-rises, socially distant.
Artist: Laboni Jangi. Reproduced with permission

Across the Digital Divide

A bunch of social media based collectives have been trying to reduce this distance. *Caremongers India* is one such, that works on the basis of the google form, whatsapp messages and simply by posting a message on their Facebook page. Typically people ask for a medicine they have not managed to procure, grocery for elderly parents who live away from their children, a drop to the hospital for an urgent checkup or delivery of home cooked meals, and even a sick pet. The volunteers are usualy upwardly mobile young to middle aged men and women, with their own transporation, resources, and strong networks with the police, hospitals, grocery chains and medical shops. They do this work for free, to help people like themsleves, across most metro cities in india.
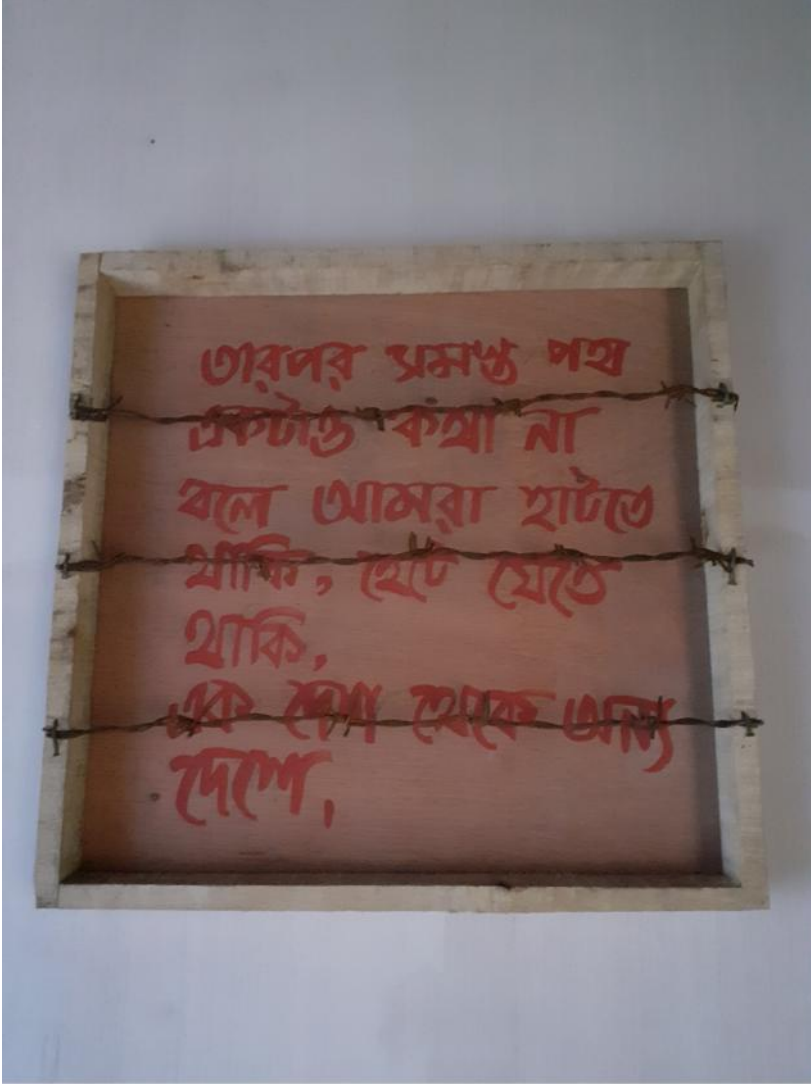
Image 8: An installation

Another one, based in Kolkata, but running in tandem with the crowd-sourced website wbtrackmigrants.com, is *Gana-todaroki Udyog* (A Collective Attempt to Oversee—translation mine). Here a group of volunteers coordinate on the basis of information they receive from bengali migrant workers stuck at different locations in India, at Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh. Telangana and other states. Typically the narratives coming out are of a bunch of men, who have either lost their jobs or have not been paid by their employers, incapable of coming back home, and without a ration card, also incapable of receiving government aid. Political parties and governments across India have been more or less proactive in distributing aid and relief material to established localities, groups of people who have ties to the local

communities and are known to the authorities, But small groups of migrant workers, incapable f moving out of their cramped residences and without money, seem to be falling off the the governmental network when monetary help/ food packets are considered. By building networks with civil rights and grass roots organisations, political parties and students' organisations, this group seems to be co-ordinating extremely well.

Nouvelle Corona Virus and Gender Transgressions

By

Paula Banerjee

Give up, just for now,
on trying to make the world
differentthan it is.
-(Lynn Ungar, *Pandemic*, 11 March 2020)

Introduction

"Epidemics throw into question people's moral responsibilities to the communities in which they live, sharply emphasising the difficulties of balancing public and private interest. Since the nineteenth century, the main locus of this tension in Europe and America has been the imposition of quarantines or restrictions on travel or trade to prevent the spread of disease."[1] Patrick Wallis from the London School of Economics had written these lines in a paper describing how people responded to plagues in early modern Europe. More recently in another article by Laura Spinney in *The Guardian* it was reported that although Covid 19 might be a new pathogen responses to it have remained very similar to how human beings responded to most previous contagions including the so-called Spanish Influenza of 1918-19. Spinney wrote that where "containment is concerned, historical comparisons can help, because the techniques don't change. Quarantine, isolation, masks and hand-washing are all time-honoured methods of keeping the sick and the healthy apart, and minimising disease transmission." [2] On one level we delve into history and re-enact how human society have dealt with pandemics before thereby emulating such time tested methods. On the other

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[1] Patrick Wallis, "Plagues, Morality and the Place of Medicine in Early Modern England," *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXI, No. 490, p. 1., February 2006.
[2]Laura Spinney, "Closed Borders and Black Weddings: What the 1918 flu teaches us about coronavinus" The Guardian, International Edition, 11 March, 2020, p. 57.https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/closed-borders-and-black-weddings-what-the-1918-flu-teaches-us-about-coronavirus

hand when confronted with a contagion that can affect large sections of the globe there is a deep rooted fear that now we have to confront a whole new world leading to a sense of loss of control. Therefore contagions that have a potential to become a pandemic ushers in a sense of unpreparedness or loss of control because human understanding of the world is based on an understanding that space is bounded. It is through the maintenance of borders and boundaries that human beings control space. A contagion, or as I have called them previously, a "mobile disease" that become pandemics such as SARS or H1N1 challenges these notions of space being bounded thereby creating primeval fears of loss of control. The time honoured solution is to restrict movements and recreate physical boundaries. But even that does not contain fear as the disease keeps spreading. That is when comparisons begin and the attention is on the central figure of the citizen who is usually a male citizen. But such attention results in whole sets of ancillary problems that concern me in this short intervention.

Soon after the Covid-19 contagion appeared in the horizon attention centred on who might be the victim. Who is falling sick and who is dying is the question that was debated throughout the world. The influenza of 1918 was again the marker that was used. In that pandemic it was reported that between 50 and 100 million people died of whom a large majority were men between the age of 20 and 40. Covid 19 on the other hand was meant to be lethal for people over the age of 60. John Oxford, a British virologist and flu historian from the Queen Mary University of London, went so far as to call Covid 19 a pale reflection of the 1918 influenza epidemic.

