

THE SIGNIFICANT UNNOTICED: MIGRANT'S PLIGHT

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INTRODUCTION

The unplanned announcement of a nationwide lockdown trailing the outbreak of COVID'19 and its manifestation as a pandemic brought heartbreaking and lugubrious images from all over the country and simultaneously devastated the socio, economic, political, and administrative structures that have existed for years in the world.

On the face of it, it was quite explicit that the world stands divided between the 'haves' and the 'have nots', the 'privileged' and the 'underprivileged'. Nothing seems to be in the middle, the world had been extended to the extremes bearing the worst impact on those who are devoid of food, shelter, water, and money. They choose between death in hands of hunger or the virus, and they struggle to escape both. The result is, we saw a huge migration, enough to compare it with that of the 1947 partition. This was the situation because of the short notice of four hours before announcing the nationwide lockdown.

In the following article, we have tried to cover the economic, political and social aspects surrounding the issue.

Laboronomics of the Marginal Laborers

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The Indian economy was put on halt in entirety with the sudden announcement of Lockdown by Prime Minister Mr. Narendra Modi in late March. Nobody was prepared, there was sudden hassle-bustle for procurement of resources like vegetables, flour, medicines, etc. The production suddenly stopped, leaving thousands of Indians jobless and below the poverty line. There would be significant losses of job because of demand crunches, production shutdowns, low liquidity, and inadequate finance in the education, hospitality, aviation, retail sales, auto manufacturing and dealership, entertainment, travel and tourism, and real estate sectors. There would be no sector that would evade the clutches of the economic massacre that the pandemic caused. There would be secondary effects on other sectors in terms of the uncertainty of markets, the behavior of demand as people tend to save more until they are sure the

Crisis is over and fall in imports of raw materials and technology from abroad, for example, the primary resource steel would experience a slump in production due to demand and supply shocks in other sectors and their corresponding market.

When the privileged in society were busy securing supplies, and the government was busy answering bigger economic questions, there were crores of inter-state and intra-state marginal income groups of daily wage laborers who strived to earn money to keep them and their families alive at least. With very little income in hand, they managed to survive and stayed wherever they were until their resources vanished. The cruelty of landowners in Times of Crisis is awful. This neglect, apathy, subjugation, secondary treatments, and hunger forced the laborers to find hope in a more familiar, more empathetic, and more inclusive society of their native villages. That was when the laborers left the cities, they had lived in for years and started a journey back home by foot, in trucks and in conditions not in accordance with the health guidelines. They are left to die either by hunger and accidents or by the disease brought in by the privileged passport holders.

Pandemic broke Economic Structures,

Or, Exposed them?

Until the pandemic, there was no noticing of the living standards and conditions of the interstate or intra-state workers. But they had existed for long, doing menial work for a living and barely earning enough for food and basic amenities, let alone the considerations of education, health, insurance, and happiness. The Objective Resolution of India that guides the motives and goals of the governments include socio, economic, and political justice and equality. Even after 73 years of independence, we have failed to ensure basic living standards for everyone. There are certain loopholes in the Indian Economic Structure:

1) Inequality to Injustice or,

Injustice to Inequality

According to Oxfam International, the top 10% of the Indians hold 77% of the nation's wealth. From the wealth generated in 2017, 73% went to the richest 1% while the 67 million people who comprise the poorest of Indians saw a 1% increase in their incomes. Very high and ever-rising income disparities among people have existed in India. With less income in hand, the equals of society have unequal control of resources which is an injustice because we are not born as equals. High rise buildings, Smart Phones, Laptops, Technology, Education aren't equally accessible and affordable for every stratum and are a mere mockery for them. Homeless people sleep on footpaths and railway tracks to be run over by trains or by fancy cars of celebrities, maybe longing to use the advanced vehicles at least once in a lifetime, to die. When many students were sitting in their safe spaces writing assignments, doing internships, and building their careers there were small kids who were walking on foot to reach their safe spaces located miles away. This injustice because of unequal resources makes their children resourceless and unskilled, furthering the inequality. This is where the forces and

mechanisms of capitalism have taken us. The Indian Economy has failed to incorporate equity and ensure equitable distribution of resources among its citizens.