Mortality or Morbidity: The Marker

The next flash point came with the disturbing news that Covid 19 was more lethal for men than women. Speculations ran rampant as to why this was happening. In a study from China on 45000 sick patients it was found out that the death rate for men was about 2.8 per cent but for women it was only 1.7 per cent. It was speculated that in a country like China more men smoked and so they had more propensity to cardiovascular diseases.[3] For a contagion such as Covid-19 cardiovascular challenges often proved fatal. No one till date have made a serious analysis of the patriarchal nature of Chinese society with its son preference and other ancillary problems and tried to correlate it with the contagion. Are there more men than women in the public space in modern China is a concern that was hardly ever addressed. Such contentions were considered irrelevant when the China experience was repeated in country after country.

Sarah Hawkes, the director of UCL Centre of Global Health in the UK stated that she had observed that "with every country that provides us

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[3]Janet Paskin, "Women Are Bearing the Brunt of Coronavirus Disruption," Bloomberg Business, 11 March 2020, https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-03-11/coronavirus-will-make-gender-inequality-worse

with sex-disaggregated data that men are more likely to die from the virus, anything from 10 percent to more than twice as likely."[4] Data from France, Spain, Italy, South Korea and United States have all reported the efficacy of the Chinese experience. In Italy statistics gathered in March showed that almost 71 per cent of all deaths were men and in Spain twice as many men died than women. In France a research undertaken between 1 March and 22 March showed that men were 57 per cent of all deaths. According to Sarah Hawkes: "Undoubtedly, a part of this is biology but a large part of this difference is also driven by gender behaviour, such as far higher levels of smoking and drinking among men compared to women."[5] Sabra Klein, a professor of John Hopkins School of Public Health went a step further and clarified that gender difference became a major factor among the older population. Therefore, when calculating fatalities it became apparent that older men died in greater numbers than women as a result of this illness. Again according to Klein this might largely be due to their lifestyle choices.[6] Mere discussion on mortality rates therefore went on to reinforce the centrality of existing gender divisions in society. But a broader gaze on morbidity rather than mortality might help alter the given formulations. Especially by considering the gender roles as performed by women their vulnerability to the pandemic might be revealed.

In her history on Canadian nursing practices K. Macpherson wrote that the nursing profession has always been influenced by gendered assumptions of care.[7] Personal service for patient care was historically expected of women. During the 1918 Influenza some city leaders appealed to all women to act as nurses. In periods of emergency the duty to care was expected not just from professionally trained women but from all women as they are considered as natural care givers. That assumption has not altered in any large extent. Even now frontline healthcare workers are largely women. Therefore as stated previously, instead of mortality rate if one looks at morbidity of the population groups a different picture emerges. Among all the statistics with which we are bombarded during Covid-19 there is one on healthcare workers in China. More than 3000 healthcare workers in Wuhan were infected of whom at least 22 died. In China 67 per cent of all health workers are women. In countries such as United States, Canada, Italy, Spain

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[4]Sarah Hawkes quoted by Annette Young, "Why Do More Men Die of Coronavirus," France 24, 31 March 2020, https://www.france24.com/en/20200331-coronavirus-why-do-more-men-die-of-covid-19-than-women
[5]Ibid
[6]Sabra Klein to Annette Young, "Gender And the Coronavirus: Why Are More Men Dying than Women?" in 51 %, France 24, 13 March 2020, https://www.france24.com/en/20200313-51percent-gender-and-the-coronavirus-why-are-more-men-dying-than-women
[7] K. Macpherson, *Bedside Matters: the Transformation of Canadian Nursing, 1900–1990*, (Don
Mills, Oxford University Press, 1996) p. 15.

and Germany women form over 80 per cent of all health care workers.[8] Recently in one instance on 7 April 2020 we heard via international media that 2200 health care workers from downtown Detroit showed symptoms of Covid-19. Among the healthcare workers who are particularly vulnerable to job acquired infections are the physicians, nurses and other medical staff. Barring doctors and physicians, frontline healthcare workers are largely women and this makes large groups of women more vulnerable. This pandemic it is said has brought countries' health services into sharp focus. While governments move to contain the spread of the virus and deliver care, health workers, especially women, are on the front lines, who are expected to provide that care mitigate the epidemic and that makes them particularly vulnerable to the dreaded affliction. A recent ILOSTAT blog report also reinforced this contention. The report stated: "Across the globe, added pressures could arise relating to the number of women working in healthcare. Globally, women make up 70% of those employed in the health sector and, based on data available for close to 100 countries, 72% of skilled health occupations. In short, women are …on the front lines in the world's struggle to treat infected patients."[9] Thus even in high income countries women through their roles as care givers become particularly vulnerable to the dreaded virus.

In developing countries such as India the essential frontline healthcare workers are also women in large majority. Often they are overworked and under paid and it is said that since three out of four of such workers are women pandemics particularly increases their morbidity. For example, again in the case of India a great majority of the 990,000 Accredited Social Health Activist (ASHA) workers, or the Anganwadi or childcare workers, and the Auxiliary workers are almost entirely women. They are in the frontline of health services and are expected to go from house to house to look after that people are healthy, they are getting supplies and they are out of hams way. These are severely underpaid, undertrained and work in precarious conditions where they lack any protection. As one observer points out, "these are the frontline public health workers who are now being rhetorically celebrated, but who are not given the basic protections of unionisation, of job security, and of adequate wages."[10]

Other than healthcare workers women form the majority in many other low paid jobs such as transport workers, teller in banks, grocery store helpers etc. because in any given society the lowest paid jobs are done by the

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[8]David Evans, "How Will Covid-19 Affect Women and Girls in Low-And Middle-Income Countries?" Centre For Global Development, 16 March 2020, https://www.cgdev.org/blog/how-will-covid-19-affect-women-and-girls-low-and-middle-income-countries

[9] "Covid-19: Are Their Enough Health Workers?" ILOSTAT Blog, International Labour Organisation, https://ilostat.ilo.org/2020/04/03/covid-19-are-there-enough-health-workers/

[10] Vijay Prasad, "Femicide Does Not Respect Quarantine," MRonline, 10 April 2020, https://mronline.org/2020/04/10/femicide-does-not-respect-the-quarantine/

most vulnerable sections in the population of whom women form a large section. Many of these women are part of the essential services. Many of them are aware that if they stay out of work then they will find it impossible to put food on the table. There is another risk and that is women's dominance in the service fields can expose them to the disease at higher rates than men. In countries such as the United States people working in essential services cannot pull out of work even if they have dependants at home because then they will neither get unemployment benefit and nor will they be eligible for another job in the same sector. In fact many of these women are nervous as reports suggest because they might not get paid leave if they contract the disease. The US senate is blocking a bill that might give them the necessary leave with pay in times of illness but as of now they do not have that right thereby increasing their morbidity.

In low to middle income countries, and here again my example is from India, most women in the service sector are informal workers. As such in the contractual sector there is no job security or pay security. In countries such as India, which are under lockdown, people in the service sectors, of whom many are women, can potentially lose their wages while the country remains in a locked down state and lose their jobs as well in the worst case scenario. If they are frontline workers they often face resentment for putting their family and sometimes neighbours at peril. If husbands are migrant workers then their return due to covid-19 lockdown is often greeted with glee but when wives are migrant returnees there is greater suspicion and in many cases they are even turned away from their family homes. They might also face desertions from their husbands when fear takes primacy. "Men who are frustrated by the worsened financial situation could also leave the family and settle down elsewhere, thereby increasing the number of single mothers left to fend for their children."[11] Also when any society faces economic distress women's morbidity increases and in the context of low income countries such as India they become more vulnerable to traffickers for the next job. Therefore covid-19 can increase women's morbidity to a very large extent wether in developed, partially developed or under developed countries.

How Gender Difference is Played Out in the Social Sector

"For the 8.5 million women migrant domestic workers, often on insecure contracts, income loss also affects their dependents back at home."[12]There are many other risks that women face than only loss of jobs. In most societies the

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[11]Manisha Gupte and Suchitra Dalvie, "The Gendered Impact of Covid-19," The Week, Section Opinion, 9 April 2020, https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/04/09/opinion-the-gendered-impact-of-covid-19-in-india.html
[12]Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, "Covid-19: Women Front and Centre," A Statement, Reliefweb, OCHA Service, 20 March 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-women-front-and-centre-statement-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka-un-under-secretary

jobs of men and women are different. As I have already argued care giving is considered as women's domain.   With the Covid-19 lockdown in most countries women's work has increased stupendously. As two commentators point out: "A nurse, frontline health worker, policewoman and waste picker returning home from work is expected to cook, clean, and bathe the children, with little concern for her own rest or recreation, while simultaneously facing resentment for putting the family at risk."[13] Whether a woman has other jobs or not they are supposed to look after the home and those living at home. When maids are unable to come they do the cooking and cleaning, prepare the food, home school the children if need be due to lockdowns, make sure that people at home have enough supplies, look after the sick and the aging etc. Social distancing be damned, if family members are unwell they are the front line care giver whether they be in United States, France or India. If that puts them in harm's way then so be it.

Another consequence of Covid-19 is the increase in domestic violence the world over. As Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the UN Under-Secretary-General and UN Women Executive Director said, violence against women is already an epidemic in all societies, without exception. "Every day, on average, 137 women are killed by a member of their own family. We also know that levels of domestic violence and sexual exploitation spike when households are placed under the increased strains that come from security, health and money worries, and cramped and confined living conditions."[14] Whenever there is an abusive situation at home it increases during times of emergency especially if that is accompanied by lockdowns or forced home quarantine. As one report clearly suggests "in addition to physical violence, which is not present in every abusive relationship, common tools of abuse include isolation from friends, family and employment; constant surveillance; strict, detailed rules for behaviour; and restrictions on access to such basic necessities as food, clothing and sanitary facilities."[15]In Spain the emergency number for domestic violence got 18 per cent more calls in the first two weeks of lock down. The French police reported a 30 per cent increase in the incidents of domestic violence. In China activists have reported a surge in domestic violence cases as millions of people live under quarantine. One such report states that "Wan Fei, a retired police officer who is now the founder of an anti-domestic violence non-profit in Jingzhou, a city in the central Hubei province, told that reports of domestic violence have nearly doubled since

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[13]Manisha Gupte and Suchitra Dalvie, "The Gendered Impact of Covid-19," The Week, Section Opinion, 9 April 2020, https://www.theweek.in/news/india/2020/04/09/opinion-the-gendered-impact-of-covid-19-in-india.html

[14]Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, "Covid-19: Women Front and Centre," A Statement, Reliefweb, OCHA Service, 20 March 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/world/covid-19-women-front-and-centre-statement-phumzile-mlambo-ngcuka-un-under-secretary

[15] Amanda Taub, "A New Covid-19 Crisis: Domestic Abuse Rises Worldwide," The Interpreter, The New York Times, 6 April 2020, https://nyti.ms/39NrcKi

cities were put under lockdown."[16] Information about acts of domestic violence is being reported from all over the world. That has a severe effect on women's morbidity. In many cases because of the lockdown women are not able to escape from abusive situations. Also because of budget cuts and social distancing women are unable to access shelters. There are countries which after widespread outrage from women's groups are putting up abused women in empty hotel rooms. But there are others such as the Malaysian government that are disregarding the problem by suggesting that women need to keep peace at home, and if they see their partner doing something wrong they should avoid "nagging" rather they should "use 'humorous' words like saying: 'This is how you hang clothes my dear' (imitate Doraemon's voice and follow up with giggles!)," suggested the ministry.[17] Such statements from the national government not just trivialises women but endangers them.

When faced with pandemics other health issues faced by women are often forgotten. In one study from Sierra Leone it is seen that maternal health suffers tremendously due to pandemics. In the specific context of Ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia between 2013-16 it was noticed that care for pregnancy and child birth eroded steadily. At least in the context of Sierra Leone it was seen that there were increased non-direct deaths as a result of all attention given to patients of pandemics at the cost of all other health issue such as pregnancy, antepartum bleeding, neo-natal health etc. Due to chronically under-resourced healthcare system any available resource was diverted to the care of pandemics as a result there were 3600 maternal and neo-natal deaths in 2014-15.[18] In most countries including those from middle and low income economies women have less power to decide on what the meagre resources of the family will be spent on. This means women's health will often take a back seat during pandemics such as the coronavirus. The hype about male mortality might increase women's morbidity as a result of this pandemic.

The Great Leveller

There is an impression given by the international media that Covid-19 pandemic is extremely transgressive as it affects prince and pauper alike. But the latest news from United States, which is currently the epicentre of this pandemic, shows that such a contention might yet be premature. Latest report

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[16] Zhang Wanqing, "Domestic Violence Cases Surge During Covid-19 Epidemic," Sixth Tone, 2 March 2020, https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1005253/domestic-violence-cases-surge-during-covid-19-epidemic

[17] Kate Ng, "Coronavirus: Malaysia sparks outrage after telling women to wear make-up at home during lockdown," Independent, 31 March 2020, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/coronavirus-malaysia-outrage-women-ministry-makeup-lockdown-a9437851.html

[18] Laura Sochas, Andrew Amos Chanon and Sara Nam, "Counting indirect crisis-related deaths in the context of a low-resilience health system: the case of maternal and neonatal health during the Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone," Health, Policy and Planning, Vol. 32, 2017, pp. iii32-iii39.

shows the racial fault lines of the virus. Race sensitive data portrays that African Americans are more likely to die from the disease than white Americans. Among the dead 42 per cent were from African American communities. Michigan had 14 per cent of African American population but reported 41 per cent deaths; Illinois with 15 per cent of the population had 42 per cent deaths and Louisiana with 32 per cent of the population reported 70 African American deaths. This data suggests that disparity is highest in the south.[19]There is however little effort to correlate the race and gender data. Since covid-19 is a new pathogen there has to be multiple clinical trials if a cure is to be found. With the hype on deaths of men and African Americans clinical trials might ignore the African American women altogether. As it is even now women are underrepresented in clinical trials. A preconceived notion that this disease is fatal only for men will detract all attention from women who are getting afflicted in equal numbers if the global data is to be believed.