2) “Yahan Par Kadam Kadam Par,

Dharti Badle Rang....”

An estimate by Indian Express states that the share of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar in the inter-state workers is 25% and 14% respectively. The regional variations in growth and development are huge. There are certain states (that too specific cities or regions) having an abundance of resources and capital while others with an abundance of population. It is because of this regional imbalance that laborers had left their villages and homes to fill up jobs that are abject or hazardous in the industrialized, modern, and smart cities. Haryana and Delhi were quick and efficient in providing food to the homeless during pandemic while Rajasthan, Gujarat, and many other states had to rely on NGOs. The effectiveness of State Governments, administration, and workers and also the availability of food grains differ in different states. The health facilities and educated population of Kerala helped significantly in reducing and controlling the spread of the disease. Both sectors are important to ensure enough and efficient human capital formation.

3) Becoming Slaves to Technology

The continuously rising growth rates in the last decades have created an illusion of growth while the Indian society is decaying continuously because of huge inequalities. India has the second-largest population in the entire world (as per the census of 2011). Instead of developing our own methods and technology, we've been continuously importing capital-intensive techniques of the West. This has rendered the unskilled workers jobless and they resorted to menial works with no job security as nearly 80% of the Indian Economy is unorganized and informal. The unemployment rate in India has been nearly 3.5% in 2018 and 2019. The devastating events of 2020 have caused an upswing in the unemployment rate to 24% (as on May 17, 2020). This jobless growth has wasted our precious human resources and forced us to produce less than our potential output.

4) The new Marginalization: Digitalization

The digital revolution that has been initiated, has made many resourceless people insignificant or peripheral. Not every individual has access to technology and the internet. The difference starts at birth and creates a digital divide among school children. The underprivileged are less competitive when compared to those who had used computers, laptops, and the internet their whole childhood. According to a survey by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, 79.8% of students were enrolled in the Undergraduate Level Programme in 2018-19 while the unemployment rate has been constant. The graduates are not competitive enough to work for the market as they lack the required skills and aptitude. This occurs because the syllabus fails to be vocational and because the graduates may have never used a computer, which is an important skill required for every job profile. Accessibility is an even more major

challenge to the digitalization of India. Even when links have been shared on the portal for migrants to register themselves to avail of transport facilities, they may not have the knowledge or means to do the same. After all, if we go by statistics, 50% of the population does not have internet access in India in 2020.

5) Fewer Resources make Poor,

Poor make Less Resources...

The vicious circle of poverty is very hard to break because of the continuous lack of education, health, funds, and an inferiority complex in the entire family line. Even after education is made free for all students below the age of 14 years, not every family can afford to choose education over the marginal labor income. Health expenditures are not economically viable for lower-income groups, even then they form a very high proportion of their income (higher than of the higher income groups). The reason being malnutrition, exposure to harmful conditions and surroundings, improper drinking water, and deficiency of nutrients and calories. The poor tend to cut expenditure on basic food items and medicines and have to face very high health costs in the future. There have been very good attempts like mid-day meals, MNREGA, and other Direct Benefit Transfer schemes. But,

- There are many who wouldn't find the schemes accessible (the ones who do not have documents like Ration Card, Aadhar Card, etc.)
- The money given is only enough to maintain the least standard of living and to make up for two meals a day. They have not been encouraged or incentivized to take up permanent jobs or to educate their children or to gain skills.
- Many may not have the correct knowledge and sources to enroll into the schemes.