Previous pandemics have portrayed that if morbidity is measured then women are found to be affected in far greater numbers. Women become further disadvantaged because traditional gender roles become entrenched in high income to low income societies. Women are called upon to care for the sick either at home or outside with little or no support as it is considered as women's job. In this age of large scale women's migration women migrant workers become particularly affected during lockdowns as social distancing and social taboos taken together makes it difficult for them to hold on to not just their jobs but also to their dignity. In any physically threatening situation women suffer the most and today pandemics are seen not just as health issue but as security issue. As the Ebola outbreak in Africa portrays such situations increase women's sexual and other vulnerabilities resulting in increased teenage pregnancies, young girls drop out from schools, domestic abuse, increase in maternal deaths etc. In the case of covid-19 there might be another added affliction because we have already marked is pandemic as one where males are particularly afflicted thereby justifying the security metaphor. Women, particularly from the minority communities as a result might find their vulnerability increasing through such characterisation. With increased women's insecurity and morbidity society as a whole becomes more insecure. Therefore what was considered as transgressive actuality goes on to further entrench gender related vulnerabilities.

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[19]Sujata Gupta, "Why African-Americans May be Especially Vulnerable to Covid-19" Science News, 11 April 2020, https://www.sciencenews.org/article/coronavirus-why-african-americans-vulnerable-covid-19-health-race

Epilogue: Counting and Accounting for Those on the Long Walk Home

By

Sabir Ahamed

Prime Minister Narendra Modi's announcement on 24 March 2020 of a three-week nationwide lockdown was intended to curb the spread of the coronavirus pandemic. It aimed to create a massive phenomenon called "social distancing" in a densely populated country. The move resembled the all cardinal features of an emergency, severe restricting citizen's mobility with a complete shutdown of public transport including the massive rail service and air travel. Under the laws, authorities can use the power of detention, closing the usual business, monitor the street to ensure that citizens remain inside the home. Though unintended, the move exposed the short sightedness of the policymakers as hundreds of thousands of migrant labourers thronged at bus or train stations, hoping to get some support to reach their native places.

When the middle class was busy in settling to "work from home", millions of migrants from various cities in the country were taking long arduous journeys towards "home". The audio-visual images of a sea of peoples on the streets irked the middle class as the whole idea of "social distancing" sank. Those who could not leave the city immediately, as the lockdown was imposed within an incredibly short notice period of four hours, flocked around the charity or government-run food counters. The government of Delhi claimed that in the first week of lockdown they had fed around 5 lakh people per day.

Several other state governments had raised concern about the migrant labourers, including the Chief Minister of West Bengal who wrote letters to the chief ministers of 18 states where Bengali migrant labourers were stranded at various locations of the respective states. The government of Maharashtra had arranged a couple of special trains to send the migrants to their native states. A researcher at TISS Mumbai aptly noted, "the global pandemic has

catapulted the migrant labourer once again as subjects of charity, objects of (mis)governance and bodies of disease and stigma".[1]

Touched by the magnitude of the crisis, the Supreme Court of India urged the governments and people to be humane and compassionate towards the migrants. *The Indian Express* reported, "Of the lakhs of migrants who throng the metropolises, '500,000-600,000', as per the central government's affidavit to the Supreme Court Tuesday (31 March 2020) have walked back to their villages in a rushed and haphazard exodus"[2]. Governments, both central and states, had announced a slew of welfare programme for the underprivileged, yet the biggest difficulty was to trace the invisible migrant workforce who had lost their livelihood entitlements, directly resulting from the imposition of lockdown.

Central as well as state governments announced a slew of welfare programmes for the underprivileged. However, in the absence of even an indicative database, it was and still remains difficult to determine the magnitude of the crisis affecting the migrants. In the absence of the topical data on the migrants governments with best of intentions could do little in the long term for the welfare of the migrants. The Chief Minister of West Bengal had appealed for the protection of the migrants from West Bengal, but the Government of West Bengal was not able to provide the necessary numbers of migrants in other states , it also could not undertake a targeted welfare programme for the families of the migrants back at home.

We shall discuss in details about the data available on migrant labourers in section three and limitations of the data. Till date, the figures largely quoted by the media about the migrants stranded in various cities are estimates without much scientific basis, including the data provided by the Central Government to the apex court.

The latest available data on migration was collected during the 2011 census exercise and was released after nine long years in 2019. The figure of internal migration was pegged at 455 million in 2011, about which we got to know only in 2019, a net addition of 141 million migrants in the country between 2001 and 2011. Out of total migrants, 54.26 million people are inter-state migrants and of which more than 12.5million people have migrated for work/employment related reasons and all this was in 2011 not in 2020. The sheer volume of inter-state work-related migration warrants a deeper inspection and updated data.[3]

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[1]Deeksha, "The Long Walk Home of an Invisible People - News," March 4, 2020, https://www.mid-day.com/articles/the-long-walk-home-of-an-invisible-people/22710203.

[2]Seema Chishti, "Hunger a Constant Companion for Those Left without Work or Income | Coronavirus Outbreak News,The Indian Express," February 4, 2020, https://indianexpress.com/article/coronavirus/hunger-a-constant-companion-for-those-left-without-work-or-income-coronavirus-lockdown-6342992/.

[3]"Census of India: Migration," 2011, https://censusindia.gov.in/Census_And_You/migrations.aspx.

The focus of the note is not to measure the unforeseen and unanticipated ramifications of the lockdown. The article rather aims to understand the available data to make some realistic sense of the huge invisible workforce. The second section of the article briefly deals on how the official statistics could play an important role in designing the welfare schemes both in normal time and during a humanitarian crisis, and what are the issues affecting the credibility of the official statistics in India in the recent past including the irregularity of the several rounds of official statistics and deliberate delay in the release of the unit level data of various surveys conducted by government agencies. The third section focuses on the big data on migration and migrant labourers, for examples the Census and National Sample Survey. This section will shed light on the limitations of these data. The fourth Section deals on how the data gaps can be bridged. This will have special reference to the flaws in the justification of the NDA government for rolling out of National Population Register (NPR).

Data for Development

There has been an incredible boom in big data - data is everywhere - yet there is a shortage of relevant and timely information in the context of effectiveness or otherwise of public policies. Release of detailed or unit level data is often too late to be effective for any analysis to be undertaken for purpose of course correction of any programme or policy. For example, Consumption Expenditure Survey (CES) was conducted by NSSO duringthe period July 2017 to June 2018. The summary results of the survey indicated disturbing changes since last CES survey done in 2011-12 probably due to significant slowdown of demand. Instead of releasing the data quickly so that researchers could identify the groups and locations that needed immediate policy attention, the government decided to sit on the data and let researchers frustrate. This does not mean that government is ineffective in collecting the data; it does collect data very efficiently. But it restricts the access to data for researchers and active citizens. Consequently the diversity of voices essential in a democracy even if they do not toe the official line is muted.

Government's effectiveness on data collection can be assessed from their zeal to access individual-level data. In the last decade, the government massively expanded the scope the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI), by making mandatory the linking of ADHAR (UIDAI), PAN (income tax), mobile phone number, and bank account for welfare schemes (including those extended because of the Corona pandemic). This came to be known JAM (Jan Dhan-Aadhar-Mobile) trinity. By now collection of individual data has become almost a routine activity. People who once fought vehemently for privacy had to accept the norm of losing privacy at every step of interaction with "the system".

The government claimed that this move is aimed at curtailing the rampant corruption in the public delivery system, ensuring the direct benefits to beneficiaries and removing errors by targeting them. However, critical data that can actually evaluate/indicate the effectiveness of policy action is

consistently non-existent. For example, while declaring India "Open Defecation-Free" in October 2019, the Prime Minster stated, "The world is felicitating India for constructing more than 11 crore toilets in 60 months, helping more than 60 crore people to use toilets." We lack two critical items of information on this: There is no independent survey to cross examine how many toilets are actually functional and how individuals have been actual "users" of toilets on a regular basis. One is forced to look at glossy websites of administrative data indicating where money has gone but there is no way to ensure if the money spent indeed has been effective. A study lead by Jean Dreze on Jharkhand found that ADHAR linked system is making people's lives harder including causing death by starvation.

Any move to curb corruption should bolster the existing independent survey based data system of the country, such as the NSSO and ASI along with the promotion of JAM trinity. But what we see is consistent contraction of NSSO's capacity and independence. Experts indicate the rise of a "surveillance state" which only collects data but does not distribute them. Often, reports have been in media that individual details of people were leaked out or sold to private agencies breaching their privacy. However, the data collected by the Census and NSS protect the identity of the individual while offering a wide range of relevant information to formulate welfare programme. Studies show that reliable data is the bedrock of better governance. It helps citizens measure how much of the political rhetoric is translated into reality.

The National Sample Survey holds a glimmer of hope for policymakers and researchers. For instance, the recently released data on sanitation could have been more effective for measurement of progress of the Swachh Bharat Mission if it could collect the data on individuals being "actual users" of toilets rather than their "access" to it. The statistical findings of official bodies also make the government of the day more accountable. The NSSO survey indicates that digital literacy is inextricably linked to educational attainment. The focus of the Digital India initiative should thus be connected with an investment in the education sector, aimed at improving the quality of education. These data can also explain how the rural households or household belonging to backward social groups can benefit from the proposed digital classes or direct cash transfer during the lockdown as the there is a significant rural–urban divide in computing ability. Since its inception the NSS has been providing critical data on education, employment, health, poverty and rarely on migration and so on. More importantly, NSSO's multi-stage stratified sampling design for data collection has withstood the test of time in capturing diversities among various groups and spatial locations. For example, the recent education round-up shows how some social groups are still lagging behind others more than 70 years after Independence, calling for the immediate attention of policymakers.

With technological advancement in data software, researchers can use datasets from more than one lakh households or of six lakh individuals to produce estimates according to social groups, economic status, and regions. An analysis can also be done, with some caution, at the district level.

Data on Migration

Internal migration, both intra and inter-state is massive and has quite complex dynamics. Migrants have become engines of our economic growth because they provide cheap labour to the destination economy and simultaneously keep the consumption growth in the places of their origin through remittances. However, data on them is scanty and outdated. A large number of researchers interested in migration studies give up on their interest because of lack of data. Given, the lack of research output, it is not surprising that major out-migrating states in the country have no systemic policy response to the issue of migration. There is no data on migrants which can give district level estimate on the intensity of migration of recent years which could of help to public policy. There is no data base to indicate ways in which migrants impact their own selves, households, and the economy and society at large.

Data on internal migration in India is principally drawn from two main sources – the decennial population Census and the quinquennial migration surveys carried out by the National Sample Survey Office. Both these sources provide a wealth of data on migration. India has a long tradition of Census, dating back to 1872. The Census is based on a complete enumeration of all households. Beside the key demographic information like age-wise population, literacy rate, basic amenities, the Census defines a migrant as "a person residing in a place other than his/her place of birth (place of birth definition) or one who has changed his/ her usual place of residence to another place (change in usual place of residence or UPR definition). The Census collects data on the age and sex of the migrant, reason for migration, its duration, place of destination origin, and the industry and occupation of the migrant; the results are available up to the district level.

National Sample Survey under the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation has been conducting annual rounds of household surveys since 1950. These rounds also provide a wealth of information on migration.

The NSS follows the Census' UPR (usual place of residence) definition. Both the Census and NSS consider a resident one has been living in a location for six months or more excepting a newborn baby. The definition of a migrant in NSS is much wider as compared to the Census. The Census data may overweigh the NSS data due to complete enumeration of people, yet NSS data provide the advantage of a more nuanced understanding of migration. This is because NSS data provide details of each household and individuals belonging to them after muting their identity variables to protect their privacywhich can be cross-classified and analysed as per a researcher's design.

NSS data collection tools aim to capture the data on migration from broader perspectives, as was in case of the 64th Round of the NSS (conducted 2007-08). Unfortunately, there has been no migration round since then. This is the most comprehensive round on migration so far. It collects data on (i) migrants using the UPR (usual place of residence) approach; (ii) migrant households; (iii) out-migrating individuals; (iv) seasonal or short-duration

migrants, that is, those who have migrated out for a period of more than one month but not exceeding six months, for employment; and (v) return migrants. However, except in the case of UPR migrants, strictly comparable estimates are not available from the earlier rounds. In addition, the NSS also collects data on items such as the consumption expenditure of the migrant's household, educational attainment, activity, industry and occupation of the household at the place of origin, as well as remittances.

Despite the wider scope of the above data sources on migration, they suffer from some serious limitations. First, the Census Authority in India conducts enumeration every decade religiously on time and uninterrupted since 1872, but the inordinate delay in the release of the data defeats the purpose of taking effective policy measures and course correction of existing programmes. Topicality of the data on migration is vital in official statistics; the latest Census data was conducted in 2011, and as earlier pointed out the data related to migration was released nine years after it was collected. There is no practical use of this data for policy purposes. Secondly, the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation is mandated to conduct a nationally representative survey on specific topics every five years, and the states can participate in the same rounds and can generate their independent samples if they wish so. In reality states do participate in these surveys to generate data using their independent samples but accessing them has remained a lingering issue for researchers since many years. As already discussed, the 64th Round of the NSS titled 'Migration in India'[4] was released in 2007-8, and the previous round (55) on migration was conducted in 1999-2000.

A host of scholars working on the migration also found some serious shortcomings in both the big data on migration in India.[5] One of the main lacunae of both the Census and NSS surveys is their failure to adequately capture seasonal and/or short-term circular migration. Their approach is best for permanent migrants and reasonably adequate for semi-permanent migrants. The researchers have pointed out that over the periods NSS has expanded the scope of incorporating the seasonal/ circular migrants,[6] however NSS estimates are still inadequate for such migrants for two major reasons. First, in many cases, the seasonal/circular migration cycle is longer than six months. Second, quite often, entire households and not individuals participate in seasonal migration. With the addition of this criterion, 64th Round in 2007–2008 of NSS estimated 14 million seasonal/temporary

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[4]"Migration in India-2007-2008: NSS 64th Round" (National Sample Survey Office. Ministry of Statistics & Programme Implementation, Government of India, June 2010), http://mospi.nic.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/533_final.pdf.

[5]UNESCO, New Delhi et al., eds., *Internal Migration in India Initiative: National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development in India: 6-7 December 2011: Workshop Compendium* (National Workshop on Internal Migration and Human Development in India, New Delhi: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization : UNICEF, 2011).

[6]A seasonal/temporary migrant is defined as 'the household member who has stayed away from the village/town for a period of one month or more but less than six months during the last 365 days, for employment or in search of employment

migrants. These migrants are the most vulnerable and undocumented, moving from rural to urban centres in search of livelihood and coming back, or wandering to other areas and then returning "home". This type of migration as many scholars have found is most common among the socio-economically deprived groups, such as Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, and among the poorest of the poor and landless households. Shorn off the livelihood at source areas, landlessness forces them to undertake such migration. The MGNREGA was meant to address vagaries of such people, and media reports and some sporadic studies have shown that 100 days works could arrest the seasonal and temporal migration. With only partial success of MGNREGA, vulnerable section continue to embark upon seasonal and temporal migration which has been further worsened as the wheel of economic slowed down since the demonetisation of high denomination currencies in December of 2016.