The Demand and Supply Conditions

The demand has fallen substantially since the announcement of the lockdown. It is a natural consumer behavior to spend less and save more in uncertain times. Till the time the uncertainty ends regarding health, security, and, economy, demand is not expected to rise. On the supply side, there would be many repercussions like:

- Unavailability of previously imported raw materials.
- No imports of Technology and capital goods.
- Even when the production is allowed, the shortage of laborers would occur in the labor market.
- Availability of finance and investment.

To get back the economy on track, the demand and supply must normalize and some mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that workers don't have to travel again,

but the work travels to them. This would ensure that while reviving the economy the health risks are also considered. Political Negligence + Social Department = laborers anguish.

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Even in these desperate and frustrating times, our administration has failed us in manufacturing a national government keeping aside their personal and political disagreements and formulating a resolute and steadfast policy to reach out to the labourers for their aid and relief.

What does the number say for those who are never counted?

Though we don't have concrete numbers to establish how many workers are on a move currently but surely they are not less than a million or so. Many killed in the infamous train accident, few in the truck tragedy, 22 people lost their lives while walking and many more lost to death, out of hunger and exhaustion before reaching their destinations. Normally, there is a huge chunk of labourers who migrate primarily from the states of Bihar, Chhattisgarh, UP, West Bengal to the metropolitan cities of Mumbai and Delhi. During such a catastrophe, the same number of people are making their reverse migration struggling hard to sustain these circumstances.

Quoting the figures from the census 2011, the share of the eastern region in the total number of inter-state migrants is around 24.8 percent (13.5 million). For employment-related reasons, the share is more than 29.9 percent (3.74 million). At the national level as well as in the eastern region, Bihar is one of the leading suppliers of inter-state migrants (7.45 million), out of whom 2.26 million migrated for work/employment. The second position is occupied by West Bengal, which was traditionally a net recipient till 2001. But in the 2011 census, Bengal suddenly emerged as the net sender with a volume of inter-state migrants of 2.40 million. This state also pushed around 6 lakh people to migrate to other states for work or employment-related reasons. It is followed by Jharkhand (1.70 million), Odisha (1.27 million), and Assam (6.59 lakh). (Data from The Telegraph Published 30.04.20, 1:49 AM Updated 30.04.20, 1:49 AM).

Workers in millions are making their ways to UP, Bihar from Maharashtra, Gujarat, Tamil Nadu, and many more states. In Haryana, 8 lakh migrants are waiting to return to their hometowns while about 1.5 lakh want to return back to Haryana.

Center state fight, labourers are nowhere in light.

Rich India is absorbed in the comfort of her home, watching the television enjoying Netflix and commenting on what was the need for the workers to sleep on tracks?

While the poor Bharat is on roads, with her children sleeping on the same suitcase that she drags in the chilling heat of the day. She is walking endlessly, her face masked with the pallu of her saari, and sacks on her head. These are the pictures that will haunt us for days to come. These conditions have been undermined by both the central as well as State governments alike.

Despite the number of cases that are soaring high, the center state differences are nowhere to end. We see many issues that remain contentious even during the national crisis. There is an evident dearth of communication within the federal set up of the country. The central government did not confabulate with the State governments before announcing the required but unplanned Lockdown. It seems that the political vision of the national leaders doesn't include these migrant labourers.

Financial tussle:

The state governments struggle for the financial backing that should be provided to them by the central ministry. Funds for some of the central schemes like the mid-day meal scheme and the National food security act need to be released by the Union Government to the state governments, however, this remains pending.

The FCI (Food Corporation of India) has a stock of nearly 60 million tonnes of food grains(rice and wheat), still, the problem of accessibility and availability stands open-mouthed before us. The main disagreement between the union and the state government is regarding the price at which these needs to be supplied to the poor. Even the railway tickets price is charged upon them at a rate as high as 800 rupees per passenger. This is the level of insensitivity of the governments towards the workers. The central government extracted 1.72 crore rupees from the RBI, which could be judiciously utilized in such times of emergency. The 20 lakh crore package too seems a post-truth concept.

Trust issues:

There is no accountability on the modus operandi of the funds utilization from the PM CARES. When INC wanted to make some buses available for the poor wage Labourers in UP, the state government barred it stating that the party is playing politics. In Karnataka, labourers were stopped from leaving the state in the favour of industries. In U.P. labour laws are liberalized for the next two years for the industrial benefits. This was not the end, after these discriminatory policies, in some states, these migrants were housed with chemicals on their body, ill-treated, undignified at quarantine centers, made to fight for food at stations and some were even beaten up by the police when they approached it for help. There is also no communication channel between the center, state, and the migrants. The fear of death still looms large upon them. The PM's speeches seem to echo hollow promises for them. The red carpeting of schemes like AYUSHMAN BHARAT, UDAAN, and the JAN DHAN YOJNA doesn't allow them to reach those on ground. There is a differential approach for those who are abroad and those who are within Indian territory.

The social horizon:

The workers were initially not allowed to step out on the streets by the government so they spent their limited resources and later when they found themselves resourceless, they started marching towards their homes without money. In many cases, they were beaten up by the police and in some other cases, they were ill-treated. No one cares for the psychological trauma that the poor is going through, the physical exhaustion he must have faced. Some fail to make it to their destination while others are not welcomed in their hometowns as people suspect them to be carriers of this deadly virus. The landlords evicted some tenants and companies dispossessed the wage Labourers. They now have no sleeping facilities, food, water, shelter, or ration cards. This is a magnanimous blot on the republic of India and requires comprehensive and justified cleansing.

A BROAD WAY FORWARD

While being in quarantine and in shelter homes for long would be mentally and physically dangerous for the workers, it would also lead to huge economic losses due to non-utilization of the laborforce. During the pandemic, it is equally dangerous for them to move around in search of work. With the involvement of local governments, a labor map can be prepared to state their skills and talents, so that working capital can be transported to them and these shelter homes can become hubs of production. Identifying groups of laborers that have similar skills and abilities would be a plus point if we go this way.

This idea can work as it did by the voluntary asking for work in a district in Rajasthan by workers to were quarantined. They painted the walls of the school in which they were kept. While in the shelter homes the workers can be provided with raw food materials to cook food for themselves. We must design innovative ideas to do something for them while also employing them.

At the financial front, the central government should give at least 6 to 7 thousand per month as a basic minimum income to all those who come below the poverty line giving priority to the poorest of the poor. A monetary room should be created where central and state governments can communicate upon the sources of such finances. Every election, unaccounted resources are wasted on banners, hoardings, promotion, and propagation. The election-related budget can be squeezed to meet such a task and there could be a cut in the election expenditure in the coming years. The government has to impose a wealth tax or property tax so as to obtain a little extra penny.

“It is a necessity that the government gives money in the hands of common people so as to revive and reorient the negative economic spiral. The middle class should be given interest-free loans and subsidies should also be provided to them” says Yogendra Yadav. The redundant expenditure on the security of the politicians should be avoided and this money should be devoted to the poor. Around 5 crore people in India don't have ration card but are in a need of food, the government should issue a notice to all the state governments that all the poor, irrespective of whether they have a card or not should be given ration i.e. wheat and rice at the rate of ₹3 and ₹2 per kg respectively. On the political front, all the parties should come forward to make a national government and put forward their part of solutions.

All the closed places like schools, colleges, or any other government buildings should be used as quarantine centers where the principles of social distancing are maintained and honored and even in these centers they should be treated with dignity. Quarantine areas should be well supplied with food, water, clothes, medical aid, and all the required amenities. On the social front, people should coordinate with the governments and should not ill-treat those who are entering their streets, they should rather supply them with food following the physical distancing.

Currently, there is a need to focus on what we can do, burring our personal differences so that the poor of India doesn't feel humiliation day in and day out. One thing is for sure, that when this pandemic ends, these same laborers will be in huge demand from the various sectors, the concern is, whether they will ever be able to forget and forgive those who turned their faces away from their problems.



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