There is another type of highly visible distress migration beyond the pale of official statistics. The above mentioned big official data does not capture the details of the child migrants. As the Census data show, a sizeable section of the population chooses to migrate to other states in search of employment. Such migration is often unsafe for children. The boy child, pushed by poverty and parental pressure, either leaves home or works in hazardous environments like bangle factories and other places that employ child labour. There is also a high risk of getting trafficked or forced into exploitative work situation. These children uncounted in the official statistics become visible only when they are rescued by the Labour Department or Civil Society organizations (Operation Smile).

In 2006, a web portal, "Track Child", was experimentally started in West Bengal to share information on children missing and found. The initiative proved ineffective. The police and investigative agencies are inept at using computers, and internet connectivity is still scant in rural areas. In June 2015, the NDA government launched a new web portal called "Khoya-Paya" to track missing children. In spite of its enormity, the issue of migrant child labour hardly receives any attention from policymakers and politicians.

Feminist scholars have also raised certain gaps in these data as migration data hides the nuanced understanding of female migration. Respondents are asked about the reasons for the migration. Those who migrate for employment-related are treated as economic migrants, while the incidence of women migration is high because of marriage induced-migration. On the other hand, the involvement of women in the informal sectors - especially their migration to other cities as domestic workers, or agricultural workers, workers in small units, or in the care industry at the same time connected to marriage - remains undocumented. The unit level data of NSS can partly bridge the gap. But the sample size limitation continuously haunts the estimates. These shortcomings of the data deserve a deeper discussion in order to address the issue adequately.

It is difficult to measure the immediate and long-term ramifications of the global pandemic. India has already experienced a massive reverse migration within the country. An online news portal reports that bureaucrats

and NGOs working in the Sundarbans of West Bengal estimate that 250,000-300,000 people native to the area, work elsewhere in India[7]. A large number of them migrate to Kerala and Maharashtra, the two states showing the highest number of COVID-19 infections in India now. Their families stayed back mostly dependent on remittances. Besides the immediate risk of bringing the virus back home, a huge uncertainty also looms large on their future subsistence. As a sizeable migration from these poverty-stricken areas is distress-induced, there are little possibilities of them being engaged in the local economic activities, and the work under MGNERGA is also scanty.

Policymakers, economists and academics will mull over ways to formulate the welfare policies for the different section of the society. The Government of West Bengal has already constituted high level committee comprising eminent specialists like the Nobel Laurate Abhijit Banerjee, public health experts, medical experts etc., to deal with the ongoing crisis and also to design policies to deal with the fall-out of Corona pandemic. Several state governments including West Bengal have announced free ration for the BPL families to avert the imminent hunger like situation. With the growing joblessness in India, ILO has already indicated, "In India, with a share of almost 90 percent of people working in the informal economy, about 400 million workers in the informal economy are at the risk of falling deeper into poverty during the crisis"[8]. The herculean task of the policymakers would be to identify who are the most vulnerable and what kind of intervention is required to rejuvenate the economy. The challenges before the policymaker, amidst the bandwagon of big data, will be the paucity of relevant data to identify the most vulnerable and the extent of their vulnerability, and their possible hotspots. Development Data Lab, led by economist Paul Novosad, a repository of data on India, notes that data limitations are a major constraint on effective public policy in developing countries. The sample surveys conventionally used for development policy and research are sparse and delayed and are incapable of producing estimates at lower level administrative-geographical units such as districts and blocks, and are also weakly integrated with other topical surveys. How these gaps can be addressed? First, the Kerala model can be replicated by other states. The Kerala Migration Survey[9] was initiated in 1989 with the following objectives: to estimate the total numbers of migrants from Kerala to various destinations, assess their demographic and socio-economic characteristics, and to calculate the total remittances to Kerala. Besides the survey, they keep records of migrant labourers coming to

[7]Jayanta Basu, "People Rush Back to the Sundarbans, Untested," *The Third Pole* (blog), March 31, 2020, https://www.thethirdpole.net/en/2020/03/31/people-rush-back-to-the-sundarbans-untested/.

[8]"ILO Monitor 2nd Edition: COVID-19 and the World of Work; Updated Estimates and Analysis" (International Labour Organization, July 4, 2020), https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@dgreports/@dcomm/documents/briefingnote/wcms_740877.pdf.

[9]S IrudayaRajan and K C Zachariah, "New Evidences from the Kerala Migration Survey, 2018," *Economic and Political Weekly* 55, no. 4 (January 25, 2020): 41–49.

Kerala, and implements several welfare programmes for the migrant labourers including education and health.

Amidst the huge humanitarian crisis, Government of Kerala has set a new model for treating the migrant which includes changing the nomenclature of "migrant labourers" to the "guest of the state" and a variety of support and protection measures. Those who initiated the Kerala model of development mixed pragmatic and political-ethical approaches to migrant labourers.

Aside of the immediate relief programme for the migrant workers, governments at both level should think of long term plan to deal with the migrants. Governments should be proactive in the collection and dissemination of data on migrants. We have discussed the irregularity of NSS' round on migration, and the inordinate delay in the releases of the data. These defects plague public policy. Government should a) conduct the NSS' rounds on migration both at the national and state level on regular basis, and b) legal provisions should be made for zero tolerance against government interference in the timely release of routine sample surveys conducted by data collection agencies working under the Minstry.

A Report: How One State can Learn from Another - Migrant Workers in Kolkata

By

Swati Bhattacharjee and Abhijnan Sarkar

India entered lockdown on March 23 to minimise the spread of the Corona virus. Shortly thereafter, Mamata Banerjee, the chief minister of West Bengal, wrote a letter to eighteen chief ministers, requesting them to provide for the migrant workers from Bengal now stranded in their states.[1] The state also publicised helpline numbers and websites for migrant labour from Bengal now caught in other states. They could report any incidence of distress. The Bengal administration would get in touch with the district administration in the concerned state to sort out the problem.

This step is appreciable. Now, the question is: What is West Bengal doing for the migrant labour from other states and what should it do? According to the Census of 2011, about 2.2 lakh people from other states come to West Bengal in search of work[2]. Moreover, many migrants come to Kolkata from the districts, mainly from South 24 Paraganas.[3] The sudden announcement of the "Janta Curfew" on March 22, and the lockdown from March 23, did not give enough time to these workers to return home.

What services and facilities are being offered to these workers? We talked to two groups of workers from the neighbouring states. The first group

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[1] "Take Care of Migrant Labourers from Bengal, Mamata Banerjee Tells Other State Govts - The Hindu BusinessLine," March 26, 2020,
https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/national/take-care-of-migrant-labourers-from-bengal-says-mamata/article31174129.ece.

[2] Saibal Sen, "West Bengal 4th in Outbound Migration for Employment | Kolkata News - Times of India," March 11, 2019,
https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/bengal-4th-in-outbound-migration-for-employment/articleshow/71872752.cms.

[3] Arpita Banerjee, "Migration in Slums of Kolkata: Examining Migrants' Labour Market Outcomes," in *Working Paper for National Institute of Urban Affairs under SHRAMIC (Strengthen and Harmonize Research and Action on Migration in Indian Context) Portal*, 2016,
https://www.niua.org/sites/default/files/Working_paper_FINAL_VERSION.pdf.

work in the Burrabazar area as coolies, the second group as tailors in Metiaburz area. We try to relate their experience during the lockdown with their previous experiences, and their understanding, of the state's facilities for them. We then look at the news reports from Kerala to understand how that state has treated its in-migrants. Kerala has received praise for handling a large number of migrant workers stranded by the lockdown with alacrity and sensitivity. We wish to argue that a state's response to a crisis is shaped largely by the policies and delivery mechanisms that are already in place, and that the structural gaps in these make migrant labour vulnerable to disease and distress, which also puts a larger population at risk.

Burrabazar

The Burrabazar market is the largest wholesale market not only of the city but even the country. It is located near the Howrah bridge, in Central Kolkata, and has several sub-markets, selling everything from clothes, jewellery, shoes to spices, grains and fruits. It has thousands of shops along winding narrow lanes. Customers need to be careful not to bump their heads against the loads carried by the coolies on their heads. It is one of the busiest business areas of the city, always bustling with people. Since the lockdown, it is eerily silent. Canning Street, Armenian Street, Bagri market has rows of shops with closed shutters. Yet there are many people around, lying or sitting around in the pavement. These are the migrant workers who have lived and worked here for decades.

A group of middle-aged men inform us that they are from Darbhanga, Bihar. They had come to Kolkata decades ago, some as long ago as three decades, but have always lived on the pavements. No "night shelter" has been offered to them after the Corona virus outbreak. They worked as coolies, loading and unloading items, earning between Rs 300 and Rs 600 a day. The Bengali month of Chaitra usually brought extra money, as the sale season saw a lot more business, but with the Corona virus outbreak, that was out of the question. The workers used to cook their meals together on the pavement. Now the markets are closed, and they do not have any money. Their ration cards are also with their families in Bihar, so they cannot access free food grains being given from the ration shops in Kolkata. Hence they are dependent completely upon the police, who serve them khichdi twice a day. They also get meals from the local masjids, including the Nakhoda masjid.

The Muslim coolies of Canning Street complain bitterly about the quality of food served by the police. The packets are getting smaller, they say, the khichdi is nothing more than rice made yellow with turmeric. Besides, they want roti, not rice.

The labour in Burrabazar have bank accounts and use them regularly, but they believe the one-time grant of Rs 1000 that the Chief Minister, Mamata Banerjee, has promised to all unorganised sector workers, will not reach their accounts. The coolies do not belong to the state. (The labour department officers, however, say that the guidelines for the scheme, *Prochesta*, have not been issued yet, hence the question of inclusion of in-migrants was

moot.) They have never received any health insurance or any other benefit. They cannot hope for help from their employers, as they are hired by different people on different days, and do not have a fixed job. Nor did they receive any support from the labour unions. They have sometimes walked in processions and attended meetings at the brigade parade ground, but complained bitterly that no leader has ever raised the issues of their wage or benefits. Not a single leader visited them after the lockdown to see how they were doing. A coolie in Canning Street says that even crows had leaders and raised a racket when attacked, but the migrant labour have none. That is why the police can serve them sub-standard food.

When they first learnt of the lockdown, some of the workers had tried to hire a car to go home, but the police had stopped them and turned them back. They are now eager to return as soon as the lockdown ends. Back in their villages, they say, getting rice, wheat or jawar will not be so difficult. They have heard about the thousands of migrant workers marching for days to get back home. They are angry – why didn't the government in Delhi give workers enough time to get back home before announcing the lockdown? But they are annoyed with the workers also – why did they take women and small children with them to their place of work? The coolies of Burrabazar do not believe in such nonsense. They visit home twice a year and send money every week.

This is their worst ever experience in this city, they claim. They did live in a lot of fear after the Babri Masjid was demolished in 1992, unleashing a wave of communal violence. But at least the army would let them go to the market, so long as they raised their hands high. Nor did the trouble stretch beyond a few days. They did live in fearthen, but now the certainty of hunger stretches infinitely.

The workers of Burrabazar are not practising "social distancing". They live as they have always lived, huddled together, finding comfort in each other's company. Some of them are using the cheap masks the police had distributed, some are not. They use public toilets, using little soap and no sanitizer.

But why do they come to Kolkata, when daily wages are better in Mumbai and Delhi, and the social security is better in Kerala? "Aadat parh gaya Kolkatta mein," (We are habituated to Kolkata) they say. A long stay in Kolkata has made them familiar with the city. People from Bihar and Uttar Pradesh come to Kolkata following their neighbours and relatives, not through labour agents. They have no scope of comparing the social security measures available in different places, as they cannot access such information.

Metiabruz

Located in the dock area of Kolkata, and popularly seen as a Muslim ghetto, Metiabruz is known for being a production hub in undergarments and children's clothes. There are approximately 15000 manufacturing units around Metiabruz, 3000 units around Maheshtala and around 5 lakh workers spread

across the Metiabruz, Maheshatala and nearby villages[4]. The expert tailors are known popularly as "Ostagors." Their manufacturing units have about eight to ten workers who stay on for several months. Those who do the "wash" work have separate units, but similar arrangements. Most of the other work is taken home, where women and children work on them.

We visit a unit where jeans clothes are dyed. We find six workers from outside the state, four from Bihar (Vaishali district), and two from the districts of West Bengal (Joynagar, South 24 Paraganas and Tarakeswar, Hooghly). The four men from Bihar carry the surname of "Ruidas" (Dalits). Two more workers are locals. They all eat the food they have cooked together; the rice, vegetables and meat are supplied by the owner of the unit. The reason is not entirely philanthropic. The owner admits that if the workers go to the police to obtain a pass to return home, they may disclose the address of their workplace. Then the owner may be in trouble as the work unit is not legal. Keeping and feeding the workers also means he has ready labour to start work as soon as the market reopens. He has already taken orders for Eid. He sits on top of huge piles of jeans, smokes and joins the talk.

The workers have 12-hour workdays and earn Rs 8000 a month. One person, who has recently been promoted to "manager" now gets Rs 15,000. They may earn extra by doing extra work when the demand is high. A young boy of about 17, who lives in Joynagar, informs us that he could have gone home before the lockdown, but was afraid that the villagers would home quarantine him for 14 days. He will go home as soon as the lockdown is lifted. The workers from Bihar are eager to return home as well, certain that production will not pick up even after the lockdown is over. The manufacturing unit next door also has three workers from the same village of Bihar, and from the same caste. They bring each other to this place to work, bound by friendship or family ties.

None of the migrant workers in Metiabruz we talk to are aware of any benefits that labour in the informal sector, or migrant labour, may receive. Nor do they hope to get any help from the state. In the entire industrial hub of Metiabruz, there are no trade unions. Neither the employers nor the employees seem to know much about labour laws or rights. All work is done on the basis of verbal contracts. Hence any awareness of a law pertaining to migrant labour can hardly be expected, nor is it to be found. Besides, both the owners and the labour know that they are teetering on the verge of penury. The workers seem reconciled to the fact that they will have to take a wage cut once the business reopens. They see it as a struggle for survival.

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[4]Chandrima Chatterjee and Waqas Ekramullah, "Report On Metiabruz Cluster Study" (Apparel Export Promotion Council, December 2016), http://aepcindia.com/system/files/publications/Study%20Report%20on%20Metiabruz%20Cluster_AEPC.pdf.

The 'Unwelcome Guest'

From these two accounts, it is clear that the migrant workers in the city are mainly getting the service of cooked food from the state government. None have approached them with any news of any further entitlement.

An interview with an officer of the Labour department shows that the entitlements of migrant labour are few and uncertain. They are not eligible for the "Samajik Suraksha Yojana" (SSY) for unorganised sector workers. SSY has provisions for provident fund, compensation in case of death or disability, financial assistance for children's studies and health treatment. The first condition of eligibility, however, is that the applicant has to be a resident of West Bengal[5].

We may contrast this with Kerala, where the Kerala Migrant Workers Welfare Scheme 2010 provides a registered migrant four benefits: accident/medical care for up to ₹25,000; in case of death, ₹1 lakh to the family; children's education allowance; and termination benefits of ₹25,000 after five years of work. When a worker dies, the welfare fund provides for the embalming of the body and air transportation. In other words, the state provides the same facilities to migrant labour as it does to its residents. Kerala is home to 25 lakh domestic migrants, most of whom hail from West Bengal, Assam, Odisha, Jharkhand, UP and Bihar.[6] The use of the phrase "guest workers" to describe migrant workers is itself a paradigm shift. It was first used by Kerala's finance minister Thomas Isaac in his budget speech in 2018when he thanked 35-lakh migrants working in the state for contributing to its economy.[7] In the wake of the Coronavirus outbreak, the office of Kerala chief minister Pinarayi Vijayan started using the phrase officially. [8]

Coming back to Kerala, following the lockdown, at a time when migrant workers walked back to their native states on foot, the state initiated a novel scheme to shelter those who came to the state for work and were stuck now. The state opened 4,603 relief camps that house 144,145 migrant labourers, officially called as "guest workers." Another 35 camps opened for 1,545 homeless and destitute people. Food items, masks, soaps, sanitisers have been made available in all these camps, and in the coming days, more

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[5] "Kolkata Gazette Notification, WB-SC/247" (Government of West Bengal, Labour Department, April 3, 2017), http://nagarikmancha.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/SAMAJIK-SURAKSHA-YOJANA-2017.pdf.

[6]KPM BASHEER, "Kerala's Scheme for Migrants," Hindu Business Line, January 24, 2018, https://www.thehindubusinessline.com/news/variety/keralas-scheme-for-migrants/article6902317.ece.

[7]Rakhi Bose, "Kerala Calling Labourers 'Guest' and Not 'Migrant' amid Coronavirus Crisis Has a Lesson for Us All," March 27, 2020, https://www.news18.com/news/buzz/kerala-calling-labourers-guest-and-not-migrant-amid-coronavirus-crisis-has-a-lesson-for-us-all-2553179.html.

[8] One has to note however that the phrase "guest worker" was used long back in Germany to describe immigrant labour. Indeed, the change in the nomenclature raises other issues beyond solving some. This is however not the place to discuss that in details.

educational institutions will be taken over for these purposes.[9] Kerala also runs an affordable housing program for migrant labour.

In Kolkata, following an order from the Centre to accommodate migrant labour in night shelters, there was an effort to accommodate the workers sleeping on the streets into the 27 night shelters run by the Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC).[10] Some temporary shelters were also opened up. But overcrowding soon frustrated the aim of ensuring safety, since "social distancing" became impossible. According to a news report, on 9 April around 10,000 pavement dwellers were living in shelters, with one shelter alone housing more than 4,000 people. The report states that KMC officials fear that the shelters may become "hotspots" of infection.[11]

Admittedly, we do not know how safe or comfortable the migrant workers are in the camps of Kerala. But the camps are certainly more in number, and the services to be provided are also being enumerated and publicised by top leaders and bureaucrats. Kerala already has a programme for affordable housing for its migrant labour, though it remains inaccessible to most of them. In view of the Kerala experience, West Bengal may take steps to remove the lack of a cogent policy towards the migrant workers at this critical juncture. Our interviews tell of a large gap in communication between the workers and the government. Bereft of attention and help, many migrant workers eye the state government with suspicion and distrust. These negative feelings may keep the workers away from seeking out government services even when these are being offered, frustrating the purpose of the state-run schemes. Emergency services can function well only when they are built upon a structure of existing services. The COVID-19 epidemic shows, once again, that the failure to integrate our migrant workers well into our social fabric puts the entire community at risk. The "Kerala model" may be of help in this regard. It can be considered an instance of what in governmental language is called the "best practices" to be emulated.

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[9]Nidheesh M.K., "Kerala Opens 4603 Relief Camps for over One Lakh Migrant 'guest' Workers," March 27, 2020, https://www.livemint.com/news/india/kerala-opens-4603-relief-camps-for-over-one-lakh-migrant-guest-workers-11585330696675.html.

[10]"Coronavirus Update: Food, Shelter in Government's Aid Plan for Migrants amid Lockdown - India News - Hindustan Times," March 28, 2020, https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/covid-19-food-shelter-in-govt-aid-plan-for-migrants/story-QFq9CNdJaWWCA0ySgSv1DJ.html.

[11]Saikat Ray and Dwaipayan Ghosh, "Kolkata: Focus on Shelters for Homeless after Two Shifted to Covid-19 Hospitals | Kolkata News - Times of India," April 9, 2020, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kolkata/focus-on-shelters-for-homeless-after-two-shifted-to-covid-hosps/articleshow/75055380.cms.

List of Contributors

Sabir Ahamed is with the Pratichi Institute, Pratichi (India) Trust, and is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Paula Banerjee teaches at the Calcutta University. She is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Ritajyoti Bandyopadhyay is with the Department of Humanities & Social Sciences at IISER, Mohali.

Madhurilata Basu teaches at the Sarojini Naidu College, West Bengal, and is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Sibaji Pratim Basu is with the Department of Political Science, Vidyasagar University. He is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Anasua Basu Ray Chaudhury is with the Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata

Swati Bhattacharjee is a jouranalist at the Anandabazar Patrika.

Samata Biswas teaches at the Sanskrit College and University, Kolkata. She is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Sonmani Chaudhary is at the Sakshama-Initiative for What Works for Women at the Centre for Catalyzing Change, Patna.

Ishita Dey teaches at the South Asian University, Delhi, and is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Ambar Kumar Ghosh is with the Observer Research Foundation, Kolkata.

Manish K. Jha is at the School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and is a member of the Calcutta Research Group.

Ravi Arvind Palat teaches at the Department of Sociology, Binghamton University, New York.

Ajeet Kumar Pankaj is with the Department of Social Work, Indira Gandhi National Tribal University, Regional Campus Imphal, Manipur.

Anamika Priyadarshini is at the Sakshama-Initiative for What Works for Women at the Centre for Catalyzing Change, Patna.

Rajat Roy is a journalist and a researcher at the Calcutta Research Group.

Abhijnan Sarkar is an independent documentary film maker.

Utsa Sarmin is researcher at the Calcutta Research Group

Ranabir Samaddar works at the Calcutta Research Group.

Badri Narayan Tiwari is at the G.B. Pant Social Science Institute, Allahabad